

What to do With the Weather

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2/15

How does cold wet weather affect dairy cows in open lots? That is a great question with countless variables to consider before coming up with the right answer. How wet? How cold? How long? What about the young heifers? What is the condition of the cows? Will the weather impact milk production or body condition first? You can see this list could quite possibly be endless. Maybe the bigger question is what should we do as nutritionists and dairy producers to best handle the reality of cold, wet winter weather. The answer is ambiguous because it is unique to each situation.

There has been great attention given by researchers to heat stress and the negative implications it has on dairy cows. Research results have been summarized and interventions put in place to minimize the negative impact. However, cold and wet weather events are typically shorter in duration and harder to predict. This makes it harder to predict the impact that such events have on a dairies. Suffice it to say that cows will have increased nutritional requirements when they are tromping through mud and fighting wind chills. In addition, they must deal with irregular feed delivery because of increased push outs, late feed delivery, parlor back-ups etc... This sets the stage for a tremendous amount of variation in their daily routine and that spells trouble.

So what do you do? How do you proactively minimize those negative effects? The easy answer is to be prepared and stay ahead of the event instead of being only reactionary and simply going into crisis mode. Prepare pens ahead of time, call in that extra employee you will need ahead of time to set the preparations in motion. Does the parlor always fall behind milking when these conditions occur? How can you counteract the slow down? If you know all of the feed in the bunks is going to need to be pushed out because it is buried in snow, sopping wet, filled with dirt from the wind blowing – what is the plan to expedite feed delivery?

There are also times when it is just cold and nutritionally we can increase the number of calories those animals consume to offset the increased demand that is put on them. Does that mean just increasing the amount of feed delivered to them? Or does that call for an extra pound or two of corn offered in the ration? One factor working with us in cold weather management is the natural appetite of cows. Some would say that the cows seem to know that the Arctic blast is coming before the weatherman does. There is something to that as our good cow sense and observation has taught us about this increase in appetite a day or so before the north wind starts howling. In any case, it is good that we can work with the cow's natural intuition and get a few extra nutrients delivered.

The fact of the matter is cows love routine and the closer we can get to making today as close as we can to yesterday – the happier she is going to be. Obviously we cannot remove all variation everyday but whatever we can do to minimize those alterations will pay off. Variation equals stress to dairy cows. Stress equals reduced production, reduced immune system effectiveness, loss of body condition the list just goes on. It boils down to money. Reducing stress by reducing variation through proactive

management before and during weather events saves money and that goes Straight to Your Bottom Line.