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Winter Goat Management

I'll be the first to admit that goat knowledge is not my strongest suit. Going back through news columns, it appears goats have rarely made the topic list of discussion. Hopefully that can be rectified today, as I've been researching winter care of livestock and came across a good reference. I'd also like to plant the seed that the Northeast Kansas Sheep and Goat school has been scheduled for March 13 in Holton, so be looking for more information on that educational event, focused on small ruminants.

With all animals, winter is a stressful time. Stress can be reduced by providing animals with the proper care, feeding and management practices to help ensure animal comfort and performance during the cold winter months. Goats are generally considered to be hardy animals, but they do need extra attention in the winter months. Common management items to consider with goats in winter follows.

Housing is a primary need, but doesn't need to be fancy or elaborate. The single most important issue regarding housing during winter is to block the harsh, cold north wind. Goats have a thick hair coat, and can survive the winter with minimal housing. A structure with the opening facing the south providing protection from the north wind, while allowing the infiltration of the warm southern winds and sunshine is adequate. Make sure there is plenty of clean, dry bedding available and easy access to food and water. Clean up or add to, soiled or damp bedding frequently to prevent the buildup of manure, moisture and ammonia.

During the cold temperatures, additional energy is needed to maintain body temperature directing more energy to maintenance. To increase energy in the diet, concentrate grains such as corn or oats can be added. Give care to slowly introduce new feed items to goats, as sudden changes in a ration can cause acidosis and/or bloat. Both conditions are potentially fatal to goats if not caught early. Roughages should always be provided in the form of grass, brome or other types of hay. Don't forget to provide a good salt and mineral source and most importantly, an abundant source of water. Frequently change the water to eliminate ice build-up or provide a heated water source or bubbler to keep the water open.

Parasites tend to be an ongoing challenge with small ruminants. Goats should be dewormed multiple times a year to guard against stomach and round worms, when parasite loads build up. Using the FAMACHA scoring system will help determine the need to deworm. There are some dewormers approved for goats and others that work Extra Label, but they need approval by a veterinarian for their use. Lice and mites can become more problematic during the winter months. Mites and lice are irritating to the goat and in some cases, high infestations can cause anemia, poor coat and skin quality. There are a number of drenches, pour-ons, and sprays that will help combat these annoying pests. Work with your veterinarian to determine which medication best suits the needs of your herd. Signs of presence of lice on the goats include; recurrent rubbing up against posts or fence, scratching using the horns or teeth and in some cases, dry flaky skin.

One final thing to consider is feet and hooves. During the cold, wet conditions of winter, it is extremely important to keep the bedding dry and regularly trim the hooves to avoid problems such as foot scald or foot rot. Trimming hooves, prevents mud from sticking to spaces in or on the hoof. Foot scald and foot rot are caused by bacteria that infiltrate the hoof, both causing lameness in animals. Generally, these conditions are treatable and preventable, but chronic animals who continually develop foot scald or foot rot should be eliminated from the herd.