

WEEKLY NEWS COLUMN
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THANK A RANCHER

Last week, I shared with producers tips to help their cattle weather the storm. Since then, we've seen what feels like an endless stretch of below zero days and nights, ice, wind and snow (not necessarily in that order). While many of us were at home cozy by the fire, or enjoying a "snow day" from the office or school, our local ranchers were not. The weather events over the last week have kicked our producers into overdrive and they are working tirelessly to care for their animals so that the rest of us are fed.

As temperatures decrease, the amount of work for a livestock producer increases. Cold weather, snow and ice increases the amount of time it takes a producer to care for his stock exponentially. The time it takes to provide daily care for the livestock more than doubles, and in some cases, ranchers were working around the clock to make sure the livestock were well cared for.

Cold weather results in increased nutritional needs of livestock. Like humans, livestock need nutrients in the form of energy (think carbohydrates) to help maintain their body temperature. As a result, ranchers rolled out more hay and increased grain supplements. Livestock also must have adequate water supply to maintain grazing and appetite, which in turn, help maintain body temperature. As the ambient temperatures plummeted, producers were out with tank heaters, hatchets, shovels and whatever they could find to keep water sources open and plentiful. Many days, they had to open the same water source multiple times per day. As the weather brought precipitation in the form of ice and snow, producers were hard at work providing structure and windbreaks for cattle to get out of the elements.

In Kansas, many producers have spring calving herds meaning the cows give birth in the spring. Spring calving begins in January. Cows that are close to calving may calve earlier due to stress from the drop in temperatures. The first thing a cow does when a calf is born is "mother" it, licking it and cleaning it off to get the calf dry and stimulate blood flow so the it will get up and nurse, receiving colostrum from the mother. Sub-zero temperatures make drying off difficult for calves. Ranchers are on the hunt for calving cows and heifers to assist if necessary and provide the calf a better chance at life. Wet and newborn calves are brought into the feed truck to warm up on the floor board, into the barn, the shop or the house to get their body temperature up and prevent hypothermia. Cattlemen who are out checking livestock frequently can help decrease the risk of losing calves. It's not just the cattlemen that's involved in providing this early care. Ranching quickly becomes "all hands on deck" as families help to warm new calves and get them going while the rancher is out looking for more.

Thankfully, we see an end in sight. As the temperatures increase and the sun comes out, baby calves have a better chance at survival. The ability of the cow to provide everything the calf needs increases, and the rancher begins to sleep better at night.

While you're cozy in your home, think about those who are out weathering the storm to feed the world. The next time you see your local farmer or rancher, tell them thanks. Let them know that you appreciate all they're doing to help feed the world.

For more information about agriculture, contact the Cowley County Extension Office 221-5450, 441-4565.

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