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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Range 101: Drought Actions 2

Another Successful Bird Tour 2

Keeping the Soil Out of the Sky: 3-4
Jim Kopriva's Conservation Story

2017 Leopold Celebrates Ranching and Conservation 5-6

2017 Happy Cow Tour 7

Grassroots

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Range 101: Drought Actions by Sandy Smart

In the last issue I discussed the elements of drought planning. Flexibility in your herd is the key to a good drought plan. Now that it is conclusive that a large part of South Dakota, North Dakota, and Montana is in a pretty severe drought (see Figure 1), what actions can and should you take to protect pastures from further damage? Some, if not all, of these actions have financial consequences and should be looked over by your tax advisor because of potential revenue or capital gains/loss implications.

We are going on the assumption that flexible livestock (yearlings, contract grazing) have been let go by now, and it is time to turn our attention to the main herd. If you didn't build flexibility into your herd, these next steps are extremely difficult because the livestock cuts need to be pretty deep.

If you plan on selling cull cows early or weaning and selling calves early, this should be tax neutral because you would have done this anyway (just later in the year). July and August is a good time to cull older and open cows because the cull cow price is usually higher compared with traditional cull cow sales in the fall (see Figure 2 and historic cattle prices from Iowa State Extension publication <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/livestock/pdf/b2-12.pdf>). Notice the peak in cull cow prices is in May.

The main thing facing every producer is the lack of pasture resources that needs to be balanced with feed on-hand, purchased feed, or getting rid of some livestock. Early weaning, selling older cows is the first option. The second option is to pull the cattle off pasture and feed the herd in a drylot. Cash flow is the issue. Hay is typically very expensive, but other options like soyhulls, ear corn or shelled corn, distillers grains

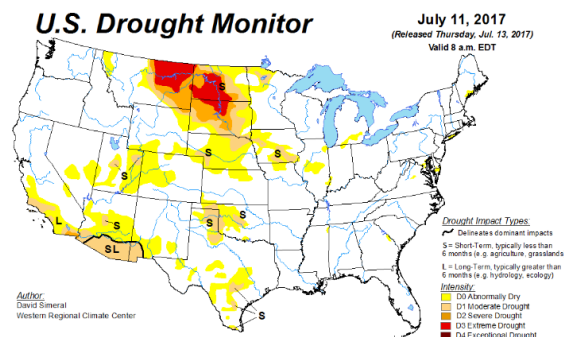


Figure 1. U.S. Drought monitor
<http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/>

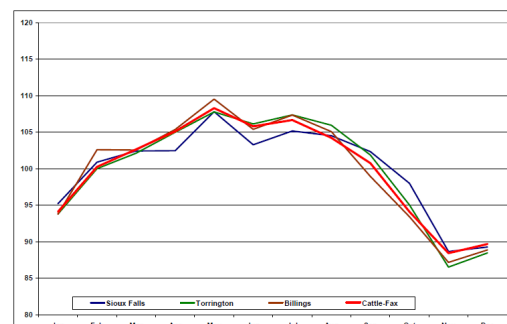


Figure 2. Cull cow price index values from 2005-2009 (Feuz and Hewlett 2012).

Range 101: Drought Actions Continued by Sandy Smart

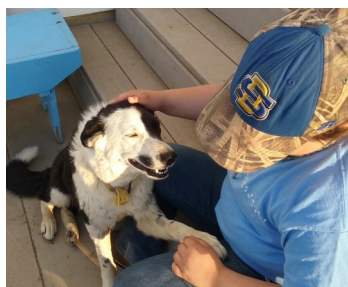
can be mixed with wheat hay, straw and other forages to formulate a cheaper ration. Silage is another good option. Make sure to test all forages for nitrate levels before feeding. The last option is to sell off a large portion of the herd. This might be your only option and if prices go down next year it might be the right thing to do.

The bottom line is to “have a plan” says Brett Nix, newest board member from Murdo, SD. “The plan needs to be written with dates and talked about”. “The earlier you start to destock, the more grass that will be left for the ones you want to keep”, says Brett. Below are ideas from Brett’s drought plan:

1. What will I sell and in what order?
 - What will I sell anyway? Cull cows, fall herd, late calves.
 - What is overvalued? Replacement heifer calves, steers.
 - What is mature? Old cows.
 - What consumes the most resources? Big older cows.
2. What animals do I (should I) want to keep?
 - My undervalued animals- light calves, young cows (thin).
 - What animals can I add value to with the least resources? Smaller, lighter animals.
3. What are my critical dates/dates of conveniences?
 - What can be sorted and sold? Are corrals close? What stage are they in?
4. Can I make an opportunity out of this?
 - Shorten breeding season.
 - Sell hard doing cows.
 - Sell big resource consuming cows.
 - Consolidate herds.

