



NEWS

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Economic Advice for Ranchers as Drought Persists: “Protect Pastures.”

QUINN, SD, March 21, 2022 – “If we can’t grow grass, we can’t make money. That’s the bottom line right there,” said Pat Guptill, a rancher from Quinn in western South Dakota. When he and his wife Mary Lou sold two-thirds of their cow herd last year, it was a measured, economic decision rather than one made in panic.

A board member of the South Dakota Grassland Coalition, Guptill said many ranchers are likely to be short on grass this year again, even with normal precipitation this spring. He and the SDGC board are urging ranchers to think seriously now about how they’re going to protect their pastures this year.

He has already reached the first trigger date and decided to sell steers. That’s part of his forage management and drought plan. “I know I’m going to be short on forage. So, I have to get rid of some cattle,” Guptill said.

By selling livestock now, Guptill said ranchers still have the option to bring cattle back into the operation if drought conditions abate. “But if you hang onto them until the end of June and we don’t have grass, it’s almost impossible to get rid of them. You’re either proactive or reactive,” he said.

To Guptill, long-term economic viability is totally dependent on the viability of his pastures. “The thing we should be looking at as grass managers is the economics of it. Over grazing or lack of rest is not economical,” Guptill said. “Whatever decision you make, make it to protect your pastures. If you overgraze and bare your ground, it can take three to five years for that pasture to recover, but if you keep it protected with grass it takes only three to five months after a substantial rain for that grass to recover.”

Guptill said he’s following his father-in-law’s advice from years ago. “He said ‘We should never fall in love with our cows.’ That’s where we have to be—everyone spends a lot of time building their cow herds and wants to hang on to them, but when you hang on too long, it hurts you,” Guptill said.

More than 20 years ago, Guptill established a drought plan as part of his grazing management plan. It includes trigger dates that may launch livestock inventory reductions. In his case, the March date called for selling steers, and an April target date will assess grass conditions and a decision on whether to bring more custom cattle in, or culling some cows if needed. He will assess grass supplies again in May and decide whether to further cull his cow herd.

The rancher-member Grassland Coalition is urging all ranchers to develop a forage management plan and a drought plan as part of it. They caution against grazing too early, too short, and overgrazing, especially in a dry year.

So far, that means this year. The [March 17 Drought Monitor Map](#) shows all but northeast South Dakota is still short of moisture.

“Ranchers in South Dakota know better than anyone that the next drought is right around the corner. Historically, a drought has occurred an average of 20 percent of the years in the northern Great Plains,” said Emily Helms, State Rangeland Management Specialist for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

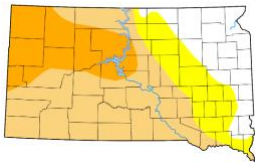
“Most recently, droughts or dry weather in 2002, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2017, and again last year in South Dakota remind us of that,” Helms said. “That’s why more and more ranchers have a drought plan, and use it to reduce the financial and grassland resource impacts that come with a drought year or extended drought.”

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 [March 17 Drought Monitor Map](#) shows most of South Dakota in either moderate or severe drought, or abnormally dry.



“If we can’t grow grass, we can’t make money. Protect your pasture,” Quinn rancher Pat Guptill advised. He’s had a drought plan for more than 20 years and said he isn’t afraid to sell cattle in order to keep pastures in a condition ready to bounce back after needed rains.



Cattle on Guptill’s healthy grasslands.

Contact Pat Guptill at (605) 386-2323

[Link to photos and audio clips of Pat Guptill](#)

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.