



# NEWS

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## Everybody's Scared

STURGIS, SD, March 28, 2022 – “Everybody's scared out here,” Ed Blair said this week, referring to the drought in South Dakota. “Pastures are short in the area, beyond short—we're really going to need something to keep us going here.”

The Sturgis rancher, his brother Rich and their sons Chad and Britton have been able to get through the past two years of drought, but this year will be a new test. “I always try to stockpile grass. Normally, I can get by a couple of years in a droughty situation without too much trouble, but if we get below normal rainfall this third year, it's probably going to be a little tougher to manage,” Blair said.

The [March 24 Drought Monitor Map](#) showed drought is persisting across South Dakota. “It wouldn't surprise me if we have only half the normal grass production this year,” said Alexander “Sandy” Smart, Agriculture and Natural Resources Program Leader with South Dakota State University Extension at Brookings. “I'd calculate stocking rates based on that and start to make culling decisions. It's clear to me that if you don't make changes, you're going to get caught off guard.”

The Blair family has been running a short-duration rotational grazing system on Blair Brothers Angus ranch since the 1980's, helping to ease drought effects. “I can get by two years pretty good. I've got the ground cover there. So if we do get rain, we'll be able to hold it,” Blair explained. “In my mind it's all about management, looking at what's going on out there and evaluating what you're doing.”

Still, if rain doesn't come, the Blairs have plans to help get through the drought. “I always keep a lot of replacement heifers. Everybody sells their young cows and I just cringe when they do that. If you're going to sell something, get rid of them old cows,” he said. “Keep your young cows, keep your heifer calves and you're right back in when it rains if you've kept grass cover on the land.”

The Blairs also run yearlings. “In a drought we can put them on feed and pasture the cows on the yearling pasture,” he said, “and that gives us more flexibility.” Another part of his plans to counteract drought is to wean calves earlier. “We weaned calves earlier last year. What it does for you, is it doesn't take much to maintain a cow out there if she doesn't have a calf sucking on her,” Blair said. “My trigger for when to start weaning calves is to pay attention to range and cow condition. If either begin to slip, I get ready to wean. Those younger calves wean real easy.”

Blair will also delay the start of grazing this year. “It's going to green up. The thing people got to watch is that they don't get out on it too quick,” he said. “We'll delay a week to ten days. This year, especially, you've got to get the grass vegetative, let it get going. If you've got good ground cover, you're going to capture that water when it comes, so you get all the use out of it.”

One thing Blair has seen, often more with season-long grazing, is that low areas really get beat up. “If you can rest those, it's amazing how fast they come back,” he said. “That’s the main thing, you’ve just got to rest your grass. That's the trouble with season-long grazing is you don’t rest it, you don’t get the ground cover. Then when you do get the rain, you don’t infiltrate as much water, and you don’t have as much grass. It's important to keep that ground cover so that when you get those big rains, you get a lot of infiltration, and keep the water on the ranch—not running down the ditch.”

“The Climate Prediction Center, the Drought Mitigation Center, and many other sources online have helpful information, with action steps ranchers can take to prepare for drought,” SDSU’s Smart said. But he thinks one of the best ways a rancher who is ready to make a drought plan is to talk with a rancher like Blair who has been through the process.

“The South Dakota Grassland Coalition has a mentor network of ranchers who have done this,” Smart said. “They have a road map to follow rather than just waiting for things to come. Talk to them, reach out and say ‘Hey, I need help. How do I put one of those things together?’”

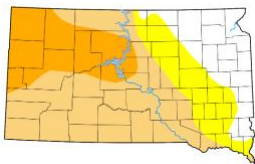
Smart is looking forward to the day in the near future when a precision forage estimator will be available to ranchers. SDSU is working on an estimator that uses satellite imagery to show how much forage is currently available, and its quality, with the capability to predict how much forage will be available later in the season. “It could be a game changer—a real help to ranchers in developing drought plans,” he said.

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition has established a website for drought information at [www.sddroughtplan.org](http://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 24 Drought Monitor Map](#) shows drought persisting across most of South Dakota.



Facing a third year of drought in a row with stockpiled forage nearly depleted, Sturgis rancher Ed Blair is making plans to lessen the impacts of drought on his ranch.



Blair said a key to overcoming drought is healthy grasslands with ground cover that helps the ground absorb all the rainfall when rain comes.

Contact Ed Blair at (605) 347-1180

[Link to photos and audio clips from Ed Blair](#)

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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.