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Preparing Your Outside Animals for Winter

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Winter is fast approaching and it is important to prepare your animals who are kept outside for the colder weather. Most large animals are kept outside in the winter and there are certain steps you should take to ensure they stay safe.

For animals kept in a pasture, ensure posts and boards are secure, especially where snow drifts form. It is essential that animals can get out of bad weather: one option for this is a run-in shed with the open end facing away from the wind. Make sure that mineral and salt blocks will not be covered in snow. Fresh water should always be provided to outdoor animals and you need to make sure the water won't freeze. This can be accomplished by using stock tank heaters or insulated and heated water buckets. If water is too cold, livestock will typically drink less, which can lead to impactions or dehydration; water heaters will help make sure they are getting enough water. Keep paths free of slippery mud, snow, and ice; a broken leg in a large animal can have disastrous consequences.

Nutritional needs change in cold weather so you should formulate a feeding plan with your veterinarian. They have training in nutrition and are familiar with your livestock's health and nutritional needs. In general, having a high-quality hay available for your animal to eat at any time is the best way to keep most farm animals warm in the winter. Hay keeps horses and ruminants warm: heat is produced as the bacteria in their intestinal tract ferment it.

It is important to routinely check your animals for any weight loss. Signs to look for includes prominent ribs or vertebra. Also make sure the animals' coats are free of manure and mud. It is not for cosmetic reasons: mud and manure in the fur prevent the longer, coarser winter coats from retaining heat. Animals that have wool, fleece, or a thick coat can become deceptively thin and still look normal, so it is important to check body conditions monthly by feeling them individually. Then, feeding adjustments can be made before a problem develops.

Talk to your veterinarian about deworming animals before the winter. Have him/her check your horse's teeth for hooks, points, or other dental problems. If not addressed, these can cause pain, dropping food, and weight loss. Small ruminants like sheep, goats, llamas, and alpacas can develop dental problems, too. If any large animal is losing weight or having difficulty eating, it is very important to get them checked. Make sure the animals are up to date on vaccines, too.

Don't forget your barn cats (and dogs). You'll need to have a way to provide fresh water for them, too. A place for them to sleep that is enclosed (even in the barn) will help them to retain body heat. Contrary to common belief, bigger is not better when it comes to dog houses. A smaller house is better, as it helps keep the heat in. The barn may keep the wind and snow out, but it's still very cold in there for your smaller barn animals.

A little preparation can help your barn animals out this winter. For advice on keeping the animals healthy and warm this winter, talk to your veterinarian. Vets see a wide variety of housing and animal health complications in the winter and can give you advice on how to prevent trouble before it happens.

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