Reduce Calf Stress with Calf Coats

Keeping every year in newborn and young calves healthy during the winter season is a challenge northern climates. Wind, snow and cold weather adds stress to even the healthiest calves on the farm.

Lower critical temperature (LCT) for calves is about 50℉, meaning when the temperature dips below 50℉, calves must burn extra energy to keep warm. Wind and snow have a greater effect on LCT. In general, a 25 mph wind can lower the temperature by 27 degrees, so a calf will start to lose energy when the temperature is 77℉ with a 25 mph wind. Snow or rain will also put a calf's LCT around 70℉.

Calf stress can be reduced with a well-planned calf management program. Adequate bedding will increase the calf's energy efficiency, reduce coat wetness and encourage the calf to lie down. Pay close attention to the calves' nutritional requirements, as they increase when the temperature falls.

The use of calf coats can also decrease cold weather stress. Calf coats made with a waterproof outer shell and a warm lining can promote growth and vigor during the coldest of winters. A North Dakota State University study found dairy calves wearing calf coats gained 1.4 pounds daily from birth to four weeks, compared to the 1.2 pound gained by calves without blankets. The Canadian Journal of Veterinary Research (1989; 53: 275-278) also reported a 52 percent increase of overall animal insulation, when coats were worn by calves housed in -22℉ to 0℉ temperatures.

For maximum benefit, calf coats should be placed on dry calves. Clean, dry coats provide the best insulation for animals. Machine-wash the coats between uses to prevent spreading of diseases.

Even though you may not feel cold when the temperature starts to fall, remember your calves may be burning extra energy just to stay warm.