

Importance of fresh water for cattle in winter

Water is the most important nutrient in animal management. Cattle need access to water of sufficient quality and quantity to meet their needs.

During the winter, providing water to cattle on pasture can be more difficult. **Relying on snow as the only water source in the winter is not recommended** due to risks to animal welfare and productivity.



Concerns with snow as the only water source for cattle:

Inability to control the quantity and quality of snow

Only loose, clean snow is acceptable as a water source. If there isn't enough snow, or it's hard-packed, ice-crusts, or dirty, it cannot be used instead of water.

In general, it takes 10 litres (L) of snow to make 1 L of water. Beef cattle drink up to 66 L of water per day, so they require large amounts of snow to meet their water needs.

Cattle may limit water intake to the point of dehydration if water quality is poor

Reduced water intake can lead to cattle eating less, which will affect growth and performance.

Dehydration can also weaken their ability to fight off disease.

It can take cattle several days to learn to consume snow as their primary water source

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Body heat must be used to melt ingested snow, which can worsen cold stress

Energy put towards melting ingested snow is also lost growth potential. For this reason, the *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Beef Cattle* prohibits snow as the only water source for cattle with higher energy needs, including cattle that are:

- lactating,
- newly-weaned,
- in poor body condition, or
- without access to optimal feed



Although the *Code of Practice* allows for snow to be used as the only winter water source for beef cattle under certain conditions, it states that these conditions can be **highly variable**, and can result in risks to cattle welfare if not carefully monitored. These conditions include:

- Snow quality and quantity
- Feed quality
- Cattle body condition
- Weather conditions

Therefore, the *Code of Practice* does not support complete reliance on snow, and requires producers to have a back-up water source.

Snow itself is not harmful for cattle to consume, but does not replace the need for a reliable supply of fresh, unfrozen water during the winter.

There is no perfect winter watering system, but there are many different options that can be used. Consult your regional beef cattle specialist or veterinarian for advice.