Careful Changes In Diet Help Beef Cattle Cope With Winter Storms

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The art of feeding cattle takes on special importance in the face of brutal blizzards and sub-zero cold snaps, according to a North Dakota State University livestock specialist.

"You have to know your cattle and what they're eating and then know what you can and can't do," says Karl Hoppe at NDSU's Carrington Research Extension Center. "We have a lot of producers who are forced to change their feeding strategies by the weather and it's easy to cause problems."

Hoppe notes that a cow's first stomach, the rumen, contains a complex mix of microbes to efficiently digest forages and grains. That's an advantage for the cow most of the time, he says.

"But when you make sudden changes, it's easy to upset the balance," he notes.

In North Dakota, where producers are backgrounding calves or caring for beef cows, the easiest strategy during a blizzard is to provide the cattle with plenty of hay often of low quality. The cattle eat their fill, it stays in the digestive tract for a longer period of time than grain or high-quality forage and the leftovers provide bedding to protect them against the weather.

Hoppe says those long-stemmed forages blow around less during winter storms and take longer to digest, keeping cattle satisfied longer. Likewise, whole grains are easier to handle in high wind than ground grain. Cattle waste less and take longer to digest them. And they are less likely to cause acidosis, the ruminant's version of heartburn.

"It's when we feed cattle diets with a higher caloric density that we cause digestive disturbances," Hoppe notes.

To avoid problems, Hoppe recommends changing the diet back to normal gradually, in increments of 5 or 10 percent daily. It's also best to mix the diet so that cattle can't pick only the grain and high-quality forage. "It's important to get cattle eating a high-quality diet as fast as possible after a storm to maintain their condition, but remember that it takes some time for the rumen to re-engineer the microbes necessary to digest those higher-quality forages and grains," Hoppe says. "You need to give cattle some time to adjust."

Coccidiosis, a condition that can cause diarrhea and intestinal damage, can also be a problem, Hoppe notes. Coccidia are microbes that normally live in the rumen. But when cattle are under stress, those microbes can multiply excessively and become pathogens that attack digestive tissue. Coccidiosis can be prevented with a number of coccidiostats or treated in its early stages. Hoppe also advises producers to beware of "personality" problems among cattle that become magnified by hunger.

"Every herd has aggressive animals that will be first in line and eat the most," Hoppe says. "You may find those cattle suffering from bloat or acidosis while more docile cattle aren't getting enough to eat." Avoid that problem by providing enough bunk space for all cattle to get at the feed.

Hoppe advises cleaning the snow out of feed bunks before feeding time to eliminate ice buildup. He also advises removing ice buildup around cattle waterers. Cattle that don't have access to unfrozen water will reduce their feed intake even if hay is readily available.

For more information on livestock feeding during severe winter weather, contact your office of the NDSU Extension Service or the NDSU Carrington Research Extension Center at (701) 652-2951.

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