



NEWS

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Contact Judge Jessop, Executive Officer
South Dakota Grassland Coalition
(605) 280-0127 jljessop@kennebectelephone.com

Faith Rancher: ‘Not Planning for Drought is a Plan to Fail’

FAITH, SD, April 25, 2022 – Seasoned ranchers say moisture from recent scattered rains are a welcomed down payment but aren’t nearly enough to make up for the “precipitation debt” that’s been accruing in much of South Dakota since last year. And it’s nowhere near the moisture needed to get South Dakota pastures back on track for normal production this year.

Almost 90 percent of the state remains in severe or moderate drought, or abnormally dry according to the latest [Drought Monitor](#). That fact, on top of a dry 2021, led Bart Carmichael to sell half his cow herd over the past year. He’s following his drought plan—something he said he wouldn’t be without.

“Not planning is a plan to fail, I really believe that,” Carmichael said last week. “It didn’t take very long at all to realize that we needed to have a drought plan. We stock to our available forage, and then we use the drought tool. Last fall we were looking at a 33 percent reduction of our herd,” the rancher from Faith said. “We’re a seed-stock operation, but now we’ve sold half our cows in the last year because of drought, preparing for it and dealing with it.”

Carmichael is on the board of directors for the South Dakota Grassland Coalition. The board is unanimous in urging ranchers to get a grazing management plan and accompanying drought plan to better deal with drought, regardless of whether enough rain comes this year to get them through the grazing season.

Need up to 150 percent of normal rain in May and June

“We would need 140-150 percent of normal rainfall in May and June to get back to normal forage production this year,” said Ryan Beer, a rangeland management specialist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Bison.

Beer, who has a cow herd himself, said he sold cows last year to help him get through the year, and was happy he did. He said he’s had a few requests for help in developing drought plans from ranchers looking for reinforcement and ideas on how to maintain their core herds.

Drought threw us into management-intensive grazing

“Drought is what threw us into management-intensive grazing, because we could allocate so many days of grass for the cow herd,” Carmichael said. “The land that’s managed this way has root reserves still down there because it’s been given time to rest and recover, and when it does rain, it would respond. It all comes together as a forage grazing plan that takes a lot of the emotion out of destocking cattle to protect the grass and soil resources.”

To protect your profitability, Carmichael said it’s sometimes necessary to go ahead and pull that trigger to get rid of those cows. “It could end up costing you way more to keep them. And you lose all your profit and end up with nothing,” Carmichael said. “If you do sell your cows, not only is that money sitting there, you’re also saving money on the other end, by not trying to replace forage that grows for free.”

Carmichael said he looks at drought as a way to make his ranch better. “Not many people look at it that way,” he said, “but I’ve learned to improve my management skills and my herd by getting rid of the bottom end. Those things help increase profitability once a plan is in place. It’s hard to look at drought making things better but that’s our outlook on it.”

The ABC herd

Carmichael refers to his management strategy as the ABC herd. “If you only have mother cows, have them broken up into A, B, and C herds,” he said. “In my case, it’s cows we’ve noticed something about that makes keeping them less desirable. I always say C herd because C is ‘cull’ and it’s easy to cull—once you put them in the C herd—it takes the emotion away. Now she’s a cull cow and if things get tough, she’s going to go.”

Carmichael has three trigger dates a year: October 15, March 25, and Memorial Day. “What we’ve been using the last several years that seems to work well is if we are below normal moisture in the fall, we stock to the forage we have in front of us, and pro-rate it out for the next six months,” he said. “Then when we get to March 25—that’s really a big one for us. We will totally reduce our stock to only the forage that is standing, to plan out for the next year to match our available forage.”

Flat grass belongs to the soil

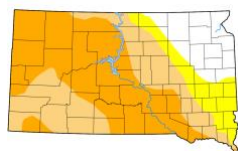
Carmichael said he’s been able to consistently meet his goal of leaving 800 pounds an acre of plant residues behind after grazing to protect the soil. “Our goal now is 1,000 pounds, even 1,200 pounds left behind, because then we can start building soil,” he said. “That grass that’s down and flat against the soil belongs to the soil—we don’t want to take that off.”

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

USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and South Dakota State University have drought planning information online as well.

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Photos and cutlines



The [April 14 Drought Monitor Map](#) shows essentially no change from a week ago across South Dakota.



Bart Carmichael



Bart and Shannon Carmichael on their ranch near Faith, SD.
Photos by Joe Dickie

Contact Bart Carmichael at 650-788-2838

[Link to photos and audio clips from Bart Carmichael](#)

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.