

Warm Through the Winter

Tips for keeping cattle warm in colder weather.

By **Ted Perry**

Cold weather impacts your cattle, but they can't stay warm by putting on winter boots, a coat and a hat. They need other ways to keep warm. Winter nutrition and environment management will help maintain a cow's core body temperature, keeping cows warm from the inside out.

If you're wintering cattle, here are seven tips to keep them warm:

1. Focus on body condition score

The No. 1 way to reduce cold stress in cattle is to improve body condition score (BCS). Having a good BCS going into winter does two things. First, a cow in BCS 5 or 6 has a layer of fat insulation helping her conserve body heat. Second, cows in good body condition likely have a good diet, which can result in nice, warm winter hair coats.

2. Deliver more cattle feed

Make sure cows have enough feed and water. A cow's feed intake will increase by 20% during cold weather. Before temperatures drop, increase the amount of feed delivered. Provide additional hay or offer 20% more feed in the bunk.

Increasing intake will increase the amount of fermentation in

the rumen, and one of the biggest waste products of fermentation is heat. If you provide cows with more energy and get more forage into the rumen, more fermentation happens, and more heat is produced. The process helps keep cows warm from the inside out.

3. Separate thin cows

Thin cows mixed with the rest of the herd probably won't get the nutrition they need to maintain or gain body condition. Separate thinner cows — young or old — to help ease feeding pressure. Once separated, make sure cows have plenty of forage and access to cattle mineral and supplements.

If you can't separate thin cows, feed free-choice cattle supplements like a protein tub to give those cows access to feed at all times. Free-choice cattle supplements also provide a less competitive atmosphere than group-feeding protein cubes or hand-fed feeds.

4. Put up windbreaks

When wintering cattle, it's important to remember that wind chill affects cattle just like it affects people. Keep cattle out of the wind if possible. You can put up a homemade windbreak, create one out of bales or install a permanent

windbreak. Wooded areas also provide shelter from the wind.

When cows don't have a windbreak, they feel the full effect of the wind, and it will cost them body condition. A drop in body condition score will result in additional feed costs to regain condition.

5. Provide cattle minerals and supplements

Cattle mineral is vital during cold weather because it impacts a cow's metabolic process. If cows are short on mineral, their metabolism will slow down. Once metabolism slows, the cow isn't producing as much heat, and she may start losing body condition score.

Providing cattle mineral and supplements can also lead to better forage digestibility. A cow's rumen microbes have mineral requirements and can also benefit from supplementation. Supplementing ramps up rumen microbes so they can digest more forage. The microbes can also get 25 or 30% more energy out of the forage they're eating.

6. Keep a clean environment

While wintering cattle, the environment tends to be muddy. Mud reduces the insulation factor of a cow's hair coat, and a cow's

lower critical temperature goes up as a result. For instance, if a cow is clean and dry, she may be okay down to 5 degrees Fahrenheit. If a cow is dirty, her lower critical temperature may go up to 20 degrees Fahrenheit.

Give cows plenty of space and move hay rings and feeding stations to limit the creation of muddy areas. The cleaner cows stay, the better insulation their hair will provide.

7. Break routine

We tend to feed cattle on a routine. We put out a set amount of feed per day because we think that's what the herd should need. But, pay close attention to temperature and watch cattle closely.

When you know it will be cold for the next few days, increase the feed offered at least 24 hours in advance to give cows a head start. Feeding cows after the storm is helpful, but the impact is greater when they are fed prior to the storm. **HW**

Editor's Note: Ted Perry is a beef cattle technical service manager with Purina Animal Nutrition. This article was provided by Purina Animal Nutrition.



Photo by Anne Powell