Cattle Chat: Winter water access

K-State beef cattle experts talk about the importance of water to herd health

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Water is an essential nutrient for people and animals alike. And while water consumption often increases on hot days, it is also an important nutrient in the winter, said the experts at the Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute on a recent Cattle Chat podcast.

“A cow typically drinks a gallon and a half of water per 100 pounds in the summer, but in the winter that will drop to a half gallon to three-quarters of a gallon per 100 pounds,” veterinarian Brad White said. “Still, she is drinking water and producers need to manage the water supply in the winter.”

Veterinarian Bob Larson added that easy access to water is crucial.

“The ground around water sources can get muddy with the changing weather making it difficult for the cattle to come up and get access to the water,” he said.

Veterinarian Brian Lubbers added: “In the winter, producers need to make sure the water sources aren’t frozen.”

Larson agreed and said cattle cannot be without water very long without having health challenges. “Water is the most important nutrient so in a winter event such as a snow and ice storm producers need to have a plan on how they are going to get water to the cattle,” he said.

“Producers who use electricity to keep the cattle waterers open need to have a backup generator for the water pumps in a power outage.”

Nutritionist Phillip Lancaster said producers need to routinely check for electrical shorts in the tanks.

“Sometimes there will be a short that will give the cattle a bit of a shock when they drink and they will stop drinking,” he said. “If the cattle aren’t drinking, they will often stop eating or reduce the amount of feed they consume, so that is something to watch for.”
For producers who routinely take water to the cattle out on pasture, the experts stressed the importance of making sure the transport tanks -- as well as the pumps and hoses – were not used for ag chemicals.

“Avoid hauling water in a tank that had herbicides or insecticides in it as well as making sure the pumps and hoses weren’t used for the delivery of any chemicals,” Larson said.

White added: “Depending on what chemicals were used, a small amount can cause severe side effects.”

“When cows have toxicology problems,” Larson said, “they aren’t just sick; a lot of times they are dead.”

To hear the full discussion, listen to the Cattle Chat podcast online.

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