



Grassroots

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Plan Now or Pay Later 2

Blioux River Ranch Leopold Tour 3

SDGFP Hires New Grassland Ecologist 4

Plan Now or Pay Later Continued 5

SRM Corner - 2024 Rangeland and Soils Days 6-7

Kurt Forman Retires After 30+ Years of Public Service by Chuck Pyle



Kurt Forman, State Coordinator with the South Dakota Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW) which is part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (FWS) voluntary habitat restoration program that provides technical and funding support to private landowners willing to participate in projects that enhance, restore, or protect wildlife habitat retired this past April with over 30 years of public service.

Kurt grew up on a farm in southwest Minnesota and after high school attended South Dakota State University. He received his undergraduate degree while in Brookings and continued to travel west to Montana for graduate school at the University of Montana. He traveled back to South Dakota with his wife Lucy and found a career with the FWS working with private landowners. Throughout

his career with the FWS, Kurt has supported and led the PFW program in South Dakota in developing a community-based conservation network to protect and conserve the state’s remaining wetlands and grasslands. Kurt’s leadership guided the PFW Program in South Dakota to collaborate with private landowners and conservation partners to deliver over 7,000 habitat projects on private land by enhancing or restoring over 1 million acres of uplands and nearly 29,000 acres of wetlands.

Additionally, he was instrumental in providing a combination of biological and sustainable land management conservation strategies while representing the FWS on five national Farm Bill reauthorizations. His leadership and dedication to private landowners, partners, and the FWS make him one of its most trusted and respected employees. His natural ability and willingness to find common ground and share visions with partners and private landowners laid the foundation for successful conservation partnerships across South Dakota.

Kurt notes, “Thank you for the support, friendship, and counsel that each of you provided me over the years as we worked together on a shared vision of conservation. The landscape of South Dakota has changed over the last three decades, however, there continues to be an inspiring team of landowners, partners, and USFWS staff who work tirelessly to help ensure that grasslands and wetlands will always be a valued part of the state’s fabric.”

Kurt and Lucy plan to stay in the community of Brookings, SD, and dedicate more of their time to enjoying the bountiful natural resources of South Dakota. Thanks, Kurt for your conservation legacy!

Plan Now or Pay Later—Planning for Drought: SDGC Webinar

by Dan Rasmussen



Alejandro Carrillo and Jim Faulstich featured on the SDGC Webinar moderated by Clay Conry of Working Cows Podcast.

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition recently sponsored a webinar with guests Alejandro Carrillo and Jim Faulstich. Alejandro ranches in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico and Jim ranches near Highmore, South Dakota.

Clay Conry, of Working Cows Podcast, moderated the webinar. Clay initially asked each rancher how they manage drought on their ranches. Then participants in the webinar followed up with questions for Jim and Alejandro.

Clay asked Alejandro to begin by describing his drought plan:

- Managing for diversity. Alejandro explained he is managing to increase perennial grasses. This is done by moving 600 or more cow/calf pairs in one herd every day.
- Adjusting cow numbers so as to have “more grass than cattle”. During a drought, this is done monthly, always removing the poorest cattle.
- Allowing for 12 to 18 months rest for each pasture.
- Grazing each pasture at a different time the following year.
- Goal of keeping 12 months grass ahead of the cattle.
- Maintaining a cow herd that is adapted to the land and management style.

Alejandro went on to explain there is a delicate balance between helping the land and maintaining cow condition. When moving on a daily basis the cows need to be moved to fresh grass when they are ready. For this to be profitable the cows need to be adapted to the land. Alejandro said, “The cows will tell you when to move. If you do not supplement with protein during the dormant season, you cannot force your cows.”

Plan Now or Pay Later Continued on Page 5

Blioux River Ranch Leopold Tour by Garnet Perman

The Aldo Leopold Award for Conservation has been given in South Dakota for 15 years now. The 2024 recipients are father and son duo Barry and Eli Little of Blioux River Ranch located northwest of Castlewood, SD. Blioux River Ranch is a diverse grain and livestock operation with decades of conservation history that turned into true passion for soil health over the past 10 years.

The father-son duo has taken land that was poorly managed for many years following homesteading and is pursuing an end goal of being a completely regenerative operation not requiring any synthetic fertilizer or pesticides. They have taken advantage of many programs through NRCS, Pheasants Forever, and Ducks Unlimited to help protect land that is in the Big Sioux River watershed. Barry converted many of those acres into permanent pasture with the help of CRP and easement programs starting in the 1990's. Son Eli joined the operation following graduation from SDSU in 2013.

Blioux River Ranch already had a cow/calf operation when Eli returned. Pasture acres were limited and the crop and livestock enterprises were separate. Making the livestock enterprise more profitable was key to bringing in the next generation. Adding a custom cattle feeding enterprise and integrating cattle with their cropping systems was their solution.

They were conscious of soil health before they first heard the term in 2014. Like many other regenerative operations, the Littles had some aha moments that led to a sharpened focus on soil health on both cropland and pastures. The Littles have made a point of attending workshops and conferences. A presentation by Gabe Brown impressed Eli. "I decided to prove him right, not to prove him wrong," Eli said. Barry mentioned Christine Jones' work as an influence. For him, understanding how everything in nature is a cycle helped shift his thinking. "We've always been advised that farming is linear with all kind of inputs, but things work in a cycle," he said.

They added small grains to the crop rotation. They no-till all crops except corn which is strip tilled in spring. After 2018, they focused more on the timing of planting cover crops so they could be used for forage. They started interseeding crops with a hybrid machine Barry designed with the help of a local welder. Grazing cropland has helped cut their fertilizer application to a fraction of what they once used without impacting yields.

