

BAD NUTRITION, BAD WEATHER AND POOR MANAGEMENT CONTRIBUTE TO BABY CALF LOSSES

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The real culprits in baby calf losses during the winter are poor nutrition, winter environment and the inability of the producer to recognize the combined effect of these factors.

Extended periods of wet, cold weather create a “chill factor” that both cow and the calf must endure. Wet weather produces mud. Cold mud has a greater effect on energy expended or energy loss by the cows and calves than if the ground was frozen. With the increase in precipitation during the winter, mud can be anticipated.

Mud is also a reservoir for disease causing organisms. Cold mud withdraws body energy of the cows and calves and also is a source of disease causing organisms.

Mud affects springing cows, but the results are not easily quantitated when a late gestation cows’ energy or protein needs are not met and the fetus is deprived of fat reserves. A “thin” lactating cow deprived of needed nutrients in late gestation produces less colostrum and milk for her young calf and a weaker calf at birth that will have a low survival potential.

Cattle exposed to dry, cold weather will increase their consumption of forages by up to 30 percent, but digestibility goes down. Conversely, precipitation and muddy conditions, at any temperature, may also depress forage intake. The reduced forage consumption can only be compensated by providing dry shelter and/or by feeding grain or other appropriate concentrates. Forages with inadequate protein content will be even less digestible and a poor source of energy. Intake will also be reduced.

Feeding cows in a muddy area adversely affects their calves in several ways: 1) the

calves use a tremendous amount of energy following the cows; 2) every time a calf nurses it gets a belly full of germ-laden mud; 3) contact with the cold mud conducts heat from the calves' bodies. It is not surprising therefore, that the disease challenge exceeds the calves' resistance level, in spite of a good immunization program.

The energy requirement for an 80 lb. newborn calf in good weather (above 45° F) is about 2 lb. of Total Digestive Nutrients (TDN). When the effective temperature (chill factor) falls to 20° F the calf's maintenance requirement increases by about 50 percent. In cold weather, baby calves need more than a gallon of milk a day just for maintenance. A cow in a poor body condition, a BCS of 3 or 4, fed low quality hay will produce very little milk. It will not be difficult to determine the fate of a calf that is receiving a quart to half-gallon of milk per day.