

Preparing For Cold Weather – Or- Now You Tell Us!

In addition to collapsed buildings many farms have been caught out recently with difficulties of getting feed to stock, frozen pipes, icy yards and other time consuming issues. While it is easy for us to say this now it does pay to be prepared for these conditions.

For sheep or cattle outwintered in hill/upland areas it pays to have a source of feed accessible to the stock. A stack of bales that can simply be opened up or rolled out is useful in this respect. Many hill sheep farms also have sheds with small bales of hay stored for emergency use. Having a brassica crop available is also a useful back up.

Where water supply in buildings is frozen it may be necessary to drain the supply overnight or set up a system with a continuous flow to prevent freezing. Heating tapes and insulation can help prevent freezing but there should be no exposed weak spots. Once frozen then it can be time consuming and frustrating to thaw out. A separate article will outline an innovative design for a watering system for new sheds but it may be worthwhile considering a total revamp of water systems in old buildings as well.

It may be necessary to turn stock out if water cannot be thawed out – a field of brassica or simply feeding silage on hard ground can be used. It is preferable to divert a natural water supply to a large trough than to allow stock to drink directly from a watercourse.

All equipment required for feeding should be well serviced before winter – it is inevitable that when under other pressures then breakdowns will also occur. It is useful to always have a back up feeding system - e.g. blocks of silage placed in feed pass if the forage wagon breaks down or an older tractor with loader in case the handler won't start etc. Keeping a supply of fuses, bulbs, plumbing parts etc and investing in a petrol driven generator are also good ideas.

Keeping the windows of tractors and handlers clean is important especially if travelling on public roads. Low sunshine in late afternoon and dirty windows can make visibility very difficult and lead to accidents so make sure your pressure washer is kept where it will not freeze and don't forget to drain water out of hoses.

I recently heard of a Welsh farmer seriously injured when a tractor slid across a sloping frozen yard and crushed him against a barrier. Keep a supply of grit or salt to keep yards free of ice. This is also important when moving stock across frozen yards as legs can easily be broken when cattle slip and fall over. Similarly take extreme care when driving quad bikes and even tractors across deep snow or ice as normal handling will be impaired and they can easily slip off a track or into a hard rut.

As someone who has had fan heaters and electric fires under tractors due to frozen diesel it is worthwhile ensuring that you have winter diesel in your tank and that if at all possible, park tractors in a shed. This will make starting up in the morning much easier.

This all may sound obvious but with the workload farmers are under these days some of these issues are easily forgotten and when an early cold snap hits then the resultant problems can prove very time consuming, frustrating and even dangerous. Make sure you spend some time to prepare for these eventualities.