

Water: The Lifeline of Livestock Health and Productivity in India

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Water is often called the "forgotten nutrient" in livestock production, yet it is the most essential. While animals can survive for days or even weeks without food, the absence of water can lead to severe health issues or death within hours, especially in the heat of an Indian summer. For livestock farmers across India, where temperatures can soar above 40°C, understanding the critical role of water and ensuring its adequate supply is not just good practice—it's a matter of survival.

In this article, we explore the multifaceted importance of water in livestock feeding, its role in various physiological processes, and the heightened water requirements during India's scorching summer months. We also provide practical insights for farmers to safeguard their animals' health and productivity, supported by data, case studies, and expert recommendations.

Introduction: Water as the Foundation of Livestock Health

Water is the single most important nutrient for livestock. It constitutes 50-80% of an animal's body weight, depending on species, age, and physiological state, and is involved in nearly every bodily function. From digestion and nutrient absorption to temperature regulation and waste elimination, water is indispensable. In India, where livestock farming is a cornerstone of rural economies, ensuring that animals have access to sufficient, clean water is critical—especially during the summer, when heat stress can dramatically increase water needs.

Consider this: a dairy cow producing 30 liters of milk per day may require up to 150 liters of water in hot weather, while a buffalo, known for its sensitivity to heat, may need even more. Inadequate water intake can lead to reduced feed consumption, lower milk yields, weight loss, reproductive issues, and in severe cases, death. For farmers, this translates directly into economic losses.

This article delves into the physiological importance of water, quantifies the water needs of various livestock species, and offers actionable strategies for managing water supply during India's challenging summer months.

The Physiological Importance of Water in Livestock

Water serves several critical functions in livestock physiology. Understanding these roles underscores why adequate water intake is non-negotiable for animal health and productivity.

1. Digestion and Nutrient Absorption

Water is fundamental to the digestive process. It helps break down feed, facilitates enzymatic reactions, and aids in the absorption of nutrients such as carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. In ruminants like cattle, buffaloes, and goats, water is especially crucial in the rumen, where it supports microbial fermentation—a process that allows these animals to digest fibrous feeds like hay and grass.

2. Temperature Regulation

Livestock rely on water to maintain their body temperature, particularly in hot climates. Water is lost through sweating (in cattle and buffaloes), panting (in sheep, goats, and poultry), and evaporation from the respiratory tract. This evaporative cooling is essential for preventing heat stress, which can impair productivity and even be fatal.

3. Waste Elimination

Water is vital for excreting metabolic waste products, such as urea and ammonia, through urine and feces. Without sufficient water, these toxins accumulate, leading to health issues like kidney failure or ammonia toxicity.

4. Lubrication and Structural Integrity

Water lubricates joints, cushions vital organs, and maintains the structural integrity of cells and tissues. It also forms the basis of saliva, which is essential for initiating digestion.

- **Insight:** Dehydration can lead to joint stiffness and reduced mobility, particularly in older animals, affecting their ability to graze or move to water sources.

Water Requirements for Livestock: A Species-Specific Breakdown

The amount of water livestock need varies widely based on species, age, weight, production stage (e.g., lactation, growth), diet, and environmental

conditions. Below is a detailed look at the water needs of common livestock species in India.

1. Cattle

- **Daily Water Intake:** Adult cattle typically require 30-50 liters per day under normal conditions. However, lactating cows may need 100-150 liters, especially in hot weather.
- **Physiological Role:** Water supports rumen fermentation, milk synthesis, and thermoregulation. High-roughage diets increase water demand due to the need for greater digestive fluid volume.
- Comprising 60 to 70 percent of a dairy cow's body weight, water is essential for a range of physiological functions. It maintains fluid balance and proper ion levels, supports digestion, nutrient absorption, and metabolism, and aids in removing waste and excess heat from the body. Water also provides a nurturing fluid environment for the fetus and facilitates the transport of nutrients to and from tissues. Water is lost through urine, feces, milk production, sweating, and evaporation from the skin and respiratory system, with losses influenced by activity levels, environmental conditions, and milk output. Weaned calves and heifers require approximately 3.8 to 5.7 liters of water per 45 kg (100 lbs) of body weight daily.

