

Ready for Winter?



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Reminders to monitor body condition, prepare for calving season and keep an eye on bulls.

by *Kindra Gordon*

What do you do on your farm or ranch to prepare for winter weather? Here's a quick review of three important management questions to ask yourself as the snow begins to arrive:

1. Is she a 5?

Going into the winter months, Saint Onge, S.D., Veterinarian Chandy Olson emphasizes the importance of keeping an eye on cows' body condition.

"Cows in poor body condition during the winter," Olson says, "usually leads to poor body condition prior to and after calving, which can delay estrus and lead to higher incidence of open or late-calving cows, as well as greater susceptibility to disease." Olson works with cattle herds in the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana and will pregnancy-check 30,000 cows by ultrasound each year.

She suggests adding weight to thin cows after weaning so they can maintain that condition through the winter and into calving. Olson says this strategy is usually less expensive and more successful than trying to add weight to cows just prior to calving next winter or spring.

"Adding weight to thin cows later in gestation during extreme cold is virtually impossible due to high energy requirements to maintain body temperature, growing gestational requirements and increasingly limited rumen capacity," she says.

Olson notes that the optimum body condition score (BCS) range is usually 5 to 6, with cows between BCS of 4 to 5 considered marginal. Because it is a subjective measure, she suggests producers consider having a third party verify their cows' BCS after weaning.

Olson adds that fall prebreeding vaccinations are an effective — and relatively inexpensive — part of a herd health program. But she emphasizes they are not a silver bullet. She concludes, "Cows in poor condition won't breed well next spring regardless of mineral, vaccine or fancy bulls."

2. Have you prepared for calving season — and marketing?

As calving season approaches, Olson also reminds producers that if they intend to participate in a source- and age-verification program, they'll need to record the date of the first and last calf born, and have a total cow and calf inventory. Additionally, pregnancy records and vaccine receipts are important as they can be used to confirm inventories for those programs.

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Add preg-checking to your herd management

In today's era of escalating operating costs, efficiency is an important part of every operation. Saint Onge, S.D., Veterinarian Chandy Olson says pregnancy-testing cows and heifers is one way to do just that.

She points out that preg-checking provides an immediate opportunity to cull subfertile females from the herd. But in addition to culling "open" females, Olson encourages producers to scrutinize their late breeders, as well.

"Making excuses for cows that breed late and keeping them in the herd frequently leads to problems the following year. These cows are the least likely to breed when feed conditions are challenging and have the highest risk for being disease carriers. Keeping them in the herd just extends the calving season," Olson says.

And, Olson explains that with the calving date information

pinpointed from the ultrasound, producers can add some extra efficiencies to their operation. Specifically, cows can be divided into calving groups that are 20 to 30 days apart (i.e., early-, middle and late-calving groups). This can help target feed resources to cows as they enter their third trimester and focus labor efforts during calving.

Olson adds that preg-checking is also a great way to evaluate the 'productive' health of a cow herd.

"Herds with an abnormal amount of late-calving cows may indicate a reproductive disease problem; a bull fertility concern; or, more frequently, a nutritional or stocking rate issue," she says.

Olson advises that the best time to ultrasound is between 30 and 100 days gestation — but it can be done as late as 120 days gestation. Frequently, producers will ultrasound cows when they pre-condition calves because the cows and calves are already sorted.

Secondly, she advocates having a predetermined treatment protocol for sick calves before calving even begins.

“Having a designated protocol for treating sick calves and marking or recording treated calves will allow for some marketing flexibility later on,” she explains. “With a defined program and proper records, many of the calves could still be eligible for premiums offered through antibiotic-free and hormone-free marketing programs.”

A system of tracking calf illness also sets up a good framework with your veterinarian for addressing health problems as soon as they occur, Olson adds.

Additionally, she points out that some antibiotic or hormone-free programs

may require an onsite audit and program enrollment prior to the calving season.

“It is important to plan ahead and have those details worked out before the calves start arriving,” Olson concludes.

3. Will your bulls be ready for breeding season?

When bulls are pulled from the cow herd late summer and early fall, they may need some extra TLC, depending on their age and the amount of weight lost during the breeding season. Olson says most bulls can be managed on an all-roughage diet through the winter, but young or thin bulls may need extra care and supplemental nutrition to rebound. So it is important to keep a close eye on them throughout the winter.

Prior to spring turnout, Olson reminds producers that:

- ▶ Bulls should also receive prebreeding vaccinations, similar to the cow herd.
- ▶ Extra fly control and vaccinations such as those to control pinkeye and foot rot should be considered for the bull battery.
- ▶ Bulls should have an annual breeding soundness exam prior to turnout.
- ▶ Recognize that yearling bulls will not be able to breed as many cows as older bulls. Also, yearling bulls that will breed on pasture should be adapted to grass and should not be overly fat at the beginning of the breeding season.
- ▶ Consider DNA testing. Genomic testing has become less expensive and easier, and may be a valuable selection tool for specific traits, Olson says.

