PREPARING OUR LIVESTOCK FOR WINTER

By Jenny Kahrl

Here in Montana, our 14-hour summer days start getting noticeably shorter soon after the summer solstice. In fact, in the middle of summer haying season, we are thinking of winter!

What can we, as livestock producers, do to make sure that our herds and flocks are ready for winter's cold and storms – that they are ready to calve, lamb, kid, foal and hatch offspring successfully next spring? How do experienced heritage livestock breeders prepare for winter? Here are some tips.

Minerals

As a breeder of Red Devon beef cattle (Recovering on the Conservation Priority List), my first concern each year is fertility – calves for the next year. To that end, I use a balanced, high-quality mineral program for my cattle, as they cannot reproduce without the basic and trace mineral ingredients necessary for fertility. In my area of the Mountain West, for example, low selenium in soils and forages can lead to weak calves and the inability to rebreed the following year.

As breeders, we face a choice: either purchase the best animals available in our area or select herds and flocks that can thrive on our resources. This essentially boils down to a decision between investing in high-cost inputs or opting for lower-cost alternatives that require more labor. The second, low-input approach can result in numerous animals failing to breed initially. Those open animals are best sold for meat, as their genetics have shown an inability to thrive in the farm's breeding program. Those that reproduce without supplements will be perfectly adapted to your environment.

If you can afford the initial losses, the low-input system can work for breeders. On the other hand, I choose to provide good minerals (high-input) all year, as 20 years of breeding Devons have shown that my purebred animals need more care than the commercial cattle that my neighbors raise. Just two additional healthy pregnancies in my herd can pay for a year of good minerals.

Other species also benefit from minerals. Julie Behrens of Allenspark, Colorado, raises Icelandic chickens (CPL status: Threatened). She finds that calcium needs in winter are very important, along with grit (coarsely-ground hard substances – often made from oyster shells, flint, granite or eggshells – that help with digestion and lead to stronger eggshells), because her ground is often frozen and snow-covered, preventing chickens from accessing natural sources of grit and calcium. During deep winter, it is also important to keep fresh, vitamin-rich foods for our poultry. These can be kitchen scraps, remainders from an autumn greenhouse or even sprouted seeds and grains.



Courtesy Jenny Kahrl

Jenny Kahrl, a member of The Livestock Conservancy from Montana, says poultry and livestock, including her Red Devon cattle, can thrive during cold weather as long as breeders plan and prepare.

Drinking Water

Fresh water is just as important in winter as in summer, but what to do when temperatures are below freezing? The answer can be as simple as a fresh container of water twice a day. All classes of livestock will learn to drink whenever fresh water appears. Another approach is to bury water lines to yard hydrants or other sources – a must in Montana. Some automatic waterers use ground heat and insulation to keep water from freezing. A continuous circulation system is suitable for many climates. Immersible water heaters inside stock tanks are another option. Regardless, always keep a large empty tub or pan on hand, along with a hose long enough to reach every pen – you never know when a water line might freeze. There is no crisis quite like carrying water buckets to a herd of 25 thirsty cows and calves!

Shelter

Meike and Michael Meissner, of Lopez Island, Washington, raise Katahdin/Dorper sheep. (Katahdin sheep graduated from The Livestock Conservancy's Conservation Priority List in 2013.) One of their key winter preparations is selecting a lambing season that aligns with their available shelter and labor. They have a large barn for shelter, and time lambing for January or early February, so that they can supervise lambing.

Meike and Mike's winter preparation includes having their birthing supplies and a few small pens ready in late autumn, in time for unexpected early births – well before winter truly arrives.

Lots of bedding helps livestock and poultry adjust their housing to their own comfort. I provided my Guinea Hogs (CPL status: Threatened) with a hoop house or calf shelter, with deep fresh straw in winter for nesting. When my older Guinea Hog sow farrowed one January and the temperatures dropped to –30 degrees three days after farrowing, her new piglets survived just fine in an uninsulated shed, deep in the dry straw she had piled around them.

