

Livestock and Natural Resources

I was thinking of just “recycling” one of my old columns from Christmas past. I opened one up from way back in 2005. In it there was a reference to the real meaning of Christmas. It’s sad to me that I pondered, that this column today, might make some people feel uncomfortable and I might be accused of being insensitive to someone of another religion. That is a sad thought.

Just like those that were offended by the 74-year-old song, “Baby It’s Cold Outside”. I guess I always liked the melody and the funny duet, not really giving it much thought. I mean if you’re really going to get your panties in a knot, how about “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer”, as a grandmother it really upsets me that no one is concerned for Grandma!

How much hay or supplement a cow needs depends on weather conditions, cow age and body condition, available pasture or crop residue, and reproductive stage of the cow. Some herds do well through fall and winter on good native pasture with just a salt/mineral supplement, especially if cows aren’t nursing calves. But, if snow covers the grass deeply or weather gets quite cold, they may need hay.

In cold or stormy weather, cattle need more energy to maintain body heat. This can be adequately supplied by forages, since fermentation breakdown of roughage in the rumen produces heat. If cattle aren’t fed additional energy, they rob body fat to keep warm, and lose weight.

During extremely cold or windy weather, cows should be given all the hay they’ll clean up, or a protein supplement on dry pastures to encourage them to eat more. As long as protein is adequate, cows can process/ferment sufficient roughage to provide energy and body heat. Access to good windbreaks during severe weather is important to reduce cold cows’ stress and energy requirements, as well.

Shelter is another obvious winter livestock management concern. Animals do not necessarily need or want to live in an enclosed barn every day in the winter and barns for shelter are not practical for large herds of cattle. Livestock can tolerate cold weather if fed properly for it. However, protection from wind and rain will decrease energy requirements and feed costs and increase animal comfort. Three sided sheds, hills, thickets of trees and solid or semisolid fences can all serve as adequate breaks from the prevailing winds. There must be sufficient space for all animals to benefit or overcrowding and even trampling can occur. If animals do not have enough space and variety of landscape to select a spot protected from the elements, a shelter should be provided. Shelter requirements vary between species—sheep with thick fleeces will graze and spend a great deal of time outside during poor weather, but most goats prefer to stay dry than eat.

If a structure is provided, be sure to keep the bedding dry and as clean as possible. Bedding helps insulate animals from the cold ground. However, in bedding soiled with animal wastes, ammonia fumes can build up quickly which can cause, irritated respiratory linings that can lead to pneumonia causing bacteria and viruses. Provide good ventilation so the air seems fresh, but do not permit drafts in the structure. Again, prevent overcrowding and make sure there is enough space for all animals.