

July 24, 2026

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Hair Shedding and Heat Tolerance

Last week we discussed summer heat stress, and this week will take a deeper dive into one of the factors of heat stress in cattle – hair coat. This might not be a topic given much consideration for many, but when summer heat rolls in, slick hided animals (or maybe those that aren't) come to the notice of an astute livestock manager. Hair/hide color also has effects on the animal's ability to withstand heat.

The ability to shed the winter coat is a trait gaining attention, with some breed associations even working on EPDs for this trait. Slick-coated cattle have improved tolerance to heat, better reproductive rates and typically wean heavier calves. There is evidence indicating slick-coated cows carry fewer flies. If fescue is the primary forage base, slick coated cows suffer less fescue toxicosis.

Hair shedding has moderate heritability, indicating that when selection pressure is applied, the result will lead to cattle that slick-off winter haircoats earlier each spring. Hair shedding scores can be taken monthly from March to July. In most regions of the country, it is recommended that the herd be evaluated during the month of May. This time seems to correlate with when most cattle have initiated the process of shedding and when most variation occurs within the herd for our region.

Hair shedding scores are based on a scale of 1 to 5 with a 1 being completely slick in appearance. While there is variability between shedding patterns among animals, cattle tend to shed from front to back and top to bottom. Hair shedding scores can be taken on both sexes and animals of all ages. It is recommended to take scores on yearlings during their first spring. Pictures of each hair shed score can be viewed at: https://guidelines.beefimprovement.org/index.php/Hair_Shedding

Producers can use hair coat shedding scores as a culling tool to reduce heat stress in their herds. Hair coat shedding is repeatable from year to year. Cattle that have a shedding score of 4 to 5 in May should be considered for culling in areas that have higher heat and humidity. Keep in mind that there are populations where hair retention is a desirable trait, such as in exhibition focused animals. That said, there can be markets for both sides of this equation given the operations organizational structure.

Data collected by seedstock breeders should be reported to their respective breed association for possible use in genetic evaluations. One example of this is Angus Genetics International has implemented a Hair Shedding EPD. A lower numerical value for Hair Shed (HS) EPD in the Angus breed indicates earlier shedding of the winter hair coat each spring.

Although hair shedding has traditionally been associated with heat stress and fescue toxicosis, recent research shows this quick and easy phenotypic assessment of cattle could be a trait of even more economic importance. With its moderate heritability, combining this score with a hair shedding EPD or score on bulls would result in positive genetic progress over time.