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Cattlemen in the Plains will be dreaming about a white Christmas for quite some time it appears. Back-to-back blizzards during the Christmas and New Year holiday period stranded thousands of cattle in the Central Plains with snow 3-ft. deep and drifts 10- to 15-ft. high in places.

Affected areas included Southeast Colorado, Northeast New Mexico, the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles, and parts of Nebraska and Kansas.

In Colorado, Huey helicopters and a C-130 military transport plane had airlifted 80 tons of hay to stranded cattle by the end of the first week of 2007 before high winds forced a halt to relief efforts. The Colorado Division of Emergency Management estimated about 340,000 cattle to be in the seven Southeastern Colorado counties hardest-hit by the storms.

In a Jan. 8 news release, Colorado Agriculture Commissioner Don Ament said the storm likely would claim at least 40,000 head of livestock in Southeast Colorado. The figure included cattle suffocated in 15-ft. tall snowdrifts and thousands of hogs housed in collapsed buildings.

On Jan. 8, President Bush made emergency federal aid available for Colorado, Nebraska, and Kansas to supplement state and local response efforts.

Conditions similar to Southeast Colorado existed in Northeast New Mexico and the Oklahoma Panhandle. Heavy snow and high drifts thwarted efforts to get feed and water to cattle, some in large and remote pastures.

In Nebraska, ice was a bigger problem than snow in many parts of the state, while the western feedyard area got snow and wind. Mike Fitzgerald with Nebraska Cattlemen told *BEEF* there wasn't a problem with stranded cattle, but the winter conditions made it very difficult for producers to get feed and water to their cattle.

“One guy told me the (corn) stalks his cattle were on was like a frozen lake,” Fitzgerald said. “The cattle had a hard time standing up, the cattleman had a hard time standing up, and the ice made the stalks inaccessible to the cattle.”

Conditions in Kansas were similar, with the National Guard using military vehicles to deliver feed to cattle. Warm weather immediately following the storm melted some of the snow. Like Nebraska, Kansas cattlemen aren't experiencing cattle isolation problems like producers elsewhere in the region, but with nearly 3 ft. of snow in parts of the state, access to pastures was difficult.

Several relief efforts have been established. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association activated its relief program. Those wishing to donate hay, trucking, equipment use, or money to the affected cattlemen can call 866-BEEF-USA (233-3872).

The Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association (OCA) established the Panhandle Ranch Rescue Fund to help purchase feed. Cash donations can be sent to OCA at 2500 Exchange Avenue, Oklahoma City, OK, 73108.

The Colorado Veterinary Medical Association is accepting cash, checks and credit card donations for relief efforts. Contact the group at 789 Sherman Street, Suite 200, Denver, CO, 80203 or call 303-318-0447.

The Nebraska Cattlemen organization established a hay exchange hot line. Call 308-762-3005 for more info.

Industry effects

At the end of the first week of January, feedlots were preoccupied with digging out and getting feed, water and mills up and running. The resulting tighter showlists and reduced hours at the packing level helped the beef complex rally through Jan. 5.

In kudos to the fledgling National Animal Identification System (NAIS), Colorado officials said the premises registration paid off during livestock relief efforts in the aftermath of the blizzards. Colorado Department of Agriculture officials said telephone calls directly to ranchers in Southeast Colorado, made possible by premises registration info, helped evaluate the safety of those ranchers' families and the well being of Colorado livestock during the blizzard recovery operation.

Those with registered premises were called early on by state animal health officials. The phone calls helped locate animals and find out if they have had access to feed, officials said.

“Starvation and dehydration are certainly animal health concerns and we are pleased that we could utilize the system in this emergency situation,” said Colorado State Veterinarian John Maulsby.

Added George Epp, Colorado Division of Emergency Management director: “Having direct access to livestock owners gave us the opportunity to quickly assess the situation. Protecting the health of Colorado livestock is a top priority to this operation and NAIS was a big help.”

Proper disposal

Meanwhile, Colorado state agriculture officials were working with their counterparts in the State Department of Public Health and Environment, and local health departments and Extension personnel, in streamlining the process for the safe disposal of livestock carcasses. You can read the “Emergency Livestock Disposal

Policy and Pre-Approved Design and Operations Plan For Emergency Livestock Disposal” at www.ag.state.co.us/commissioner/Livestock%20disposal.html.

In addition to providing burial requirements, officials listed these other options for disposal:

- Take dead animals to any permitted landfill that will accept them.
- Transport them to out-of-state rendering plants; Colorado has no such plants.
- Compost them according to an approved design and operations plan.

Despite all the inconvenience, loss and suffering wrought by the storms, helping hands and the generosity of citizens were in abundant supply. Denver snowmobile clubs journeyed to Southeast Colorado to help locate cattle and get feed to them.

That willingness to help was trumped only by people's resilience. One cattleman interviewed by a local radio station about his inability to reach his cattle, and uncertainty about even where they even might be, said: “At least we'll have a lot of green grass this spring.”

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