

Late Winter Snow Storm Blasts Midwest



► Joel Bunker, registered Angus seedstock breeder, digs out after an April blizzard slams his Sharon Springs, Kan., ranch with roughly 18 in. of snow.

PHOTOS BY JOEL BUNKER

Pasture and feedlot cattle suffocate in 60 mph blizzard conditions.

by **Paige Nelson**, field editor

On April 29-30, 2017, an unexpected spring snowstorm plastered parts of eastern New Mexico and Colorado, the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, and western Kansas and Nebraska with 12 inches (in.) to 24 in. or more of snow and 60 mph wind gusts.

While this region of cattle country is no stranger to harsh and sometimes erratic weather patterns, the devastation of the storm surprised most people in its path. The storm's mid-spring timing and cocktail of wet snow and harsh wind left a trail of dead cattle, lost cattle, power outages, downed tree limbs and, in some places, 8-foot (ft.)-high snow drifts.

Waking up to white

Ranch hand for Larson Angus Ranch and ABS Global Representative Brady Larson of Sharon Springs, Kan., says 8 in. of snow blanketed the ground when he woke up Saturday, April 29. He didn't think much of it because by end of day the snow had melted. However, Sunday morning's weather conditions surprised him.

"Gosh, you looked outside and there was probably 18-20 in. on the ground," he describes.

With a ground temperature of around 60° F, Larson suspects the snow was melting on the bottom and piling up on the top, so he's unsure of just how much accumulation his area actually received.

"Sunday was hard," he continues, "because we lost power. ... It's just kind of an eerie feeling knowing there's cattle out there, and there isn't anything you can do about it. I tried going out in the Ranger around noon, and I got stuck 30 yards from the house, and I couldn't budge."

Southeast of Sharon Springs, in Garden City, Kan., Lee Reeve, Kansas Livestock Association (KLA) president-elect and owner of Reeve Cattle Co., says what started Friday and Saturday as a nice spring rain with good moisture accumulation turned into a blizzard the likes of which he had never seen before.

"By early Sunday morning there was a couple inches more of snow everywhere, but then the storm really picked up, and it was blowing 40-50 miles per hour. I have

never seen as much snow in the air as what was there. It was a real heavy snow, so it was almost like getting plastered with a snowball. I mean, it was packing on everything," recalls Reeve.

He says there was so much heavy snow dumped on the town of Garden City, several roofs collapsed because of the weight.

"We weren't quite in the center of it," he says. "There were two centers of it. One was north toward Scott City, and then there was another center in extreme southwest Kansas around Johnson to Hugoton ... There were [accumulations of] 30 in. of snow in some spots."

Oklahoma, Cimarron and Texas counties received their fair share of wind and snow. Oklahoma State Veterinarian Rod Hall reports the Panhandle felt the weight of about a foot of snow, but got upward of 60-70 mph wind gusts. That created whiteout conditions, he says.

"Twelve inches of snow wouldn't have been a bad issue on its own, but coupled with the wind, just basically blinded the cattle, and they couldn't see where they were going," says Hall.

Bad timing

Area meteorologists had done their job. They had warned the population that a snow event was coming, but no one expected anything of this scale this late in the year. Larson says when he heard the weather report call for 5-8 in., he doubted it would drop even that much.

Because of the storm's late-spring timing, a majority of the cattle losses were young calves, but all cattle were affected. A large number of the cattle had already lost their winter coat and were unprepared for the blowing snow, states Reeve.

In his area, wheat that was green and growing looked like a rolling pin had gone over it when the snow melted away. However, at the time of Reeve's interview (about three weeks later), he says most of the wheat had recovered.

Lost in the storm

Hall describes a number of ways cattle perished in the storm:

- ▶ Feedlot cattle bunched in the corners of their pens and suffocated/trampled pen mates closest to the fence;
- ▶ Pasture cattle drifted with the wind into and over fences;
- ▶ Blinded by the snow, several animals fell into swine farm lagoons and drowned.

In speaking with some of his ABS Global customers, Larson has heard of several accounts of veterinarians actually diagnosing cattle deaths as drowning because of the amount of snow that was in the air. Necropsies performed by veterinarians found water in the lungs of the animal.

Larson Angus Ranch lost young calves, older cows and a few feedlot cattle that had been battling illness at the time of the storm. Reeve echoes that sentiment, saying the cattle he lost in his feedyard were those that were already health-compromised for one reason or another.

Larson thinks in most cases the stress of the storm was too much for the cattle to handle. In a few unique situations, however, even some of the strong were caught by the storm's ferocity.

Besides a couple cows and calves getting tangled in wire, Larson lost some healthy, middle-aged cows in a pen close to his breeding facilities.

"I'm not so sure that they didn't just get trampled," he says. "The pen just filled up and it was a mess."

Calculating the damage

There is no formal system in place for reporting cattle deaths, but in Cimarron County alone, Sherriff Leon Apple says he has heard a consistent number of 1,700 head. Hall says a rough estimate for Texas County, Okla., is 1,000 head.

Kansas Wildfire Update

Kansas Livestock Association (KLA) President-elect Lee Reeve says in a nutshell, Kansas's ranchers were highly disappointed by the staggering effects of the March wildfires that blackened the prairie.