Another Successful Bird Tour by Sandy Smart

The 2017 bird tour was held at Dan Anderson’s ranch south of Lemmon, SD on June 9-10. Thanks to the hard work of the organizing committee and the many volunteers we were able to reach 50 participants with a high quality experience. Despite the heat (103°F) that Friday afternoon we were able to take in some birding on a prairie dog town and saw burrowing owls. We shared the rainfall simulator and people learned about bird banding. All had a great time, even the ranch dog.



Keeping the Soil Out of the Sky: Jim Kopriva's Conservation Story by Kate Rasmussen

Jim Kopriva rolled the cuffs of his denim shirtsleeves back and wiped the sweat from his forehead in the uncharacteristically dry heat for east river South Dakota. "By this time of year we're still usually knee deep in mud when we're sorting off pairs," Jim said as he peered across the dusty corals. His son, Lee, loaded another bunch into the semi trailer. We had been getting pairs ready to haul to fresh pasture—not the work I expected after driving passed an endless grid of crop fields on the way to Kopriva's place. By the time I had arrived at Jim's, I had grown more skeptical with each passing mile of neatly tilled crop fields. What would an east river farmer have to say about preserving grasslands?

My skepticism soon disappeared in an alfalfa field where Jim gave a documentary worthy tour of about three inches of soil. We crouched closer to the ground at the base of a small slope he referred to as "The Mountain" with a sideways grin. Sharing his work with people was clearly something he enjoys. Jim reached down between two alfalfa plants and moved a layer of mulch aside. "Feel that?" The soil felt significantly cooler than I'd expected. "Having a layer of organic matter like this protects the soil from baking in the sun and blowing away when the wind picks up." The jovial expression Jim carried the whole day fell from his face when he told me about the occasional windstorms that pick up exposed soil, loose soil and carrying it down wind. Lee pulled out his phone and showed me a picture (shown below) of one of these dust storms blowing across a neighboring field that had been freshly tilled. "I think we need to produce crops on ground that's already tilled



This picture taken by Lee Kopriva of a windstorm picking up loose soil from a neighboring field. Jim's goal with no-till practices is to keep the topsoil from blowing away and running off.

but there is no combination of events where tillage is the answer", he said as he wiped his hands on his blue jeans and adjusted his glasses (the same frames every range conservation professor I've ever had wears).

"Like anything," Jim said, "there are trade offs. With no till, the cost of production goes down and the micro capillaries that hold water are preserved, but the ground stays cooler. When the ground stays cooler the plants take a little longer to germinate." Germination slows a bit, he explained, but keeping the farm ground out of

Jim Kopriva's Conservation Story Continued on Page 4

Jim Kopriva's Conservation Story Continued by Kate Rasmussen

direct sunlight has allowed the helpful soil organisms thrive, encouraging diversity in the soil. The mulch Jim pointed out was like a miniature forest canopy giving shade to the busy little world beneath it.

Plants and animals do well with diversity. In a place surrounded by uniform fields, Jim has created a place where he and his son “work with mother nature rather than against her.” The Kopriva place sits just east of the James River valley on the West edge of the Coteau hills. He and his wife, Karen, met while studying at SDSU. Shortly after getting married and graduating, the two moved outside of Martin, South Dakota where Jim worked as an Agricultural Management Specialist for the Farmers Home Administration and later for the Black Pipe State Bank. They started a small ranch along the Little White River and had two kids, Lee and Angela. In 1991, the Kopriva's moved back East river and settled on the Clark County farm Karen's family homesteaded in the 1880's. After a few years of planting crops in tilled soil, Jim was ready to explore different approaches to farming. “We do a lot of things differently here—like staying away from tilling the soil and planting some of our cropland back to native grass-- but I think the biggest difference between us and the conventional guys is that we try new things and see what works for us.” Doing things differently in Jim's case has meant preserving the land rather than mining its natural resources.

