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Winter Management of Livestock

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Winter is a testing season for livestock, especially young, old, sick, pregnant and newborn animals. Low temperatures, cold winds, damp housing and scarce green fodder affect animal comfort, feed requirements, immunity and productivity. Poor winter management can lead to respiratory illness, slower growth, reproductive problems and lower milk yields. Simple, timely measures help farmers protect their animals and their income. Winter management should suit the local climate, species, age, body condition and production level of the animals. The aim is not to keep every animal in a heated shed, but to provide dry shelter, adequate nutrition, clean water and attentive care.

Housing: protection without poor ventilation

Sheds should protect animals from cold winds, rain, fog and dampness while still allowing fresh air. Close gaps on the windward side where necessary, but do not seal the shed so tightly that moisture, ammonia and other harmful gases build up. A dry floor, good drainage and clean bedding are essential: replace wet bedding promptly and remove dung regularly. Give animals enough space to lie down comfortably and avoid overcrowding. Keep newborns and vulnerable animals in sheltered, dry areas. Where curtains or windbreaks are used, make sure they are secure and neither block ventilation nor create a fire hazard. On sunny days, let animals enjoy the sunlight and a dry exercise area when conditions permit.

Feeding and nutrition during winter

Animals need more energy to maintain body temperature in cold weather, especially when exposed to wind and wet conditions. Provide good-quality roughage and a balanced ration suited to species, age, body weight, pregnancy and production. Avoid sudden changes in feed, never feed mouldy or spoiled fodder, and store feed in a dry place protected from moisture, rodents and contamination. Green fodder is scarce in many regions during winter, so farmers should plan fodder reserves in advance. Well-prepared hay, silage and other locally suitable feeds can bridge the seasonal gap. Use mineral mixtures and other supplements according to the animal's needs and veterinary or nutritionist advice, and monitor body condition and production so that rations can be adjusted when required.

Clean and accessible drinking water

Cold weather does not reduce the need for water. Animals need clean drinking water for digestion, milk production, metabolism and overall health. Check troughs frequently, keep them clean, and make sure water is accessible and not frozen where temperatures fall below freezing. Do not let animals drink from stagnant pools or dirty containers. Dairy animals in particular may eat less and give less milk if water access is inadequate. Offer water regularly, paying special attention to lactating animals, young stock and animals eating dry feed.

Care of newborns and young animals

Newborn calves, lambs, kids and other young animals are especially vulnerable to cold stress because their energy reserves are limited and they lose body heat rapidly. Dry newborns

promptly, provide a clean, sheltered lying area, and ensure early intake of adequate colostrum as advised by a veterinarian for the species. Keep bedding dry and protect young animals from drafts and wet floors. Watch young animals closely for weakness, shivering, failure to suckle, diarrhoea, coughing or difficulty breathing. Weak or chilled newborns need prompt veterinary attention. Keep young animals away from direct contact with hot heaters or lamps, and use warming equipment safely to prevent burns and fires.

Health care and disease prevention

Cold, damp conditions aggravate respiratory problems and make poor housing more harmful. Watch for coughing, nasal discharge, fever, rapid or difficult breathing, reduced appetite, diarrhoea, lameness and sudden drops in milk yield. Separate sick animals where appropriate and seek veterinary advice early, especially if several animals fall ill or deaths occur. Follow locally recommended vaccination and parasite-control schedules. Keep housing clean, avoid overcrowding, isolate newly introduced animals for an appropriate period and clean shared equipment. Do not use antibiotics or other medicines routinely without veterinary advice. Correct diagnosis, appropriate treatment and observance of withdrawal periods for milk and meat protect both animal health and food safety.

Species-specific considerations

Dairy cattle and buffaloes: Provide a dry resting area, adequate energy and roughage, clean water and protection from cold winds. Monitor milk yield, appetite and body condition, and keep milking areas and udders clean and dry.

Sheep and goats: Provide dry shelter and protection from prolonged rain and cold winds. Avoid damp, muddy resting areas, maintain suitable nutrition and pay special attention to newborn lambs and kids.

Poultry: Prevent cold drafts at bird level while maintaining ventilation. Keep litter dry, provide adequate feed and water, and avoid overcrowding. Monitor behaviour, feed intake, egg production and mortality, and use heating equipment safely.

Working animals and equines: Provide shelter, dry bedding, appropriate feed and water, and reduce workload in severe conditions. Dry animals after rain or washing, and check hooves and skin regularly.

Special care during fog, frost and extreme cold

During severe cold, fog or frost, limit unnecessary exposure and provide sheltered resting places. Move vulnerable animals to safer areas when needed, keeping ventilation adequate. Never leave animals wet in cold winds, and check water, feed and bedding more often during extreme weather. Farmers should follow local veterinary and weather advisories, particularly cold-wave alerts. Preparing before winter, by repairing sheds, arranging dry bedding and storing fodder, usually works better than reacting after animals show signs of stress.

A practical winter checklist

- Keep sheds dry, clean, well drained and protected from cold winds.
- Maintain ventilation; do not completely seal animal housing.
- Provide balanced feed, suitable roughage and planned fodder reserves.
- Ensure continuous access to clean drinking water.
- Give newborns prompt drying, colostrum and sheltered bedding.
- Observe animals daily for signs of cold stress or illness.
- Follow veterinary vaccination and health advice; use medicines responsibly.
- Use heaters and lamps safely and keep them away from bedding and flammable material.

Conclusion

Good winter management combines shelter, feeding, water, hygiene and regular observation. These measures help livestock maintain body condition, sustain productivity and avoid preventable health problems in cold weather. Every farm is different, so practices should be adapted to the local climate, species and production system, with veterinary advice for sick or

vulnerable animals. A little preparation before winter protects animal welfare, improves farm efficiency and supports the livelihoods of livestock keepers.

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