



BeefTalk 697: No Shortcuts in the Beef Business

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



There is nothing cheap or quick about raising cattle and shortcuts will leave cattle exposed and vulnerable.

Once again, Mother Nature reigns and we follow. The challenges that cow-calf producers face are immense. The wind, temperature extremes and just the sheer forces of nature are mind-bending.

Given the recent cold wave across the country, walking across cold snow is notable. There are several types of snow. The fashionable snowflake is poetic, so we smile at the beauty, shape and the mild weather required to gently layer the land. Soon to follow is Jack Frost, those beautiful ice crystals on a cool but not cold morning.

However, we mostly live with just snow, which is those white particles flying through the air creating visibility problems. If the winds blow hard enough, those white particles create a blizzard. Once deposited, snow creates drifts, which are mounds of piled water that ideally can be suited to sleds and kids.

However, cold snow is a different story. On these cold mornings, and I mean cold, everything else also is cold. The feel of bare hands on a cold pipe could just as well be hands on molten steel because the pain and intensity are about the same. As one walks out to check the cows, a very distinctive sound is heard. Underfoot is the crunching sound of cold snow. The snow is so cold that the weight of a person or cow on it causes a slow, uprising moan. The snow is so cold that ice crystals scamper across the surface because the snow is blown as smooth as glass by the piercing wind.

Twenty degrees below zero is a starter, but minus 25, 30, 35 or 40 produce much better cold snow. With each dip in temperature, the walk gets more gaited, lungs more demanding and the moan crisper. The stillness of the air is deafening because nothing interferes with the passage of sound.



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At last, the gate is reached, and not a sound can be heard. A group of cows, one by one with ears, eyelashes and every hair coated white, slowly begins checking on the intruder. Movement is optional, but hibernation is preferred.

The cows are OK and probably pondering why anyone is moving around outside. Numb by the cold, the rancher feeds the cattle and chips open the water. After that, the rancher begins the numbing walk back to the house to the sound of cold snow moaning underfoot.

The entryway or foyer is laden with parkas, gloves too numerous to count, foot gear, scarves, stocking caps and caps that are all needed in triplicate. Finally, in the kitchen, the cheeks not yet warm, the coffee cup held by sight, not feel, the white socks fresh, a smile, a friendly chat and the comfort of home reappears. The chair is soft and comfortable and the magazine has articles on places far away. As the sun dogs go with the setting sun, there is an evening thought and soon dad's asleep in the chair.

The snow is cold, but I guess there always is a good side to everything. Perhaps it is the warm chair or knowing life is sufficient. Beef production is a daily exchange with nature with no shortcuts.

It takes a real hammer, along with nails, lumber and a person, to produce a real fence. Using a cheap hammer and nails, along with yesterday's lumber special, will make a pretty fence but one that will not last the effects of cold snow.

There is nothing cheap or quick about raising cattle. Shortcuts will leave cattle exposed and vulnerable. One could say the same for pliers, screwdrivers, wire and all the other things that hold an operation together. Surviving cold snow means not taking shortcuts.

The eating public seldom realizes that the 99-cent special in a cafe also means that a rancher is taking care of the cattle on a cold day in January with 50-mile per hour winds.

Producers survive by using a good pair of brown coveralls that hide them from the snow and cutting wind. There is something about those brown coveralls, especially after several days of wear with no water to wash them. As those brown coveralls come in from the cold, real people emerge with faces smiling and happy to do what they do. Brown coveralls do have names, although the several layers of clothing the producers are wearing make identification difficult.

The other day, two brown coveralls were talking, but I was not quite sure they knew who they were talking to. With the passing of time, most of Mother Nature's events are converted to stories that memories slowly smooth over. The roughest parts often are dropped and replaced with a superhero memory or two.

Battling the cold snow and other forces of nature never will end, nor will the future stories. The best outcomes always rest with good planning and preparation so that the ending is good, which at least means having a new pair of brown coveralls and good pliers.

May you find all your ear tags.

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