



STAYING WARM AND DRY: If a building isn't feasible for your operation, consider a windbreak — either a natural one or one you construct — to help cattle stay dry and out of the wind.

Is your beef operation ready for winter?

Beef Column: For every 10-degree drop below 30 degrees F, cattle energy requirements increase by 13%.

Oct 15, 2019

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With another Wisconsin winter upon us, it's a great time to consider cold weather protection for your beef cattle. While winter's wrath and timing will vary across our state, it's a safe bet that all Wisconsin cattle herds will feel dangerous weather impacts over the coming months. Planning for cold temperatures and high winds can help keep your herd healthy and productive, control your feed costs, and ultimately improve your profits.

With thick winter hair, healthy rumen activity and body temperatures around 101 degrees F, it is true that cattle handle the cold better than their human caretakers. As cattle work harder to maintain that body temperature, however, the amount of feed consumed dramatically increases. Studies have shown that for every 10-degree drop in outside temperature below 30 degrees, cattle energy requirements increase by 13%. Make sure enough feed is available to support this increased need. Also, make sure water is readily available. If water is restricted, feed intake will be reduced, as well.

Provide shelter

Giving cattle the ability to stay dry, out of the wind, and on a well-bedded pack may be the ideal option for extreme cold protection. A shed with the open side facing south is a good choice. Avoid using buildings that are too tightly constructed without adequate ventilation. Moisture and dampness can be more dangerous than cold as harmful pathogens thrive in these environments.

If a roof overhead isn't feasible for your operation, consider a windbreak. Natural windbreaks that exist on your farm are the most cost-effective option. Woodlots, brushy fence rows or hilly terrain can provide effective ways of protecting cattle from the wind. If natural windbreaks are not an option on your farm, there are many different windbreak styles available.

Constructing windbreaks

Permanent windbreaks may be constructed in a variety of shapes. Although there is no perfect solution to the wind, semicircle-shaped, V-shaped or L-shaped windbreaks have proved effective.

You may be tempted to construct a solid wall to fight winter winds, but studies show that porous windbreaks are actually more effective. Solid panels cause the wind to go up and over, dipping down right behind the panel. This design limits the area of protection and can cause large snowdrifts.

A better alternative is a porous windbreak that lets some air flow through but reduces the velocity. Research indicates that 20% to 30% fence porosity can be effective in reducing wind chills while extending the area of protection farther from the barrier. A 25% porosity, for example, can be achieved by placing 6-inch boards 2 inches apart. Slotted fences should be at least 10 feet high for the best wind and snow blocking.

Portable windbreaks may offer the flexibility you need as you move cattle to different locations or storms bear down from different directions than your prevailing winds. Portable windbreaks must be constructed to remain stable and secure and also to withstand movement to other areas. Build with ease of movement in mind and consider designs that can be lifted and carried using available equipment. Fabric windbreaks are available that may be a versatile option for your farm.

How long should your windbreak be? The general rule is 1 foot of barrier length for every cow.

While winter in Wisconsin is inevitable, it doesn't have to have adverse effects on your bottom line. Your extreme weather plan can protect your herd, your next calf crop and your profits. Take some steps now to make sure your cattle remain healthy as temperatures fall.

Additional resources for successful management of your beef operation are available at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension [Wisconsin Beef Information Center](#) or by contacting your county agriculture Extension educator.

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