When I asked Jim why he decided to be a farmer/rancher, he said without hesitation: “the animals.” After sorting and vaccinating that afternoon, we hopped in his 1985 Cab-over and took a load of cows to fresh pasture 18 miles down the road. We pulled through the gate and let the cows and calves pair up together. We watched as the pairs settled into the fresh green grass, clipping their favorite plants and moving on to the next ones. The pasture was one of the last holdouts of grass in the area—the horizon on all sides had been converted to cropland and much of that land has been stripped of the natural diversity essential to preserving it for future generations. “The real enemy is ignorance,” Jim said as he watched the cattle graze. “I feel like I'm doing some actual good by being a part of the South Dakota Grasslands Coalition and helping the land through educating the people taking care of it.”

Kate Rasmussen is a freelance writer and ranch hand based near Belvidere, SD.



Jim in the paddock he planted back to native grasses for hay next to a neighboring conventionally cultivated field (Photo by K. Rasmussen).

2017 Leopold Award Celebrates Ranching and Conservation by Pete Bauman

Since 2010, the South Dakota Grassland Coalition has worked closely with the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association to ensure that the annual South Dakota Leopold Conservation Award is celebrated as a means of advancing conservation on working ag lands, especially excellence in grassland and grazing management. Every year the South Dakota Grassland Coalition and other organizations nominate families deserving of this recognition. While the Coalition's candidate doesn't always win, all of the winners have had a strong connection to grasslands and livestock production that exemplify the core values of the Coalition centered on our mission of 'improving stewardship of grasslands through sustainable and profitable management'.

On April 21, Governor Dugaard announced the Blue Bell Ranch near Clear Lake, SD as the 2017 winner of the Leopold Conservation Award, extending the tradition of working cattle ranches that have been selected for this award. The Blue Bell Ranch is owned and operated by Herb and Beverly Hamann and their two children Arlo and Breck. The Hamanns are the 8th family to receive this prestigious award since its 2010 inception in South Dakota. The Hamann's story is impressive and centers around the balance of operating a working cattle ranch while respecting the integrity of the grassland system so vital to the ranch's diversity, sustainability, and profitability.

The South Dakota Leopold Conservation Award recognizes landowners that are committed to perpetuating a land ethic. The award program is administered by the Sand County Foundation and is sponsored and presented annually by the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association at their annual banquet. The award, which consists of \$10,000 and a Leopold crystal, also includes a video production of the winning operation and a host tour.

The Blue Bell Ranch dates back to the late 1800's, and has been in the Gabriel and Hamann families since the 1950's. During that time, the ranch has been a working cattle ranch and has grown in both land and cattle to its present size under the ownership and direction of Herb and Bev, who value the simple natural integrity of the ranch; a trait they have passed down to the next generation. Herb Hamann was the 1983 winner of the SD Rangeman of the Year Award sponsored by the South Dakota Chapter of the Society For Range Management, and 35 years later the same organization (in partnership with SDSU Extension, the Nature Conservancy, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service) nominated the Hamanns for the 2017 Leopold Award.



One of the many streams running through Blue Bell Ranch (Photo: P. Bauman).

2017 Leopold Conservation Award Continued by Pete Bauman

From the rolling upland prairies to the creeks, fens, and springs found on the ranch, the Hamann's believe that working with natural systems is much more efficient than working against them. To that end, they've made management decisions, such as later calving, to better match their operation with natural cycles. In addition, their approach to implementing conservation is relatively unconscious, given that the right thing to do for profitability is often the right thing to do for ecology as well.

The Hamanns now join a unique group of winners committed to conservation in their agricultural operations. The Hamanns will be hosting a ranch tour in conjunction with the Leopold Award on Tuesday, August 1 at the ranch pasture located approximately 5 miles east of Clear Lake on Hwy 22. Join the family and their partners for the tour as they discuss ranch management, water systems, alternative weed control, partnerships, conservation easements, and other topics. See below for tour details.

2017 Leopold Conservation Award Tour Information

Date: Tuesday, August 1

Directions: From Clear Lake, 5 miles east on Hwy 22 to large tent in pasture

RSVP: Judge Jessop 605-280-0127 or judge.jessop@sdconservation.net

Agenda

9:30am	Registration Coffee & Rolls
10:00am	Welcome, award, & Hamann Presentation
10:30am	The Blue Bell Ranch and the Prairie Coteau – Pete Bauman, SDSU Extension
11:15am	Rainfall Simulator – Stan Boltz, NRCS
12:00pm	Complimentary Lunch
1:00pm	Ranch Tour: grazing management, fens, springs, prairie, native American site
4:00pm	SDSU Ice Cream



Grouse and prairie chickens taking flight on the Blue Bell Ranch (Photo: J. Blastick).