"One thing that's really a tribute to everybody in agriculture is the amount of help that was offered these people," he states.

The KLA foundation has now gathered more than \$2.5 million in cash donations to help ranchers who lost cattle, buildings, grass and fences to Mother Nature's wrath.

Reeve explains: "That will be distributed to those people to help mainly rebuild fences. Fences cost \$5,000-\$10,000 a mile, and there was a lot of miles of fence, and most of the fence was gone."

At the time of this writing, there were still cattle missing in Oklahoma, so numbers are subject to change.

KLA hasn't compiled the death loss numbers yet, but Reeve states the consensus among cattle feeders in the Garden City area is a loss of 20-40 pounds (lb.) each on cattle that were ready to be harvested.

According to reports, Reeve says about half the cattle on feed in the country were affected by the storm.

"A lot of our feedyard operators ranked it among the biggest-impact storms that they can remember," says KLA Executive Director of the Feedyard Division Clayton Huseman. "Even those guys that remember back to

some of the really historic blizzards say this one ranked right with them because of the amount of snow, how wet and heavy it was, and how hard it came."

Larson lost 16-week-old and younger calves, five or six feedlot cattle, and five or six cows to the blizzard.

The financial loss of dead cattle is stressful, and watching the death rate climb adds a burden to heavy shoulders, but the emotional strain on the cattle caregivers is just as trying.

"That's just depressing for these guys that work hard to keep them alive and healthy," remarks Hall, "and now they've got to get in there and dig them out of the snow and drag them out and bury them. It just affects their mental attitude.

"It's terrible for the animals, but it's just really, really hard on the people," he says.

Cleaning up

Thanks to a warm Monday and even warmer Tuesday, the snow melted quickly. Reeve says it didn't take long for the ground to soak up the moisture. By the end of the week, pen conditions were almost normal.

However, feedyard operators didn't wait for things to dry out before springing into action.

"The response was to get the cattle fed and get the cattle cared for," says Huseman. "That's their job in all weather conditions, and a storm like this just makes it extra hard to get that work done."

Huseman says many feedyards and ranches were running on generator power during the storm and for a few days after.

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▶ All of Joel Bunker's cattle were on pasture when the storm hit. He says for the first week after the storm, the cattle were tired, but he hasn't seen any sickness in his calves.

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“I’ve heard reports of feedyards being without their primary source of power from anywhere from a couple of hours to days,” he says. “There’ve been some prolonged power outages in rural parts of the state [for] about two and half weeks.”

As soon as he could get out to the cattle on Monday, in what was still 18 in. of snow, Larson found the majority of the herd in good shape, just exhausted and hungry from the storm.

“The cows were looking for feed. The calves were just too tired to bawl for their mothers,” he describes. “We had cows going around sniffing calves, but the calves weren’t bawling.”

It took a day or so for the calves to get rested enough to want to look for Mama, says Larson. Even then, he still was on an ATV every day for three days getting cattle paired.

As for lingering effects of the storm, it might be too soon to know. Calving season next year will either tell a story of late-calving cows or hearty girls that can stay pregnant through just about anything.

Larson had just finished heat detecting some of his father’s recipient cows and felt he had a good response from them.

“One of my concerns, though,” he says,

“is there’s a lot of (artificial insemination) projects that I had that were about 12 days before the storm. I’m kind of nervous that those projects may have some embryonic loss.”

Market response

Almost immediately following the storm, cattle futures and live-cattle prices took a significant jump.

A May 5 *Reuters* report (www.reuters.com/article/usa-livestock-idUSL1N1I5230) stated live-cattle contracts hit their 3¢ daily price limit. June contracts closed the day at \$130.05 per hundredweight (cwt.), and August contracts settled at \$123.80 per cwt. — fresh highs for both contracts. Cash cattle sold for \$145-\$147 per cwt., up from the previous week’s \$131.68 average high.

The spike didn’t last, and within a few days the market leveled.

“After [the storm] the fat price jumped up several dollars, partially because of the storm and partially because we’re getting very current on fat cattle,” asserts Reeve.

“Those guys in Chicago watch the weather and the news just like everybody does,” he says. “They saw this big storm. At first nobody knew how extensive the damage was going

to be, so they kind of err on the side of being sensational.”

Huseman says the storm influenced markets but nothing extensive.

“I think that the news of the blizzard had some impact, at least in terms of how the futures reacted. A storm like this is not going to significantly reduce the supply of beef.

“Long-term probably has limited impact, at least on the ultimate price of our product, but it will, in the short term, take some pounds off the cattle that were going to harvest immediately after the event,” he says.

While no one expected a storm of this magnitude this late in the year, all parties agree that it could have been much worse. Reeve is grateful it happened in April, when the ground was warm, instead of November. Larson says he’ll take a blizzard over a wildfire any time, and Hall says people in his area will be gathering cattle anyway for branding, so hopefully the lost cattle will be found and sent home.

Joel Bunker, a registered Angus seedstock breeder in Sharon Springs, Kan., says maybe the icing on the cake is that, “This year, if you buy bulls out of Kansas, you know they’re tough.”



Editor’s Note: Paige Nelson is a field editor and a cattlemaster from Rigby, Idaho.