

Prior to the first talk that I gave on overwintering cattle a few years ago, I rang a friend of mine in the ministry and asked what they thought of it. The initial response wasn't good; they weren't impressed by cattle trudging around knee deep in mud. I was fairly baffled as my own experience of overwintering stock didn't feature that. When I explained that I was meaning strip grazing kale or fodder beet with preplaced bales or slow rotational grazing on deferred grass, the response changed completely. The ministry vet had thought that I was talking about bales being driven out to a ring feeder several times a week which obviously creates poaching by tractor and stock. The vet was impressed by the "overwintering" that I had meant and when I said that some farmers starting down this path were concerned that people wouldn't like to see stock walking on mud, the response was that "terrible sheds are usually hidden"!

Like most things in life, 'prior preparation and planning prevents poor performance'. You have to calculate how much crop you need to feed whichever group of stock and based on typical crop tonnages, how much land you have available and how long you want the stock out there. You can calculate the deficit to be made up with round bales. These can be put in out in rows as they are silaged.

Livestock love fresh air and God made them with leather coats or woolley jackets. That's not to say that a fully housed Holstein cow would be happy being put outside in winter just like that, as it takes a while for cattle to adapt to changes in season with thicker coats and more fat under the skin. A study done many years ago found that cattle shiver when exposed to -20°C in September but not in December. However breed selection must be considered as some are harder than others inherently.

Generally the main reason that sheep, beef animals and dairy heifers are housed is to stop them poaching up the land; there is quite a lot of land that is just too heavy or too steep – however they can be kept out in many places but they get housed for man's convenience. They may not mind the rain too much but we do. You do have to balance this against the fact that when housed you have to bring feed to them, put out bedding, muck out bedding and then spread muck instead of just moving an electric fence and un-wrapping bales

Brassicas and fodder beet do have slightly awkward mineral profiles and stock do need supplementation in some way to compensate (often easiest by bolus). They are lowish in copper and their high sulphur levels reduce copper availability; some crop species are low in selenium and generally they are low in iodine with what's there made less available by goitrogens. Phosphorus levels in fodder beet can be quite low but daily top dressing with dicalcium phosphate easily rectifies this.

Without housing stock can continue to pick up fluke in mild winters and, just as many sheep often kept out at grass all winter are likely to need more than one fluke dose, so will overwintered cattle. Cattle should still receive a 'housing' type dose of wormer to remove encysted gut worms and parasite control plans may need significant modification in different weather patterns.

Think about it this winter, especially if you have pneumonia issues frequently. Stock may not grow at the same rate outside but there is no turnout check, once spring comes they motor on. They are fitter and lambing/calvings are easier despite bigger babies.

Think about which fields the Environment Agency will be happy with, buffer zones may help mitigate problems in the event of an unusually wet winter (again). The Soil Protection Review paper trail is going, but understandably any resulting erosion is a cross-compliance issue.

For further information on outwintering cattle, or Westpoint Veterinary Group, please call our Launceston practice on 01566 86985, or visit [www.westpointfarmvets.co.uk](http://www.westpointfarmvets.co.uk).

**Rachel Risdon BVSc CertCHP MRCVS**



I shifted the fence by myself the following day whilst in labour! – 80 yearlings fed, watered, bedded and mucked out in an hour!