For about a 3 week window recently we had clear skies, mild daily temperatures, and we were able to finish harvesting and turn our focus to winter preparation. It was a blessing to have such consistent weather but as weather does, things quickly shifted and brought with them new stresses for the livestock. As we moved temporary shelters this weekend and started to put up windbreaks, I was reminded of all of the planning that is required to get through each winter successfully. Shelters will need closed up, groups of goats moved off pastures and into the dry lots, bedding and hay storage accessed and additional purchases made when necessary, and the list goes on and on. Winter is coming and with it, new stresses. As producers however, we can reduce their impacts.

Stress is the leading catalyst for disease, death, and poor performance. As such it is always the first place I tell producers to look when things start going wrong. Each year I visit farms that must believe that bedding costs will run them out of business. Barns and shelters are overcrowded, and never as dry or clean as they ought to be. This simply will not do. Wet bedding and the lack of appropriate spacing can create the perfect growth medium for bacteria, and respiratory disease. This is a major concern as many prepare for kidding season, and newborns are particularly susceptible to respiratory disease and naval infections. As shelters and barns grow bacteria due to wet bedding, the risks of mastitis in the does and sheath infections in bucks also increases. Investing in good bedding and appropriate shelter concentrations will dramatically reduce stress and therefore disease as well. This alone should make it of the utmost importance to producers looking to make a profit and improve the overall health of the herd. It is important to note it is not just the physical appearance of bedding that matters though. I have been in many a barn where the bedding looked decent yet the ammonia levels in the air made my eyes water. This requires additional attention on the part of producers when checking pens or shelters. When in doubt, crouch down on the bedding and breathe in the air 8” off the ground. If the air quality is bad at that level, then kids and resting adults are at a higher risk of respiratory disease. When bedding looks good but air quality is poor there are only two options; clean out the bedding and start over or improve air flow to improve air quality.

Another area of focus should be a producer’s feed purchasing strategy. Developing a strategy to feed goats and make money each year will vary from farm to farm however many parts will be consistent for all. The largest of these is the need to purchase grain supplements. With daily temperatures dropping, and pregnancies building, the nutritional requirements of our stock are increasing daily. Better forage could be offered but some grain will still be required as does get deeper into the winter and further in their productive stages. This is where gathering additional information can really pay off. Grain is a supplement and as such, each producer must consider what it is supplementing as well as the weather patterns of the time. If the forage offered is low protein, more protein will need to be offered in the grain. If the weather is colder, more energy must be offered. Before any grain supplement can be selected and quantities needed per head per day determined however, the forage it will supplement against or balance must be known. Investing in forage analysis will dramatically improve the ability of any producer to make better supplement purchases. Many feed companies and even local extension offices can send samples to laboratories for a producer. The knowledge gained from a forage analysis and the identification of supplement needs will also improve a producer’s purchasing power. As an example, if the forage tested is determined to be 21% protein, less protein will need to be offered daily in the grain supplement. As protein is the leading cost of any grain ration, a forage analysis can save a producer money in the costs of a grain supplement. In addition to forage analysis, observing grain futures markets and current markets can assist in supplement purchasing. As commodities and grains go up, so will grain supplements. As such, watching grain markets can give producers an idea of which direction feed prices will go and give opportunity to potentially save money through ingredient substitution to keep supplement pricing more consistent through the winter. As cold weather increases so will grain supplementation needs. Identifying the supplement needs and purchasing accordingly will decrease stress on the herd and improve performance simultaneously.

As the colder weather rolls in each producer can reduce their risks each time they reduce livestock stress and strategize better in their feeding practices. Investing in proper bedding, pen management, and effective grain supplemention can not only reduce the risks of stress induced issues, but also improve the likelihood of showing a profit through the coming winter. Invest wisely, and consider the stresses; your pocketbook will thank you.