Pete Bauman is an Extension Range Field Specialist in Watertown, SD.



2017 Happy Cow Tour by Garnet Perman

The SD Cattlemen's and SD Grassland Coalition are teaming up to offer Year Two of the Happy Cow Tour on Friday, July 28. This year's tour will include Rick and Linda Rausch's ranch near Onaka and Holsing Farms near Wecota.

Registration is from 8:30-9:30 am at Holsing Farms near Wecota, SD. Holsing Farms is a multi-generational Angus cow/calf operation started by Vic Holsing in 1929. Today it is operated by Kurt and Lori Holt, Gene and Lora Holt and Nick Holt. Kurt started ranching in 1980 and credits his father-in-law, Gene Holsing, and a neighbor for influencing his interest in caring for grass. The Holts utilize cover crops and crop residue for winter grazing. This is the second year they haven't put up hay.

Managed grazing allowed the resident pheasant population to flourish. Kurt and Lori started a pheasant hunting enterprise 22 years ago that includes food, lodging, and guiding. The entire family is involved in one way or another and enjoys renewing friendships with repeat clients every year. Sons Nick and Gene have joined the business in the last 10 years. Kurt's advice for bringing in the next generation is to embrace it and plan for change.

Gene graduated from SDSU and returned to the operation in 2006. An avid reader and researcher, he likes trying new ideas. His goal is to make grass be as competitive with crops as possible. In the last ten years they've gotten more aggressive in their grass management, putting in more fences and subdividing pastures. Cropland has been planted back to grass. Last year they started multi-species grazing, with sheep following the cattle. Learning the dynamics of adding another species has involved some problem solving, but they are pleased with the impact it's had on their grass in such a short time. They are also in the process of developing a custom grazing program with help from their not so distant neighbor and fellow tour host, Rick Rausch. Lunch will be served at Holsing Farms and the tour will then move to the Rick Rausch Family Ranch.

Rausch's start in the cattle business was a by-product of a custom fencing business he started about 30 years ago. "I didn't own an acre," he said, but he'd discover small patches of grass that only needed a fence, rent it and then find cattle to put on it. He's been doing some kind of managed grazing since the mid 1980's. He took over the family farm in 1999. Today, the ranch includes a Hereford cow/calf operation and a custom grazing enterprise. His management includes moving cattle as often as every other day to every two weeks depending on the season. Haying interfered with his fencing business so he learned to get along without haying equipment. Tour attendees will see several phases of development in terms of fencing and grazing plans.

Rausch's experience in leasing pasture from a number of landlords eventually led him to develop a unique grazing contract. He defines his contract grazing program as a service that commits to grazing a defined number of animals for a defined period of time, and includes his services as a manager.

He offers a basic contract that guarantees good grass, good water, good fence and mineral. Anything over and above that such as herd health services are written into a custom grazing plan. He takes bids instead of setting a price. Contracts are awarded to the bidder that offers the best return on his time and labor. Last year 24 people asked for a copy of the contract with 12 cattlemen bidding on his services.

The tour will conclude with SDSU ice cream served at the Rausch Ranch. The tour is free to all SD Cattlemen's and SD Grassland Coalition members.

Garnet Perman is a freelance writer and ranches with her husband, Lyle, near Lowry, SD.



Sandy Smart
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Brookings, SD 57007

Calendar of Events

Event	Date	Location	Contact Person	Phone
Happy Cow Tour	July 28	Wecota	Judge Jessop	605-280-0127
Leopold Conservation Award Tour	Aug 1	Clear Lake	Judge Jessop	605-280-0127
Pasture Walks	Various	Various Locations	Randy Holmquist	605-730-0550
NRCS State Technical Meeting	Sep 7	Huron	Kathy Irving	605-352-1205

Please remit any comments, suggestions, or topics deemed necessary for further review to: Sandy Smart, SDSU Box 2170, Brookings, SD 57007, alexander.smart@sdstate.edu, (605) 688-4017