



BeefTalk 693: Bulls and Cold Are Not a Good Mix

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



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Having had to break into the office door because the lock was frozen shut reminded me that not all things work well in the cold. Those that have experienced cold firsthand do not need to be reminded. For others that can skirt the harshness of winter, in this case early winter, one only needs to take a short walk to be reminded.

Simple things, such as trying to open car doors or trying to straighten out a set of jumper cables to start a car, are reminders. Experiencing slow, cold and clumsy fingers, dropping car keys in the snow or having to take off gloves to pick up the keys literally sends one into despair. Even to the point of thinking: Maybe I will just pick up the keys next spring.



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Anyway, it is cold. It is very cold and it has been very, very cold. The weather people tell us that the wind chill index recently reached well past minus 40 degrees.

Walking across an open stretch of space, the sharp pains of cold air attach to one's face like daggers, so one cannot help but wonder about the cattle and other outdoor critters. In reality, animals are much better prepared for the cold than we are. To some extent, cold is not even a concern for those that are adapted and prepared. Suitable hair coats have been grown and provide excellent body insulation provided the environment is dry.

For cattle producers, much of the attention involves making sure the cattle are dry and well fed. Cattle generate heat as they digest their food, which is needed during the winter by cows and calves. Cows and calves get along quite well, gathering heat from the herd, while bedding down in a well-bedded and protected area.

Cattle can generate a lot of heat. When necessary, cattle will lie down and make every effort to get out of the wind.

Come morning, the cows will get up, get a good drink of water, find hay and eat and then spend the rest of the day lounging and chewing their cud.

On the other hand, calves need more protection from the wind but, given dry bedding and good feed, they will do very well.

The challenge is more on the producer because getting feed out, proper bedding and keeping water lines open are a struggle. At the days end, remarkably, the work gets done. However, if there is an oversight, it will more than likely be in the bull pen.

The bulls often are separated from the main herd and do not gain the benefit of the herd environment when it comes to survival. Often they are more individualistic and not up to cuddling to keep warm. They seem to survive but are at risk in cold weather. The most reported issue is a frozen scrotum. The situation is not that uncommon but certainly a crisis for the bull.

The scrotum is specifically designed to allow heat out of the body and away from the testicles. The bull will not tolerate these cold temperatures without good bedding and wind protection. Bulls exposed to the elements, in this case wind and cold, could be neutered by morning.

In severe cases, any frozen testicles means the bull is of no use. Fortunately, the testis proper generally does not freeze and the damage usually is limited to the scrotum. In such cases, check your bulls for scrotal swelling, followed by sloughing of dead skin.

The heat of the inflamed scrotum actually damages the sperm producing and storage capacity of the bull's reproductive system, which usually means the bull will be infertile for a couple of months.

Needless to say, all bulls should have a breeding soundness exam. Have those bulls tested in late March or early April while there still are plenty of bull sales to shop for replacements.

As a side note, are you feeding your bulls? We spend so much time talking about the cows that often the poor bulls get left out in the cold, literally. Granted, bulls can get big, with some adding 300 pounds a year. However, stunting their growth and then expecting them to be fertile in the spring is not realistic bull management.

A quick check of the dry matter intake tables shows that larger, mature bulls should be eating 40 to 50-plus pounds of dry matter. As the bull adds weight, his daily feed delivered easily could exceed 60 to 70 pounds of forage, depending on feeding method.

The pounds will be even greater if you are giving the bulls wetter feeds. Add it up and make sure your bulls are bedded well, out of the wind and getting the right amount of a balanced ration for proper maintenance and growth. Check with your local nutritionist.

Enjoy the cold because it's going to be a long winter.

May you find all your ear tags.

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