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News

Cattle can manage in cold weather

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(1/31/2011)
By Feedstuffs FoodLink

Bitter cold temperatures and extremes in windchills likely will continue this winter in the High Plains and Upper Midwest regions of the U.S.

These conditions are particularly stressful for groups of cattle that have not adequately acclimated to such conditions, according to a University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) beef specialist.

The most susceptible animals are newborn calves in cow/calf operations and new cattle arriving in feedlots, said Terry Mader, UNL beef cattle specialist at the Haskell Agricultural Laboratory near Concord, Neb. Cattle that lack body condition for insulation also may be at risk from cold weather.

"Most cattle can easily handle cold weather conditions if they are dry and maintain dry hair coats, even if temperatures are subzero," Mader said. "The most adverse conditions occur around freezing, when cattle get wet and the pens turn sloppy and muddy. The presence of moisture or mud on the animal draws heat from the animal's body at a much faster rate than when the animal is drier in extreme cold temperatures."

Mader said one plus for cattle producers and feeders is that since cold temperatures and snow have been around for several weeks, most cattle are generally already acclimated to current conditions.

"Most cattle by this time in the winter have developed their winter coats and are able to withstand windchills well below zero," Mader said.

Healthy, dry, well-conditioned and well-fed cattle can handle windchills of -40 degrees F, but tissue damage may start to occur when windchills drop to around -60 degrees F.

There are a number of things that can be done in feedyards and other cattle holding areas both before and after major weather events.

Mader recommends that managers smooth or knock down rough, frozen pen surfaces with a blade or harrow. Sharp edges that form when cattle tracks freeze can bruise the animals' feet, which can lead to foot injury.

Bedding such as wheat straw, corn cobs or cornstalks also can be used to help insulate cattle from the cold ground during severe cold outbreaks.

Mader said these are better for bedding than hay-like materials because they are less palatable, so cattle will be less likely to eat the bedding and more likely to stay on the ration provided in the bunks.

It is important to keep feedlot animals from going off feed during even the worst of weather conditions, Mader said. Erratic feed intake can result in digestive problems and loss of performance and possibly even death in severe cases.

Cattle that are within 30-45 days of slaughter are particularly prone to going off feed and can be difficult to get back on feed. Moving cattle to a higher-roughage storm ration may be advisable to keep them on feed, even though UNL studies have shown that the animals need more energy in the form of grain to maintain performance.

Finally, current feed costs suggest that it is cheaper to keep an animal dry through good maintenance of pens and use of bedding versus trying to give the animal extra feed that will be required for maintenance if it has a wet or partially wet hair coat.