



NEWS

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Planning, Experience Is Source of Calm for Rancher, as Drought Persists

MURDO, SD, April 18, 2022 – Brett Nix is concerned, but far from panicked, even as the drought across most of South Dakota shows little evidence of going away any time soon. The Murdo rancher and his wife Lori are very short of moisture—their ranch in central South Dakota falls within the large swath of the state classified as severe drought.

Yet, Nix is remarkably calm, especially considering the likelihood of more dry weather ahead. That calm comes from what he learned as he dealt with drought ten years ago, in 2012, and the changes he’s made since. “We were in more of a panic mode then,” Nix said. “That’s when we got serious about setting up a grazing plan along with a drought plan. We don’t look at them as separate plans—they’re implemented together.”

Before they developed their grazing plan, Nix had different herds of cattle running a month to a month and a half on different pastures. “We tried to manage that to give the grasses time to rest and recover, but having cattle grazing on the whole ranch most of the time didn’t work the best,” Nix said.

“One of the most powerful things you can do on your ranch is to comingle your herds,” Nix said. “It changed everything for us when we grouped them all together. The impactful thing about having all your cattle eating in one spot is that the grass on all the rest of the ranch is resting and recovering.”

Nix, the current chair of the producer-led South Dakota Grassland Coalition, said he uses grazing principles to guide rotations of cattle through pastures. “We don’t want to take a second bite from a plant after it has started to recover. That means our herd isn’t going to be on any piece of land for more than three to five days. We like to change season of use, too.”

Those grazing patterns result in soils and grasses that are more resilient in dry weather, and ready to bounce back after a rain, Nix said, resulting in considerably more production. “I think a lot of ranchers focus on their cattle genetics and kind of put their soil and grass aside. That’s a real mistake that will get you into trouble real quick,” Nix said. “We can have grass without cattle, but we can’t have cattle without grass.”

Compounding effect

Matching livestock numbers to production potential is key to navigating through drought years, said Pete Bauman, a range field specialist with South Dakota State University Extension in Watertown. “We live in a semi-arid state, where drought is normal, but it’s on the harsher side now with two years of drought back-to-back. It’s the compounding effect that’s going to make it really tough this summer—worse than last year—if we don’t get rain.”

Bauman said ranchers who have high-base stocking rates face the most trouble. “The ranchers who understand you can’t run your operation with carrying capacities based on only the good years are set up better to weather the drought,” Bauman said.

Nix started de-stocking almost two years ago. “We could see we were short on moisture going into the summer of 2020. We left our bulls in for only 35 days with cows and 25 days with stockers. That generated sales from open cows and tightened up the calving season. So we sold about 20 percent of our cows in 2020. Last year open cows were first to go, then we sold steer stockers early on. We put bulls in for 30 days on our cows and 20 days on heifers—that generated another 100 head of open cows to sell.”

After marketing the remaining steers in late March of this year, Nix is down to the nucleus of his cow herd, which represents about 50 percent of his normal stocking rate. “We have a lot of regrowth left in our pastures from last fall, and the old grass caught all the little bit of snow we got over the winter. So, we’re hopeful we can get through this year if we get any kind of moisture. If we get no moisture from here on, we’ll start taking off some of our older cows.”

Bauman said he’s not surprised that Nix has sold cattle. “He’s a forward thinker,” Bauman said. Bauman’s best advice to ranchers who know they’ll be short on pasture is to seek trusted advice from nearby ranchers like Nix who are in a better position than they are to deal with the drought. “They’ve got less stress. Ask them what you need to do to get into a better position; learn what they’ve done to be prepared,” Bauman advised. “And take advantage of the grazing schools and other programs of the South Dakota Grassland Coalition and South Dakota Soil Health Coalition to learn how you can make your ranch more resilient.”

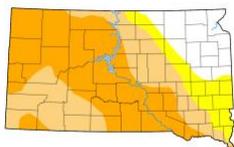
Nix said just having a plan in writing reduces stress. “When you have a drought grazing plan and you have it written down with trigger dates, all you have to do is look at it and it gets your brain rolling—asking yourself what you need to do,” Nix said. “Our motto would be ‘the earlier you start to de-stock, the more grass you’ll have left for the cows you want to keep most.’”

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.



Brett and Lori Nix



Murdo ranchers Brett and Lori Nix have transformed their ranch from cropland to grassland. That switch, along with their written grassland and drought plan, are big reasons for happier, less stressful lives, even during a drought, Brett said.
Photos courtesy of Brett and Lori Nix

Contact Brett Nix at (605) 669-2584

[Link to photos and audio clips from Brett Nix](#)

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.