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WINTER GRAZING

Snow can be great thing for those wishing for a white Christmas this year, but producers hoping to winter animals on crop residues or pasture, too much snow and ice can be an issue. How can winter weather impact your herd management this year?

Just how much snow or ice can be a problem for animals grazing is debatable. This back and forth can mostly be attributed to the differences in the forage itself and precipitation we receive. A foot of stockpiled grass or a hay swath with lots of air under ice or snow is going to be easier to break into and get meaningful forage from than a shortly grazed pasture or corn residue lying on the ground.

When it comes to precipitation, what we actually receive can impact availability as well. A heavy, wet snow will be harder to dig through than dry, fluff. If the snow drifts or sits around for a while, it will compress and digging through becomes harder. Finally, with sunshine or a warm day, the top will melt, forming a crust that animals have to break through. With each impediment, an animal has to work harder and harder for a bite. With ice, thickness and length of time it is maintained are the two factors to keep in mind. An inch of ice that melts in a day or two after warm temperatures can have less of an impact and ½ inch that sticks around for 3 or 4 days.

So what is the level we need to watch for? I personally like the 6 and ¼ inch rule. 6 inches of snow or ¼ inch of ice, and animals are going to work harder to eat. At this point we need to start watching animal condition, and be ready to supplement, especially if temperatures drop and animal requirements to just meet basic metabolic needs increase. Again, this is just a starting point. Each situation will be different.

Grazing through snow and ice is a learned behavior, so don't expect animals that have relied up on hay in the past to pick it up overnight. It might be tempting to push animals so they are hungry enough to dig down and find forage. Be careful not to over-do it, especially if you see body condition slipping. A better option may be to help facilitate the learning by scrapping snow away from an area so animals can see for themselves the food below the snow.

Another thing to take into consideration is the impact moisture will have on forage quality. In corn fields, windy conditions before lasting snow cover can blow away husks and leaves, the staple and highest quality forage for animals grazing. Any moisture, be it snow, ice, or rain, will slowly cause nutrients to leach out of standing forage, whether it's grass or crop residues. Typically more mobile sugars are lost first, so energy values take a hit, but after a while, protein content will drop too.

Last, with the early storms we've already received, the ground isn't frozen, leading to muddy conditions. This is especially problematic in crop fields, where animals will foul and trample forage, reducing the amount of feed available.

One way to reduce the impact of weather on both pasture and crop residue is to strip graze. This keeps animals from packing down snow or trampling feed into the ground by limiting the amount of field they have access too. Additionally, limiting animal's selectivity prevents cherry picking the best stuff first and leaving lower quality forage to the end of the grazing period. While initial grazing may not be as nutrient dense, the overall quality of diet during the entire grazing period will be constant and higher quality.

Taking advantage of winter grazing resources can be a viable practice, but knowing how to handle snow and ice is critical for success. Taller and fluffy forages like stockpiled pasture or windrowed grass will be easier for animals to reach under snow and ice. Keep an eye on animals that have to dig through more than 6 inches of snow or ¼ inch of ice and if body condition starts to drop, be ready with supplemental feed. With practice and planning, winter doesn't have to stop your herd from grazing.

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