2. Buffaloes

- **Daily Water Intake:** Buffaloes consume 40-60 liters daily, with needs spiking to 120 liters during lactation or heat stress.
- **Physiological Role:** Buffaloes are highly sensitive to heat and often wallow in water to cool down. Their water needs are not just for drinking but also for external cooling.

3. Sheep and Goats

- **Daily Water Intake:** These small ruminants need 3-10 liters per day, with lactating animals requiring more.
- **Physiological Role:** Sheep and goats are efficient at conserving water but still rely on it for digesting dry forages and regulating body temperature through panting.

4. Poultry

- **Daily Water Intake:** Broiler chickens consume 0.2-0.4 liters per bird daily, often 1.5-2 times their feed intake. Layers and breeders have similar needs.
- **Physiological Role:** Water is crucial for egg production (eggs are 75% water), digestion, and cooling via panting. Poultry are highly susceptible to heat stress, making water intake critical.

Table 1: Average Daily Water Requirements for Livestock

Livestock Species	Normal Conditions (Liters)	Summer Conditions (Liters)
Adult Cattle	30-50	60-150
Adult Buffaloes	40-60	50-120
Sheep	3-6	5-10
Goats	3-5	4-8
Broiler Chickens	0.2-0.3/bird	0.3-0.4/bird

Note: Values are approximate and vary based on animal size, production stage, and environmental factors.

Factors Influencing Water Requirements

Several factors can increase or decrease the amount of water livestock need. Farmers must account for these variables to ensure adequate supply.

1. Diet

- **High-Salt or Protein Diets:** These increase water intake as animals need more water to excrete excess minerals and nitrogen.
- **Green Fodder:** Fresh, green feed contains up to 80% water, reducing the need for additional drinking water.

2. Temperature and Humidity

- **Hot Weather:** High temperatures increase water loss through evaporation, significantly raising water needs.
- **Humidity:** In humid regions like coastal India, animals may struggle to cool themselves, further increasing water demand.

3. Production Stage

- **Lactation:** Lactating animals require substantially more water to produce milk.

- **Growth:** Young, growing animals have higher water needs relative to their body weight.

4. Activity Level

- **Grazing or Working Animals:** Livestock that graze over long distances or are used for draft purposes require more water due to increased physical exertion.

Water Requirements During Summer in India: A Critical Focus

India's summer season, typically from March to June, brings extreme heat, with temperatures often exceeding 40°C in many regions. This period poses significant challenges for livestock, as heat stress dramatically increases water needs.

1. Impact of Heat Stress

Heat stress occurs when animals cannot dissipate heat effectively, leading to:

- **Increased Water Loss:** Cattle and buffaloes can lose up to 10-15 liters of water daily through sweating and respiration.
- **Reduced Feed Intake:** High temperatures suppress appetite, reducing the water derived from feed.
- **Productivity Declines:** Milk yield in dairy cows can drop by 10-20%, egg production in poultry decreases, and growth rates in young animals slow.

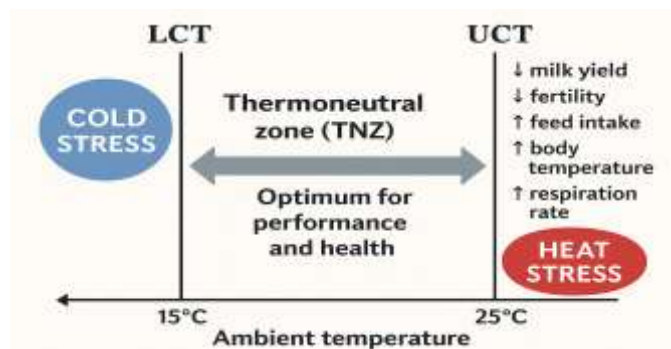


Fig. 1: Relationship Between Temperature and Water Intake in Cattle

Caption: As ambient temperature rises, water intake in cattle increases exponentially to compensate for evaporative cooling needs.

