K-STATE Research and Extension | Meadowlark District

January 12, 2024

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Winter Bull Management

The last few days have been a very real reminder that it is January and frigid winter weather can assault with vicious force at any time. At the calving school last night, a good deal of attention was given to hypothermia in new born calves, as well as energy requirements of the cow herd. Great discussion, but what can often be forgotten in winter cattle management discussion is the bull. Having just deep bedded the bull calves in another blowing snow storm, this seems to be a topic to discuss this week.

Harsh winter weather can impact bull fertility both short term and into the next breeding season. Now is a perfect time to be checking the bull battery for cold weather issues. Paramount importance should be given to ensuring that bulls have appropriate shelter, bedding, and feed to weather winter conditions and advance successfully into the next breeding season. An ounce of lower cost prevention now, can prevent a costly pound of cure if bulls need to be replaced later.

Bulls need appropriate housing to provide protection during severe cold weather, which can lead to fertility problems. Tissue damage due to frostbite will appear as a scab, discoloration, and/or sloughing of the lower portion of the scrotum. Scrotal frostbite will hinder the bull's ability to raise or lower the testicles for proper thermoregulation, which ultimately will affect sperm production and result in reduced fertility. Evaluating and observing for tissue damage can help a producer identify bulls that need time to heal or allows time to cull that bull and find a replacement prior to the breeding season.

Frostbite can be prevented by providing heavy bedding (i.e. straw, cornstalks, etc..), a shelter, or windbreak for bulls to get out of the weather. Bedding is important to help alleviate the cold by providing insulation from the frozen ground or snow and keeps cattle clean. We often recognize the issues associated with severe winter storms. What might be less obvious are the weather stress coming from moderately cold, wind, rain, ice or wet snow, that lead to wet hair coats. Just like wet clothing, wet hair cannot insulate effectively. Moderately cool, yet wet conditions, is often worse than extreme cold and dry weather.

Providing protection from wind and cold temperatures can help bulls maintain body condition rather than using feed to maintain body temperatures. Similar to maintaining body condition score (BCS) of the cowherd, bulls should be in an adequate BCS of 5 to 6 as we move through winter, which allows for greater BCS and potentially semen quality in the succeeding breeding season. Research has shown that bulls in a body condition 5 to 6 have better semen quality than those in a 4 or 7. Reference the K-State Body Condition Guide MF3274.

Winter weather injuries most definitely impact a bull's ability to breed cows. Taking care during winter weather, along with planning to schedule a breeding soundness exam before each breeding season, are important management considerations. It is much easier to work with prevention on the frontside, versus dealing with the aftereffects. It matters not if the discussion revolves around reproductive track injuries in the cold or reduced body condition and nutritional considerations. When out checking the cows and calves in the snow and cold, don't forget the bulls!