



NEWS

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Advice for Ranchers: “Pray for rain. Plan for drought.”

PRESHO, SD, March 14, 2022 – “Pray for rain. Plan for drought.” That’s the advice rangeland experts, conservation officials, and ranchers with experience in developing drought plans have for South Dakota ranchers as they head into a year that could have worse impacts from drought than last year.

The March 10 [U.S. Drought Monitor Map](#) shows all of western South Dakota in either moderate or severe drought, and the rest of the state either in moderate drought or abnormally dry, with the exception of northeastern South Dakota and counties along the eastern border.

“I’d be concerned about the possibility of drought this year, with the exception of the northeast corner of the state,” said Laura Edwards, State Climatologist at South Dakota State University (SDSU). “We didn’t have a lot of fall moisture, or a lot of snow over the winter. So we’ve seen some worsening over the winter, with no snowpack to melt. We’ll need to rely more on spring rain than in a typical year.”

“We’re definitely behind the eight-ball going into this year,” cautions Jim Faulstich, who ranches with his wife Carol and other family at Daybreak Ranch near Highmore in central South Dakota. “I don’t see any way around the fact that we’re going to have less forage this year than last year. That’s why the South Dakota Grassland Coalition is so concerned about what could happen.”

“Hopefully, we can help people be aware of the circumstances we’re up against,” Faulstich said. “And we can offer advice and help get people in touch with mentor ranchers and grassland planners with experience in planning for drought. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has local conservationists who can help, and area rangeland management specialists with years of experience in this. So does SDSU. That help is free,” Faulstich said.

Faulstich and other experienced drought planners say the first thing to do is to develop resource inventory, including such things as labor availability, financial situation, available standing and stored feed, and numbers and classes of livestock. “You have to know what you’ve got out there first. Then you can start looking at options, and start planning,” he said.

Faulstich has had an active drought plan for more than 30 years. “Last year, even though it was dry for us it was pretty much business as usual because of our previous grass management—things like keeping good ground cover, rotationally grazing or management intensive grazing and resting pastures versus season-long grazing,” Faulstich said. “Your drought plan really starts with good grassland management. You should be in charge of the plan instead of waiting to see what Mother Nature deals you. One of the things we’ve emphasized is increasing our warm season grasses, so we have a diverse mix out there of warm

and cool seasons, and a lot of forbs and legumes. It just makes it more resilient than if you took it into the ground the year before.”

Still, he said, since it was so dry last year, he doesn’t have the amount of carryover dormant grass they had on the ranch going into last year. “It could get really wet and turn into a good year, but regardless of what moisture we get now, we’re not going to have the annual production out there that we could have had for this year. So it will be important to manage our resources,” Faulstich said.

Edwards agrees. She said it’s always challenging in the spring to predict precipitation for the months to come. “We will get a report from NOAA this coming Thursday (March 17) that may have more insight on the weather ahead,” Edwards said, “but in any case, I think having a drought plan in place is a smart idea.”

“We’ll always need a drought plan, and it needs to be flexible. Even if it started raining, you don’t know how long that’s going to last,” Faulstich said. “The next drought is right around the corner and our philosophy is to keep our drought plan in place all the time. It avoids surprises, avoids getting yourself painted into a corner.”

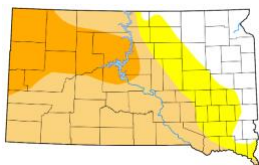
His family’s drought plan offers a comfort zone from a management standpoint, both financially and in reducing stress, Faulstich said. He was surprised at how it increased profits. “It changed everything around when we changed our management to put more attention on our resource versus the livestock,” he said. “Our profitability is really turned around, and it’s a little surprising just how well that grass and soil resource responds when the drought is over.”

Faulstich believes many ranchers don’t develop a drought plan because they think drought is part of the weather, and something they can’t control. “That’s true,” he said. “There’s nothing you can do about the weather or the markets, but if you plan around them, if you’re prepared, you can do a lot of positive things.”

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition has established a website for drought information at www.sddroughtplan.org

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Photos and cutlines



The [March 10 Drought Monitor Map](#) shows most of South Dakota in either moderate or severe drought.



“I don’t see any way around it. We’re going to have less forage this year than last year,” Highmore rancher Jim Faulstich said. He’s confident many South Dakota ranchers would benefit from preparing for drought now.

Contact Jim Faulstich at (605) 852-2622

[Link to photo and audio clips of Jim Faulstich](#)

The South Dakota Grasslands Coalition promotes good stewardship of grasslands through sustainable and profitable management. Goals include widespread use of sustainable, profitable ranching practices; enhanced water quality and reduced runoff into streams and lakes; abundance of wildlife; and preservation of small towns and the ranching economy.