2. Regional Variations in Water Needs

India's diverse climate means water requirements vary across regions:

- **Northern Plains (e.g., Punjab, Haryana):** Intensive dairy farming combined with high

summer temperatures increases water demand.

- **Western Regions (e.g., Rajasthan):** Arid conditions and extreme heat exacerbate water scarcity, making efficient water management critical.
- **Southern States (e.g., Tamil Nadu):** High humidity amplifies heat stress, particularly for poultry, elevating water needs.

3. Practical Tips for Farmers

To ensure livestock have adequate water during summer, farmers can adopt several strategies:

- **Provide Multiple Water Points:** Reduce competition in large herds by offering several troughs or drinkers.
- **Shade Water Sources:** Keep water cool by placing troughs under shade or using insulated containers.
- **Monitor Water Quality:** Regularly check for contaminants like algae or bacteria, which can proliferate in warm weather.
- **Offer Electrolytes:** Adding electrolytes to water can help replenish minerals lost through sweating.

Consequences of Inadequate Water Supply

Failing to meet livestock's water needs can have dire consequences, both for animal welfare and farm profitability.

1. Reduced Productivity

- **Milk Yield:** Dairy cows may experience a 10-20% drop in milk production.
- **Growth Rates:** Young animals grow more slowly, delaying market readiness.
- **Reproductive Issues:** Dehydration can lead to irregular estrus cycles and lower conception rates.

2. Health Complications

- **Dehydration:** Signs include sunken eyes, lethargy, and dry mucous membranes.
- **Heat Stroke:** In severe cases, animals may collapse or die from overheating.
- **Kidney Damage:** Chronic dehydration impairs kidney function, leading to long-term health issues.

Table 2: Signs of Dehydration in Livestock and Recommended Actions

Species	Signs of Dehydration	Recommended Actions
Cattle	Sunken eyes, dry nose	Provide immediate access to water
Buffaloes	Lethargy, reduced rumination	Offer electrolytes, shade
Sheep	Weakness, panting	Ensure cool, clean water
Poultry	Drooping wings, open-mouth breathing	Increase water availability, ventilation

Water Quality Considerations

Water quality profoundly affects dairy cattle health and productivity. Key parameters include:

Salinity and Total Dissolved Solids (TDS): Levels below 1,000 ppm are ideal; 1,000–2,999 ppm may cause mild diarrhea, while levels above 5,000 ppm can harm pregnant or young animals.

- **Hardness:** Measured as calcium and magnesium, it has no impact on performance.
- **Nitrates:** Safe below 44 ppm; higher levels risk toxicity, reducing oxygen capacity.
- **Sulfates:** Should be below 500 ppm for calves and 1,000 ppm for adults to avoid diarrhea.
- **pH:** Optimal range is 6.0–8.0; deviations may cause digestive issues.
- **Microbial Contamination:** Low coliform and bacterial counts are essential, particularly for calves.

Managing Water Quality

- **Regular Testing:** Farmers should test water sources every 3-6 months for TDS, pH, and contaminants.
- **Cleaning Troughs:** Remove debris and algae weekly to maintain cleanliness.
- **Avoiding Runoff:** Prevent agricultural or industrial runoff from contaminating water sources.

Conclusion: Proactive Water Management for Livestock Success

Water is the cornerstone of livestock health and productivity, particularly in India's challenging

climate. From supporting digestion and nutrient absorption to enabling temperature regulation and waste elimination, water is involved in every aspect of an animal's physiology. During the summer, when heat stress can double or triple water requirements, ensuring an adequate and clean water supply becomes even more critical.

Farmers who proactively manage water—by providing multiple access points, shading troughs, monitoring quality, and adjusting for regional conditions—can safeguard their animals' health and maintain productivity even in the hottest months. As climate change intensifies water scarcity and heat waves, these practices will be essential for the sustainability of India's livestock sector.

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