

## Is your beef operation ready for winter?

Jim Versweyeld, Walworth County Agriculture Educator

With another Wisconsin winter upon us, it's a great time to consider cold weather protection for your beef cattle. While winter's wrath and timing will vary across our state, it's a safe bet that all Wisconsin cattle herds will feel dangerous weather impacts over the coming months. Planning for cold temperatures and high winds can help keep your herd healthy and productive, control your feed costs, and ultimately improve your profits.

With thick winter hair, healthy rumen activity and body temperatures around 101 degrees F, it is true that cattle handle the cold better than their human caretakers. As cattle work harder to maintain that body temperature, however, the amount of feed consumed dramatically increases.

Studies have shown that for every 10-degree drop in outside temperature below 30 degrees, cattle energy requirements increase by 13%. Make sure enough feed is available to support this increased need. Also, make sure water is readily available. If water is restricted, feed intake will be reduced, as well.

### Provide shelter

Giving cattle the ability to stay dry, out of the wind, and on a well-bedded pack may be the ideal option for extreme cold protection. A shed with the open side facing south is a good choice. Avoid using buildings that are too tightly constructed without adequate ventilation. Moisture and dampness can be more dangerous than cold as harmful pathogens thrive in these environments.

If a roof overhead isn't feasible for your operation, consider a windbreak. Natural windbreaks that exist on your farm are the most cost-effective option. Woodlots, brushy fence rows or hilly terrain can provide effective ways of protecting cattle from the wind.

If natural windbreaks are not an option on your farm, there are many different windbreak styles available.

### Constructing windbreaks

Permanent windbreaks may be constructed in a variety of shapes. Although there is no perfect solution to the wind, semicircle-shaped, V-shaped or L-shaped windbreaks have proved effective.

You may be tempted to construct a solid wall to fight winter winds, but studies show that porous windbreaks are actually more effective. Solid panels cause the wind to go up and over, dipping down right behind the panel. This design limits the area of protection and can cause large snowdrifts.

A better alternative is a porous windbreak that lets some air flow through but reduces the velocity. Research indicates that 20% to 30% fence porosity can be effective in reducing wind chills while extending the area of protection farther from the barrier. A 25% porosity, for example, can be achieved by placing 6-inch boards 2 inches apart. Slotted fences should be at least 10 feet high for the best wind and snow blocking.

Portable windbreaks may offer the flexibility you need as you move cattle to different locations or storms bear down from different directions than your prevailing winds. Portable windbreaks must be constructed to remain stable and secure and also to withstand movement to other areas. Build with ease of movement in mind and consider designs that can be lifted and carried using available equipment. Fabric windbreaks are available that may be a versatile option for your farm.

How long should your windbreak be? The general rule is 1 foot of barrier length for every cow.

While winter in Wisconsin is inevitable, it doesn't have to have adverse effects on your bottom line. Your extreme weather plan can protect your herd, your next calf crop and your profits. Take some steps now to make sure your cattle remain healthy as temperatures fall.

Additional resources for successful management of your beef operation are available at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension [Wisconsin Beef Information Center](https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/wbic/), <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/wbic/> or by contacting your county agriculture Extension educator.

*Article written by: Jim Versweyeld, UW Division of Extension Agriculture Educator- Walworth County, and recently appeared in the Wisconsin Agriculturist magazine.*

## Winter Cow Feeding Considerations

Many producers have felt the stress of non – favorable environmental conditions for producing forage for livestock. For many producers this summer not only was pasture forage production short, but producing and sourcing winter hay supplies has been challenging. We wish that the winter will be a fast and harmless season, but unfortunately the future is hard to predict.

Traditionally, feeding the beef cow herd in the winter months has been on a hay ration. Unfortunately, an all hay ration is one of the most expensive feeding systems with the current hay market. With tight hay supplies and high prices, re-thinking your feeding program to provide a balanced, least-cost ration to the cowherd would be a timely management strategy.

There are many alternative feedstuffs out on the market today. One question many have is, "What are the alternative feedstuffs, and how do I determine if they are a good buy?" With that said, there are many pros and cons to take into consideration when altering your feeding program. Below are publications that may help aid in the decision making process for winter feeding strategies.

Articles on the WI Beef Information Center, <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/wbic/> can be accessed at the following links:

[Winter Cow Feeding Considerations](#), [Hay Analysis Guide for Beef Cattle: Determining Winter Feed Needs](#).

[Winter Cow Feeding Strategies Proceedings- Driftless Beef Conference 2013](#), [Corn Silage Opportunities and Considerations for 2013](#)