

Winter Storm Recovery Issues for Beef Herds

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Winter weather conditions during December and January have created numerous problems and losses for beef cow herds and cattlemen, especially in the eastern Colorado plains. Recovery from the harsh hand of Mother Nature is in progress and efforts are underway to mitigate the damages. However, the effects of the severe winter conditions may linger through the remainder of the season and into spring for some cattle operations. Cattlemen should evaluate the physical and reproductive condition of their heifers, cows and bulls to develop and implement recovery plans that minimize further problems as calving and breeding seasons approach.

Physical stress and loss of body condition of most beef cattle during the storm period was inevitable. Periods of inaccessibility to feed and water have caused use of body reserves of energy. Requirements for energy are increased during cold temperatures. Cows and heifers in late stages of pregnancy or nursing calves are the most seriously affected by the increased nutritional demands. In some cases, pregnant females have incurred fetal death and abortions. Pregnancy loss is highly variable within groups of bred-females and between herds; however, increased abortion rates are being reported for many herds. Most of the abortions may be attributable to severe stress and nutritional depletion, but concerns for nitrate toxicity due to high nitrate levels in feeds and water should be considered. Due to the insufficient intake of energy during the storm and post-storm periods, the risk of nitrate toxicity may have been accentuated. Reports of abortions related to other plant-associated toxins are also arising, such as “pine needle abortion.” Abortion events that continue during the recovery period should be investigated for infectious or toxic causes and control measures instituted. Feed and water sources should be evaluated for potential toxins, such as nitrate, and intake of other plants should be monitored.

The importance of designing effective feeding programs to meet the nutritional needs of pregnant females is imperative, particularly with cows calving or approaching calving time. Shortages of feed sources and high feed costs compound this issue and make implementing recovery of cow body condition and health challenging and expensive. If possible, it may be advantageous to sort cows by body condition, health, pregnancy status, and calving time to feed according to their needs. Higher-quality feeds could be directed to the most demanding groups of females. Sorting and culling cows that have aborted or have physical debilitations may conserve feed and labor resources. The recovery of lost body condition will impact the degree of secondary effects on reproduction and calf survival.

Secondary effects of the stress and physical losses incurred by beef cows and heifers may be seen throughout the calving season. Increased calving difficulties due to weaker cows, prolonged delivery times, and premature births may be experienced. Weak and

stressed calves at birth and decreased colostrum and milk production may influence calf health and survivability. Awareness of these risks should prompt the development of more intensive calving management protocols to assist the survivability of calves and cows. Review of informational materials on calving management, neonatal calf care, and handling health problems is warranted and consultation with your herd veterinarian and area extension specialists could be valuable. Providing accessible and healthy calving environments should be addressed as snow cover, mud and more dense confinement of cowherds is likely due to the winter weather. Providing more bedding and shelter may be necessary to protect calves that are slow and weak at birth. Assuring early colostrum intake is essential to protect the calf from infectious diseases. Minimizing the length of time calves are exposed to highly contaminated environments will decrease disease exposure. Providing facilities to warm-up weak, hypothermic (chilled) calves may be necessary. Calves should be closely monitored for nursing activity as milk production may be slow to develop, cows may have frostbite damage to teats, or cows may be weak and reluctant to mother calves effectively. Preventative actions to control herd epidemics of infectious calf diseases (calf scours, pneumonia, septicemia, etc.) should be a priority. Effective treatment programs should be developed in association with veterinary services. All in all, higher levels of management of pregnant cows and heifers and their calves will be necessary to minimize problems and losses. Remember, very little “magic” is available in the form of medicines, drugs, compounds, and potions that truly alleviate these problems. Good nutrition, management and health practices will generally be more beneficial.

Another issue often arising following severe winter weather may be higher-than-usual levels of lameness in cows and heifers. Frostbite, injuries, claw damage and continual walking on frozen, rough ground often precipitates lameness problems. Many of these lame cows are just “sore-footed” and will recover slowly. More seriously affected cows may need more detailed attention and placement in bedded areas. With the snow meltdown, muddy conditions may precipitate infectious “foot rot” problems that should be detected early and treated accordingly. Cows with upper limb injuries and lameness should be evaluated as to their potential to recover soundness. Cows that are severely crippled and unable to rise and travel, in most instances, should be humanely euthanized.

Awareness of the potential secondary production and health issues that may arise following severe winter weather stress and nutritional insufficiency is a primary means to plan and respond. Developing flexible and most-effective management and treatment practices can assist recovery and provide highest returns. Undoubtedly, the remainder of this winter and spring will provide many challenges. To assist you, your local veterinarian and area extension specialists are available to join in the recovery efforts. Resources, such as printed materials and web-based informational sources are widely available for information. Colorado State University Extension services, through local, area, and campus-based specialists, are available for education and consultation. Supporting the CSU Extension “Beef Team” is the Web site (CSUBeef.com) with informational and printed resources (The Cattleman’s Library). Good decisions and actions are necessary to prevent further production and health issues created by the 2006-2007 winter storms.