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Time to bundle up and prepare for working in the cold!

It is finally December, that means that we will be celebrating Christmas in just a few weeks and then we can look forward to the miracle of birth in our cows this spring. However, before all that happens we need to deal with freezing temperatures that came on with a vengeance back in mid-November.

Forecasts for this winter are calling for bitterly cold temperatures like last year due to another Polar Vortex. Here are some key things to do to properly take care of your cows this winter.

Animal health

The harvest seemed to go on and on this fall due to a bumper crop. For many farmers that meant that some routine animal health programs got put off. If you have not taken care of normal animal health procedures such as pregnancy diagnosis, fall vaccines and bangs vaccinating heifers, now is the time to get caught up.

It is not going to get any warmer anytime soon and we will shortly be looking at subzero temperatures. When it is that cold, vaccine

freezes in the syringe; your fingers lose their feeling, making procedures difficult; and things seem to break easier.

If you are planning on culling any cows this year, now is the time. Even though feed prices have dropped, it is still going to be costly to feed cows enough to keep them in condition this winter.

Nutrition

Once temperatures drop below 20°F, cows will start burning energy in order to stay warm. Cows need an additional 1% of energy intake for each degree it is below 20°F in order to meet their nutritional needs. Otherwise they can lose almost a pound of body weight per day.

Keep in mind that since most of our cows live outdoors, you need to take wind speed into account to determine the effective temperature that cows are dealing with. A simple method to calculate effective temperature is that each 1 mph of wind drops the effective temperature 1°F.

Supplementing an additional one-half pound of good quality hay or one-third pound of corn (or corn co-product) for each degree of cold stress will help your cows maintain condition during the winter. Don't forget that as your cow progresses through gestation, that the growing calf will demand additional nutritional requirements as well.

Protection

One way to help minimize feed costs is to provide a wind break so cows can get out of the wind during cold windy days. It can also be advantageous to provide bedding so that cows can be insulated from cold or wet ground. However, make sure that you can clean the bedding out from behind the windbreak easily, otherwise you can get a buildup of bedding, manure and pathogens which can be deadly to neonatal calves once the spring thaw starts.

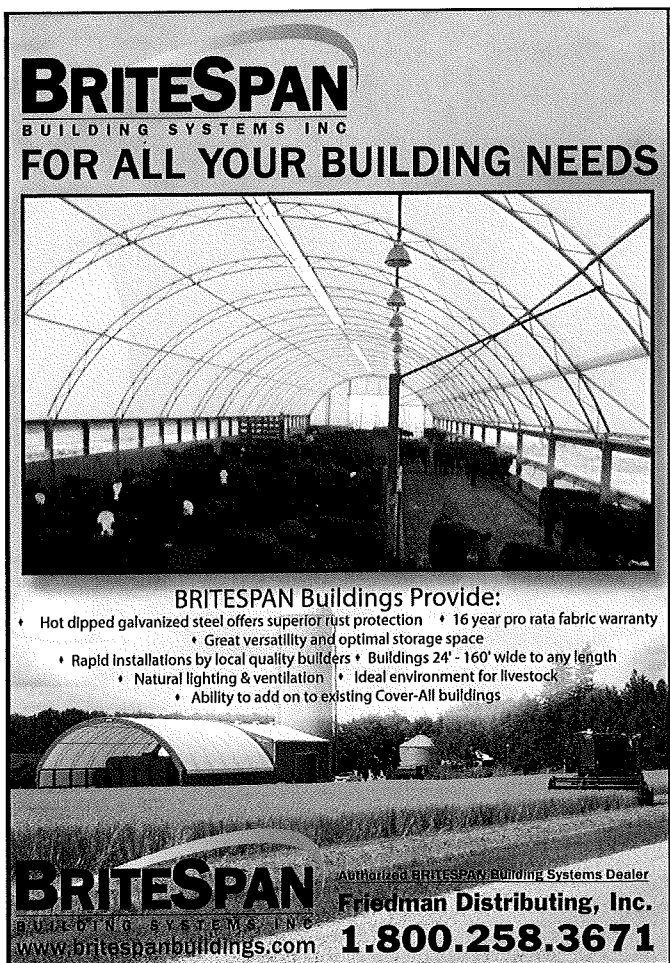
Additionally don't forget to protect your bulls. A lot of times we forget about the bulls during the winter. However, frostbitten testicles will ruin a valuable part of your breeding herd. Keep bulls in good condition over the winter, too, so that we don't negatively impact fertility and have to play catchup in the spring.

Facilities

Many of us had to fight frozen water lines, etc., last winter. Before it gets to sub-zero temperatures, make sure you resolved any maintenance issues you have been putting off. Check tank heaters and have a spare around for the one that quits working on Sunday morning.

Also, make sure your lots are smoothed out. With all the rain, it was common to have ruts and mud holes in the corral. If possible, grade the ruts and holes out or fill in with some dirt. Cows and tractors will have difficulty maneuvering through frozen snow-covered ground if there are deep ruts still there.

Hope you had successful harvest and can endure the upcoming winter. And despite my focus in this article on some of the tough physical issues to raising cattle, I wish you a Merry Christmas!



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