Winter is well underway: Were you prepared?

I got a call last week from a producer who was frantic. His production females had lost 20 pounds of bodyweight in just 30 days while bred. Yes, you read that right. 20 pounds lost in just 30 days. As he was vaccinating, and trimming feet, he decided to weigh each animal and get a body conditioning score as well. 30 days later he brought them all up and weighed them again and got a second body condition score. It was after this second evaluation, I received a rather frantic call. Before I go too far, let me provide a little background information on this producer’s program. This gentleman runs around 140 head which he raises on a primarily forage based diet. His stock have been selected for generations based on their ability to thrive on this forage based program year round. Each year, he cuts and bales 800 lb round bales of alfalfa, orchard grass, and alfalfa blended hay which he will feed through the winter. For years this program has worked with little to no grain supplementation needed. So what happened this winter?

In past articles I have written extensively about the need to test all forages before feeding them. The 2019 hay crop for much of the Midwest was poor. It was cut late, flooded out, rained on, and in general hard to put up. This was compounded by rapid growth from the high rainfall totals leading to forage the got away from producers very quickly. In some rare cases forage was put up properly and looked good but unfortunately, still did not have the nutritive value of years past. This is the heart of the problem for many like the producer at the beginning of this article. With this in mind here are a few things to each producer can consider as they re-evaluate the effectiveness of their winter programs.

**Forage Quality:** If it has not been done, get the forage tested. Testing a forage is the greatest way to determine the if supplementation may be needed. When tested, the some of the forage of the producer mentioned above was as low as 5.79% protein. Additionally it had unusually high levels of acid detergent and neutral detergent fiber which reduced the quantity his stock would willingly eat each day. It is important to note this forage looked good. Upon visual inspection it would be expected to test very good. Unfortunately, with the nutritive value sitting so low his stock were starving even with full bellies. Please remember; forage quality can not be determined by visual appearance only.

**Body Condition Scoring:** When it is cold and there is snow on the ground or mud everywhere, handling each goat at least once a month can be a real chore. In spite of this, it is important to get a real handle on each goat’s overall condition. Conditioning can be deceiving with winter hair as it is thicker and can make goats look fleshier than they really are. Evaluating at least once a month is also a great way to check the progress of your feeding program. Please remember just like with forage quality, you can not judge body condition scoring by visual appearance only. You must handle the animal.

**Proper Supplementation:**  Use the results of your forage testing to determine what kind and quantity of supplement you may need to offer. Grain is fed as a supplement in most production herds but comes in many different percentages and forms. We must be sure to supplement the elements we are lacking in the base program in the most efficient manner. If the forage is low in protein, we must supplement protein. If more energy is needed, we must supplement energy. Supplements must be selected after basic testing is done and body condition scoring has been completed. Please remember nutrition is measured in pounds of intake not percentages.

As this winter presses on, every producer should take the time to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. Winter can test the limits of a nutrition program and cause production losses leading into the warmer months. The producer at the beginning knows this all too well as he now has to feed much more grain simply to regain lost ground and the pay the higher costs that come with it. Take the time to re-evaluate your program and maintain the productive potential of your herds through the remainder of the winter.