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ABOUT ORGANICS IN ALBERTA



LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW ORGANIC FARMERS CARE FOR LIVESTOCK IN COLD WINTER MONTHS

When you think about organic livestock farming, you might immediately imagine a herd of cattle grazing peacefully in a grassy field. In the sunny Canadian summer, this might be exactly what you stumble across. Unlimited access to the outdoors and plenty of fresh grazing pasture is ideal for organic livestock.

Unfortunately, winters in Canada can be harsh and long. As the cold weather approaches, you might be wondering how organic farmers keep their livestock safe throughout the winter months. Farmers have to take a different approach to caring for their livestock in the winter, and organic farmers have a few basic regulations to follow when it comes to winter care.

HOW STRICT ARE THE WINTER CARE REGULATIONS FOR ORGANIC LIVESTOCK FARMERS?

Although the Canadian standards for organic production states animals must have access to the outdoors, farmers have a few options available when it comes to protecting their livestock from harsh winter conditions.

Before diving into the regulations, it's important to note that every farm, organic and conventional, is set up differently. One farm may house different breeds than another, or may have to deal with distinct weather patterns.

This is why the standards are flexible. Some of the guidelines for organic livestock care in Canada include specific measurements (such as the indoor and outdoor space required per animal that is audited by a third-party certifying body each year). However, many of the guidelines for winter care allow farmers to make decisions based on the best interests of their animals. This means farmers make daily (or even hourly) decisions about whether or not it's safe to allow animals

outside in adverse weather conditions. They can also decide which breeds are best for winter farming, and which types of shelters to build for their animals.

THREE CONSIDERATIONS FARMERS ASSESS IN WINTER MONTHS

Type of Livestock

The Organic Production Systems General Principles and Management Standards outlines general guidelines for caring for organic livestock during harsh Canadian winters. It even includes recommendations for specific species that endure colder climates better than others and explains the varying living arrangements animals need to thrive in the winter months. Since each species has different needs and requirements, farmers must ensure they have the appropriate facilities to meet their animals' needs. This is a very important factor to consider when farmers are selecting the type of livestock they wish to raise. For example, some animals, like sheep, often have access to indoor housing during the winter months, while it's recommended cattle spend their winters outdoors with accessibility to non-enclosed shelters according to the Canadian Organic Guidelines.

Age & Health of Livestock

Just as humans have different care needs at various ages, animals need different treatment depending on where they are in their life cycles. Young poultry provides a great example of how age can impact whether an animal is restricted to the indoors. Birds are typically kept indoors until they're fully feathered and can regulate their body temperature. When it comes to pigs, sows and nursing piglets may also be placed indoors for a few days at a time (winter or otherwise) to protect them from the elements and other dangers.

Calves receive similar caution. Young calves aren't required to be put out to pasture until they are nine months of age. However, it's recommended



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by the Canadian Organic Growers (COG) they have access to the outdoors before then, as long as the conditions are safe. This may include terrain conditions, health threats, and weather – all of which a farmer will assess before making a decision.

Outdoor Conditions

What constitutes bad weather in Canada? It might depend on who you ask!

When it comes to inclement winter weather on livestock farms, there are plenty of factors organic and conventional farmers have to consider including: temperature, wind gusts, precipitation, and terrain. In general, animals need to be able to move around safely, maintain a healthy body temperature, and have access to adequate food and water. When it comes to winter preparation, the major difference between organic and conventional livestock production lies in the fact that organic producers must follow regulations that allow animals to live in their most natural state.

While many conventional farmers might subscribe to similar practices as organic farmers, they are not audited each year. Organic farmers must keep extensive records on how their animals are cared for, and in order to keep their certified organic label, they must be audited by a third-party certifying body each year.

HOW DO FARMERS MEET THE ORGANIC STANDARDS IN THE WINTER?

Housing Requirements & Access to the Outdoors

The organic livestock production regulations in Canada help ensure animals have the most natural living conditions possible. In other words, livestock should be able to move and act as they would in a natural, uncontrolled environment. This includes exercise and outdoor access.

According to COG:

“Access to the outdoors is necessary for all livestock, but it is also recognized that in the Canadian climate, there will be times when outdoor access is problematic for some types of livestock. Cold temperatures are not a good reason to keep animals confined, but protection is needed from excessive

exposure to sunlight, extreme temperatures, precipitation and wind (e.g., in the form of shade or windbreaks).”

Here are a few of the options organic livestock farmers have when it comes to winter housing for their specific types of livestock:

Cattle: One way cattle farmers can combat frigid temperatures without restricting access to the outdoors is to build an open-sided barn. This provides shelter from wind and weather, without penning animals inside permanently.

Poultry: Chickens and other poultry do not like to be outdoors when there is snow on the ground. To solve this challenge, farmers can allow outdoor access without exposure to the snow by creating covered patios attached to the main shelter.

Pigs: Pigs can be housed outside in the winter if the snow is not too deep, and they have access to shelter. Outdoor exercise pens for pigs are created with at least three open sides so they can be outdoors, but still protected from the elements. Since creating an environment for animals to live as naturally as possible is a major factor in organic farming, many farmers will keep straw in outdoor pig pens. This allows the pigs to “root”, which is an instinctive behaviour where pigs will repeatedly nudge at materials with their snouts. In many cases, the pigs will burrow in the straw in order to keep warm in the winter and act out their normal tendencies.

Breed Selection: Although there are many practical ways organic farmers can fulfill the organic standards in Canada, one of the most effective ways farmers ensure livestock can combat the cold, happens before they're born. Farmers typically select hardier breeds of animals known to stand up to harsh weather conditions, ensuring their animals are naturally suited to their environments.

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