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Keeping your animals healthy during the winter months

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The old adage that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” seems very appropriate when preparing for the winter months with livestock. What you do ahead of time — and being proactive instead of reactive — will pay great dividends in the days of bitter cold and winter weather. Here are some things to consider:

- **Draft-free, clean, dry**, well-drained lots are the key to getting off to a good start for the winter. Cleaning up your lots when you begin the wintering process and forming them to drain will make getting through the winter months much easier. Livestock can handle many types of weather if they can keep dry. Wet coats take away the natural insulation of their hide and hair, but clean hair — with no manure tags — acts as a blanket to naturally keep your animals warmer. If an animal becomes wet and/or if there is too much wind, you will need to increase the nutrients that you are providing them. Wind breaks or a place where animals can get out of the wind will allow them to stay warm. If animals are in buildings, make sure that there is enough ventilation to keep the buildings dry and not too tight, as breathing in damp air with an ammonia build-up can injure your animals' lungs. Dry bedding provides insulation from the cold ground and decreases the amount of energy that animals must expend to stay warm. Some options for bedding include straw, corn stover and similar crop residues for cattle, sheep and goats and straw and/or wood shavings for hogs.
- **Feed:** Animals must maintain their energy reserves to be able to endure cold temperatures. Before the weather gets cold, assess the body condition of your animals and adjust their nutrition accordingly so they can reach the ideal body condition going into the cold winter months. Assess their body condition again throughout the winter and continue to adjust their diet accordingly.
 - o The lowest critical temperature, or the lowest temperature that animals can tolerate before it becomes necessary to adjust their conditions and nutrition, varies by species. It may be necessary to provide cattle, sheep and goats with additional feed when temperatures drop to 20 degrees, and for hogs, additional feed may be required when temperatures drop to 40 degrees. One pound of additional gestation feed should be added for every 10 degrees the temperature falls below 40 degrees. Twenty to 30 degrees Fahrenheit are often considered the lowest critical temperatures for dry livestock — meaning that livestock can tolerate these temperatures if they are dry. Notably, 60 degrees Fahrenheit is the lowest critical temperature for wet livestock. For every degree the windchill drops below the animals' lower critical temperature, their nutrient requirements increase by 2%.
- **Water:** Frozen water cannot be accessed by livestock, and snow is not a viable option for hydration. When animals are provided extra feed during the winter, they also require extra water for digestion. Make sure ahead of time that your electric heaters are in working order.

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The need for clean, reliable water cannot be stressed enough. Water is as essential as nutrition for survival. The rule of thumb for the daily water needs of various species is as follows:

- o **Cattle: 7–12 gallons per day**
- o **Goats: 1–4 gallons per day**
- o **Hogs: 6–8 gallons per day**
- o **Sheep: 1–4 gallons per day**

In conclusion, be like a Boy Scout: Be prepared for winter with your livestock. Don't procrastinate; get things done ahead of time, while the weather is still good. Doing so will make your life — and your livestock's — a whole lot more enjoyable when Old Man Winter strikes.

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