

Preparation and Vigilance Prevent Cold-Weather Livestock Injuries

Charlie Stoltenow, Extension Veterinarian

While it might be tempting for livestock producers to snuggle up to the stove during subzero days, that's when it's most important for them to be caring for their livestock, says a North Dakota State University veterinarian.

"Prevention is the key to dealing with hypothermia, frostbite and other cold weather injuries in livestock," says Charlie Stoltenow with the NDSU Extension Service. "By the time symptoms are noticeable, it'll probably be too late for producers to provide much help.

"Consider what you would need if you were out in severe cold and wind for 24 hours a day," Stoltenow says. "Shelter, something to insulate you from the cold and plenty of food and water would be your top priorities."

Stoltenow says producers should take extra time to observe livestock, looking for early signs of disease and injury.

"Severe cold-weather injuries or death primarily occur in the very young or in animals that are already debilitated," he explains. Some studies suggest that up to 80 percent of severe frostbite injuries in cattle are linked to other health-related conditions.

Stoltenow says some North Dakota beef producers have reported cases of cold-weather-related sudden death in their calves. Such cases often result when cattle are suffering from undetected infection particularly pneumonia.

"Those animals are under stress already and the weather puts them under such an energy stress that they're putting everything they've got into producing heat," he says. Sudden, unexplained livestock deaths and illnesses should be investigated quickly so that a cause can be identified and steps can be taken to protect remaining animals. That's when help from a local veterinarian may be particularly valuable, Stoltenow says.

Making sure animals receive adequate feed and water is a big step toward preventing cold-weather maladies. A key in feed management is to provide enough energy the veterinarian says.

"Give animals plenty of dry bedding to snuggle into," Stoltenow advises. That insulates vulnerable udders, genitals and legs from the frozen ground and frigid winds. Likewise, windbreaks are essential to keeping animals safe from frigid conditions.

Stoltenow says animals suffering from frostbite don't exhibit pain and it may be up to two weeks before the injury becomes evident as freeze-damaged tissue starts to slough away. "At that point the only option is to consult a veterinarian and treat the injury as an open wound," he says.

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