

BeefTalk: A Significant Storm Event



A Significant Storm Event - When a producer can no longer provide the needed care or the cattle cannot take advantage of the care provided.

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A significant storm event occurred last Saturday, the last day of April, for those of us in western North Dakota. Significant storm events actually occurred in several areas of the country last week, resulting in the tragic loss of life. Our hearts go out to those who lost family and friends.

One finds it difficult to put words in play, but ironically, the sun is shining brighter than ever today, and the Earth is turning to make sure all who need sunshine receive it.

As cattle producers, each brush attack from Mother Nature should cause us to ponder what we are doing. More specifically, in the North Country, one of these significant storm events came in the form of snow, wind, sleet, rain, more wind, more snow and then more wind. In the middle of a storm, it is hard to find beauty in Mother Nature.

Today, let's talk about the word "significant." What makes a significant storm event in contrast to weather-related management issues? For most producers, cattle feed intake can be adjusted upward as the weather gets wetter and/or colder. The fundamental purpose of increasing feed intake is to increase energy as the cattle adjust their bodily functions to offset the additional body heat loss due to the cold and/or wet conditions.

Simple processes, such as shivering, all take energy. The opposite is true when excessive heat arrives. The rations are changed or the intake simply decreases. Either way, the body is good about regulating body temperatures if the appropriate nutrition is available. In addition, the process of digestion also produces heat. This adds to the list of available heat the body may rely on to offset wet and/or cold environments and maintain body temperature.

However, that does not explain a significant storm event. In a significant storm event, a producer no longer can provide the needed care or the cattle cannot take advantage of the care provided. The cattle become aimless and begin to wander in search of the care they are used to finding. Having their daily routine and herd structure lost, they become disoriented.

The cattle can become lost because normal identifiable home points are missing, so they are driven with the wind, snow and rain. Fences are barriers, but the snow will fill in to make the effectiveness of the fence useless. Even if the fence is good, the first cattle that arrive at the barrier are pushed by the weight of the herd behind them, so the fences give way or the cattle are crushed by the force of the herd.

As the cattle become crushed, they form a ramp, so the herd goes right over the top and keeps going. The worst-case scenarios are open pits, lagoons and other water sources that are encountered. The front cattle can be pushed into these water sources and then die as those behind them keep coming.

It certainly is not pleasant to think about, but producers do have to go out and find the cattle that have encountered a significant storm event. From a producer's point of view, the management is right, the planning is good, but the overpowering impact of Mother Nature is an unknown no one controls.

However, there is more to this story than the generation of good storm stories for later telling. Yes, the Dickinson Research Extension Center cattle experienced a significant storm event. The cattle drifted away but did not encounter any life-threatening barriers, which was fortunate.

The next day, all the cows and calves were rounded up across a path of three or more miles. The calves were separated from the mothers and all ended OK. Other producers were not so fortunate. Many significant storm events are cruel and merciless and leave producers pondering what it is they can do differently.

In the big picture, the choices seem to be more with the selection of what significant storm events one wants to deal with because no one is immune.

For cattle producers, the perpetual question of when you want the cows to calve is asked again. One thing is very evident. Even if a producer wants to avoid the mud, slop and pains of winter weather, calving in April still places the operation and cattle in harm's way because of possible winter weather.

May you find all your ear tags.