Behrens' advice is to match poultry flock size to available indoor winter space. Evaluate your different housing zones to ensure there is enough space available if all your birds want to be near the heater, for example, while also making sure there is safety for the more timid ones to hide or escape, and all can access food without too much crowding. Julie's coop has a raised floor and is deeply bedded with shavings so her birds' feet are well off frozen ground. A deep bedding of shavings, chips from the wood pile, or even autumn leaves are all good for keeping birds occupied

and happy, scratching around during long cold, snowy or muddy months. She is also careful to keep at least part of her outdoor run shoveled clear of snow or covered with shavings for traction, so birds can always get outside if they choose. Their health and mood benefit from getting outside when they choose to do so.

Fertility and Health

In preparing for winter, I pregnancy test all my female cattle in mid to late fall. While it is more expensive, I opt to pay for ultrasound testing. That gives me full knowledge of which females are pregnant, the sex of the calf and the due date (which also tells me which cows settled from artificial insemination, and which are bull-bred). With this information, spring calving can be planned smoothly. I know which animals I must sell because they are open, which animals I want to keep and which animals I can sell to other breeders. Most importantly, when to expect the earliest calves, so my family and I can be on the lookout regardless of the weather.

Other health checks can be completed before the coldest weather sets in. No one wants to be treating animals in the coldest weather. Behrens advises checking poultry for mites and treating facilities and infested birds. She knows that the birds will be spending more time indoors, in closer quarters. "If it's warm enough for chickens, it's warm enough for mites," says Behrens. She also knows that her flock will be expending more calories in the winter, and doesn't want to take any chances with mites robbing energy from any of the birds.

Feed

By July and early August, I have already planned the number of cattle I will carry over winter, and therefore the quantity of hay I must purchase. And, I have already squirreled away money from the spring's cattle sales to pay for next winter's hay!

Smaller flocks and smaller animals require less planning, but it is always important to think ahead to ensure our favorite feeds for our animals are available throughout the winter. In the West, we often carry almost two years' worth of hay in our hay yards over winter. One year, our winter started a month early and didn't quit. Another year, the intense cold required a lot more feed to keep my cattle warm and healthy. Plan ahead – the hardest time to find extra feed is when everyone else is having the same problem, when the snow is so deep your trailer is completely under a drift and your livestock are hungry.

Growth

As the winter days grow longer and warmer after the winter solstice, I wean my calves across the fence from their mothers. Preparing for winter means keeping calves at their mothers' sides through the worst of the cold and storms. A day of howling wind? Mothers have taken their calves to shelter, taught them how to survive. Deep snow? Mothers have taught them where to go, and how to make it back to the hay feed line. And cows' higher cream production in late lactation provides the calories and fats that calves need for good growth and for efficient digestion of forages until their last two to three digestive enzymes kick in at 8-9 months of age. This should work for other livestock species. Likewise, Behrens culls all "floppy comb" roosters in her Icelandic flock, which selects for combs that don't freeze and cause extra stress.

Soil Preservation

In many parts of the U.S., winter means rain, and rain means mud for confined animals on winter feeds. Mud leads to compacted soils and the destruction of plants growing therein. Plan ahead for that mud. It might mean deep bedding confined under a roof, as is required in England. It might mean asking your local tree service folks for every scrap of their discarded wood chips, which can provide an island of drier warmth in a muddy corral or a run for birds. Or it might mean using your tractor or team in spring or summer to reseed that muddy confinement area with a multi-species cover crop to soak up all that excess water, nitrogen and manure potassium salts, converting them into premium forage for birds and mammals alike.

Like Aesop's ant, we livestock folks must think far ahead for our difficult times of the year. Carbon (dead plant material) can offset nearly all our excess nitrogen issues, and it can also turn into "black gold" as we compost it the following spring. Shelter comes in many forms; wind protection and the ability to stay dry are the most important factors.

Plan ahead and enjoy your heritage livestock all through the winter! ■

The Livestock Conservancy member Jenny Kahrl and her sons raise Red Devon cattle on their ranch near Harrison, Montana, where January low temperatures average 14 degrees.

Courtesy Lisa Richards



Even though some animals, like these Icelandic chickens, are well-suited for colder weather, special preparations are still necessary to ensure these animals thrive during the winter.