

Picture by Mark Kepler: Well fed cattle with adequate hair are insulated from the cold snow on their backs.

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Livestock Hair



With the sounds of the Cowsills signing their 1969 hit, “Hair,” playing in the background it is a good time to talk about livestock hair. The Cowsills sang about “long beautiful hair. Shining, gleaming, steaming, flaxen, waxen.” It was all about hair.

Working with the cows in our dairy barn at milking time, that song played many times on our radio, but unknown to me at that age, was just how important hair really is to the cows.

Livestock produce hair growing hormones in reply to the oncoming winter weather by responding to daylength and cold. In order for cattle to survive the winter, their haircoat has to be in place.

In 2013, western South Dakota was struck with one of the worst blizzards in the state’s history. It came in early October when cattle had not fully grown their winter hair and the snow came in wet, heavy, and in copious amounts. Then it got really cold, nearly 50,000 cattle died.

The key term was wet. Once the hair gets wet, it lies down flat, it no longer has those fluffy air spaces between the hairs. It is the air that insulates, and without those spaces it’s very hard for the animal to keep warm. During the harsh winter, cattle may have snow accumulate and remain on their backs until a warm sunny day comes along, yet they remain comfortable due to the insulative effect of the thick winter coat of hair.

Once spring comes the animal needs to lose that winter hair to reduce heat stress. Research has shown that calves from cows that shed their winter hair coat earlier weigh more at weaning, to the tune of 25 to 50 pounds. Shedding of winter hair is related to health and nutrition but it is also an inherited trait. In fact, the American Angus Association has hair shedding scores. On black animals’ winter hair is reddish in color and is easily seen.

A farm animal I have wondered about is hogs. The old heritage breeds of hogs have a thick winter coat. Between the hair and copious amounts of fat they could survive the winter with some shelter. Most hogs of today are raised in indoor confinement. They are tremendously leaner and there is less need for hair. Taking one of them out in real cold would be a disaster. Given time, they too would acclimate somewhat.

Then there is a pig breed that I was recently introduced to called the Mangalitsa. It comes to us from Hungary and it is so hairy it looks like a sheep with a snout. They were raised for lard in the day when lard was a desirable characteristic of a hog. Hogs with that trait were in poor demand in the last 100 years causing a decrease in that breeds’ worldly numbers down to around 200 hogs. About 70% of the carcass of a Mangalitsa is fat, leaving a small amount of meat on these hogs that I have been told is very tasty. It also adjusts well to pasture raising and fits well in the natural meat movement. So now the world population of them has climbed to about 50,000.

Now that I think about it, I wonder if the Cowsills were singing about those Mangalitsa hogs.