

Tending Cattle After the Winter Storm

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Forage Quality Has Changed

It appears the worst of the early February winter blizzard that swept across the state has past. As water sources thaw and leak repairs get underway, cattlemen might give some thought to forage conditions.

Grass leaves contain most of the digestible protein, energy and minerals in the plant. Rain, sleet, snow and freezing temperatures leech these valuable nutrients from the plant. Snow and ice accumulation tends to break leaves from the stems. Likewise, the weight of snow and ice often reduces range for-

age to a mat that may be of lesser palatability than standing forage. With fewer leaves and perhaps a mat-like appearance, the forage has no doubt changed in the past ten days.

Grazing cattle need a minimum of 7% crude protein in the diet to support rumen microbes and maintain rumen function. The protein content of weathered dormant forages may be below this optimum threshold. If so, cattle may be slowly starving on a belly full of grass.

In addition to correct-

ing a potential rumen nitrogen [protein] deficiency, protein supplementation will often facilitate greater forage (and hence energy) intake. If cows are in thin body condition (condition score 4 or less), supplemental energy may be warranted to speed their recovery from the cold stress.

Late winter and spring-calving cows are in their final trimester of gestation where 80+ percent of fetal growth occurs. Improvement in body condition is difficult during this time. Remember—the goal is to calve them in at least a BCS=5 to optimize the 2012 calf crop.

Highlights:

- Inclement (wet and cold) weather takes a toll on the quality of dormant forages
- A beef cow needs 7% crude protein in the diet to maintain rumen function.
- Late winter dormant forages often contain less than 7% crude protein.
- Depending on body condition, additional protein and energy supplementation may be warranted.
- Monitor the strength and condition of first calf heifers closely.

How much does a cow need?

1300 lb, 5 year old, heavy bred cow

Current range forage quality (estimated): 5% crude protein, 48% TDN

Predicted forage intake, 24 lb/day

Predicted weight changelose a condition score in 50 days

Supplement required to maintain condition and weight

20% cubes 5 lb/day

Distillers dried grains 3.5 lb/day

(Numerous other supplements are available, these two are offered as references only.)