



NEWS

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Little rain after last year's drought worries ranchers most

CHAMBERLAIN, SD, April 11, 2022 – The first year of a drought doesn't bother Chamberlain rancher Charlie Totton. It's the second and third years that worry him.

That's the case now; it's the extended drought that can be ruinous to ranchers across the state.

"It looks real scary," Totton said. "The whole country is pretty much grazed off right now. I've been watching and the forecast for rain is not good for this coming year. We have registered Black Angus for the most part. When you've got thirty years invested in breeding purebred cattle, selling cows out is not an option. I can't do that. I can't replace these cows that I've been breeding on for thirty years."

The upside is Totton has a drought plan, which has been part of his grassland management since the 1980's. He stockpiles forage ahead to use during a drought, and plans to sell yearlings if it comes to that. "I've been ahead since the last drought. But now I'm using up some feed I put up a couple of years ago, and I'm starting to get down on feed supply," he said.

"A lot of times we keep heifers around to breed, but last summer we knew we'd be in trouble and we sold half of the yearlings that we normally would have run," Totton said. "That frees up more grass to maintain our cow herd." As part of his drought plan, he'll make a decision whether or not to sell more yearlings this year later on in May.

Last week's [Drought Monitor Map](#) (April 7) showed no change from the previous week. About 46 percent of the state is in severe drought, and another 30 percent is in moderate drought, with about 10 percent abnormally dry. Severe drought in 46 percent of the state compares to 25 percent March 22.

Lots of drought talk

"I'm seeing more discussion on drought this year than in the past, and that's a good thing," said Rod Voss, an area rangeland management specialist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Mitchell.

"We're in a drought about 20 percent of the time and I'll bet we're really wet another 20 percent of the years," Voss said. "If you're stocking only for those more normal good years, 60 percent of the time, and don't plan for the extremes, you can be in a real hurt when the droughts come."

Instead, he said, the grassland managers who are prepared for drought make proactive rather than reactive decisions, with less stress. "When you can look at your forage inventory, look ahead, and couple it with stocking to match the situation, you can plan for some flexibility to make rational decisions," Voss said. "It's a tougher decision to cull when you're new to drought planning, but those with experience understand what needs to be done in the best interests of their land."

Pastures overgrazed last year most vulnerable

It's the new land Totton has rented for this year that worries him most. "It was severely overgrazed. The people renting it last year left the cows out there into November, chasing that green regrowth," he said. "I'm sure it's not going to have the root reserve to come back this spring unless we get a lot of rain."

"If you grub all the grass down, it's going to freeze hard and the snow won't catch on the land. Your water's all going to run off in the spring when your snow melts," Totton said, noting that dams without water behind them can be a sign of good grass management. "If you've got old dead grass, your ground won't freeze as hard and then the water all soaks in."

Totton credited "mob grazing" with helping him keep the protective grass cover on his ground. "We took a section of land and we cut it in half. We gave 200 cows about four acres a day, and went down through there and mob grazed," he said. "If we just turned the cows out, it would have taken the whole section to summer them. But by making them eat weeds and everything that was growing there, and moving them often, we can almost get by on half as much land. That gives us the other half to dormant graze. Any time you let the roots grow all summer, you're going to have a better chance next year in a drought, because those plants fed their roots all summer and there's something out there to catch snow."

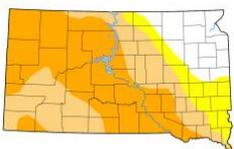
Totton has learned much of his management from associating with the South Dakota Grassland Coalition, attending meetings and grazing schools. "We never quit learning. We try things and then we think we got it figured out and a drought comes along and no, you don't have it figured out, you've still got a lot to learn," he said.

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 7 Drought Monitor Map](#) shows drought creeping across more of South Dakota, with more intensity than a week ago.



Charlie Totton



Rod Voss



Charlie Totton of Chamberlain almost doubles production using mob grazing, with fewer drought worries. He said selling his purebred Angus herd is not an option during droughts.

Contact Charlie Totton at (605) 234-0349

[Link to photos and audio clips from Charlie Totton](#)

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.