News Column
by Greg McClure, KSU-Riley County Extension Agriculture Agent
110 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, KS 66502

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Phone: 785/537-6350
Fax: 785/537-6353

WATER NEEDS DURING COLD WEATHER

It was day four of our most recent cold blast and the temperature was a pleasant 5 degrees Fahrenheit at 6:30 a.m. when I left the house to start my morning chores.

I wouldn't normally describe 5 degree weather as being pleasant, but I was wearing insulated coveralls, a coat with a hood, my cap with ear flaps, rubber overshoes, and insulated gloves. There was no wind and most of my chores were in the barn, so it truly was pleasant,...until it wasn't.

The temperature remained OK for how I was dressed, but my enthusiasm started to wane when I entered the barn and found the cats had been messing with the tent-like structure I had constructed over a couple of lambing jugs. I was trying to create an area that was just 20 degrees warmer than the rest of the barn and the cats were tearing it up. At 20 degrees a newborn lamb will usually survive. At zero — probably not.

Darn cats.

I knocked the ice out of five rubber buckets and refilled them with fresh water before moving on to other chores. Feeding is easy – I just throw hay against a fence-line feeder and carry a bucket of grain to the feeder inside each pen. And I individually feed whatever is in the lambing jugs at the time. No new lambs to deal with that day, so I was rolling right along.

I just needed to fill the water tubs for the bigger pens of ewes and I'd be done in record time.

Well, maybe not. Frozen hose in the far east pen. I guess I didn't drain that one good enough. No problem though – I knew I had another hose laying against the north wall of the barn. I hooked it up and noticed I still had enough hose left to reach the tub, even after snapping a chunk off while dragging it across the fence.

Note to self – buy only the very best hoses next time. Cheap hoses don't bend when frozen, they break.

On to the final two pens. I pulled the handle on the hydrant supplying those two pens and easily raised it to the open position. Too easily. The handle raised, but the long rod inside the pipe (the rod that opens the valve to make the water flow) didn't go up with it.

I tried tightening the set screw. Then I tried tightening the set screw again. Then,... I tried tightening the set screw again. And,... I finally I gave up. I'll deal with that one tonight.

Water. It is probably the most often over-looked ingredient during cold weather feeding. Yes, there is snow out there and that will kind of work for sheep, but it doesn't work as well for cattle. Cows will drink about 10-14 gallons of water per day during cold weather. Twice that much in the summer. Limiting water will limit feed intake.

During extreme cold weather, limiting feed intake is the exact opposite of what we need to do. Instead, we need to increase energy intake by about 1% for each degree below 18 degrees Fahrenheit, so cows can stay warm and maintain weight in severe weather.

Some cattlemen will feed a couple of pounds of grain when it gets really cold. Others will just switch to the very best grass hay they have to provide the extra energy cows need. Whatever the strategy, water is an important piece of the puzzle.

Cattle need that extra energy – more feed – during brutally cold weather, and we can also help them out by providing dry bedding and protection from the wind. But today we are focusing

on water. Feed consumption will drop if they don't have enough water, so we need to break the ice at least daily. Maybe twice a day.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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