They went from just rotating pastures to intensive, high density grazing which has enabled them to increase forage production from a stocking density of 4-5 acres/cow to less than two acres. They utilize regenerated pasture, cover crops and crop aftermath. They started small, initially trying it on one pasture. Cattle are moved once a day into temporary paddocks. "It takes longer to drive to and from pasture than to put up fence," Barry said. Calving moved to May. The late Gerald Frye influenced their cattle raising philosophy. They like black baldies that weigh about 1200 pounds with good mothering ability that do well on grass. Eli purchased his own cattle in 2021, phasing out the custom enterprise.

Eli tracks crop inputs, grazing and crop maps on a computer program. Experience and observation informs cow math when estimating forage. Implementing the first five principles of Soil Health made a positive difference to Blioux River Ranch. The sixth principle, context (figuring out what works best on their operation in their ecosystem) has increased ranch production and enthusiasm for their work.

This year's Leopold tour is August 8 from 9:30- 4:00 CST at 45696 SD HWY 22, Castlewood, SD. Directions to Blioux River Ranch from Kones Korner, Castlewood SD: At the intersection of US HWY 81 and SD HWY 22 East, go two miles East on HWY 22. Blioux River Ranch is on the North side of the road at 457th Avenue. Please RSVP for meal count to Judge Jessop at jljessop@kennebectelephone.com or call/text 605.280.0127.

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

SDGFP Hires New Grassland Ecologist by Sandy Smart



South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks (SDGFP) recently hired Luke Zilverberg as the Grassland Ecologist. Luke grew up in Minnesota but has been a South Dakota resident for 10 years now. He graduated from South Dakota State University with a B.S. degree in Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences in 2017 and an M.S. degree in Biological Sciences in 2019. During grad school, Luke studied alternative grazing strategies to promote heterogeneity in the mixed-grass prairie of South Dakota. He currently lives in Brookings with his wife Jenna and children Mack and Mya.

Before working for SDGFP, Luke worked for Pheasants Forever as a Farm Bill Biologist where he helped landowners enroll in voluntary conservation practices. Following that job with Pheasants Forever, he was hired by SDGFP as the Private Lands Biologist for the Brookings area. Again, he was doing similar work helping landowners enroll in conservation practices. Some of the conservation practices included wetland restorations, grassland restorations, and helping design grazing systems for landowners.

As the Grassland Ecologist, Luke will work across South Dakota on a broad range of habitat types with the majority of his time spent working on grassland ecosystems, rangeland, and grazing systems on both public and private lands. He will work with SDGFP staff, private landowners, other agencies, and NGOs to develop, evaluate, survey, and research grassland ecosystems. Luke will provide recommendations where needed for grassland management, including grazing systems, to promote ecological health and support plants that are rare or are species of greatest conservation need (SGCN). He will also spend time with riparian areas, wetlands, forests, and other habitat types in South Dakota, but his primary focus is on grasslands. He will also be helping with Public outreach, workshops, tours, and educational opportunities to promote and implement both the department and other agency landowner programs that support rare plant species and SGCN.

Luke will also carry out botanist duties that include administrative functions of the South Dakota Natural Heritage Program, primarily the plant portion covering Rare, Threatened, or Endangered species. He will help manage a compilation of the state floristic list for vascular and non-vascular plants, and state ranks for state-monitored plant species and natural communities. He is currently helping with the plant portions of the state's Wildlife Action Plan, scientific collectors permits, and responding to literature requests while serving as the department's plant expert.

Luke brings with him to this position vast knowledge, a strong passion, and an energized personality. Luke will remain working in Brookings from the Outdoor Adventure Center. Please feel free to reach out to Luke with questions related to grasslands or plants!

Plan Now or Pay Later Continued by Dan Rasmussen

Next, Clay asked Jim to explain his Drought Plan:

- Practicing rotational grazing year round. Allowing for adequate recovery for all plants in the pasture.
- Goal is to promote diversity of species in rangeland. Jim manages for a wide range of cool season and warm season perennial grasses and forbs. This diversity provides resistance to drought and healthier soil.
- Pursuing diversity of ranch enterprises: Examples on the Daybreak Ranch include: custom yearlings, cow/calf pairs, hunting (pheasant and deer), and flexible stocking rates. Jim destocks by adjusting number of custom yearlings on the ranch.

Jim explains, “Diverse enterprises need to be complimentary. It all boils down to being profitable.” For example, good grazing planning results in healthy rangeland, which provides abundant habitat for wildlife which opens the door to a hunting enterprise.

A webinar participant asked each of the two ranchers, “How much grass do you leave behind the cows?” Alejandro explains on one day moves with 12 to 18 months rest he plans to take as much grass as the cows will allow. Qualifying this by explaining, it depends on the season. Alejandro then gave his definition of overgrazing: “Overgrazing is leaving the cows in a pasture too long or coming back too soon”. He described coming back to the pasture too soon in a rotational grazing plan as “rotational overgrazing”.

Answering the question: “How much grass do you leave behind the cows”, Jim explains, It depends on the season and the resource. In early summer in their brome grass pastures, Jim likes to take most of the available forage, in mid summer on their predominately warm season pastures, they will leave more grass behind the cows. Both ranchers commented on how they always planned to graze so the land had some regrowth by fall for protection of the soil.

Clay asked both ranchers how they monitor and plan for dry years on their ranch.

Jim began by saying, “I look very hard at the moisture condition in October. This will often tell us what the next year is going to be like. Next, I look at moisture in April. These are Jim’s trigger dates for planning stock numbers and feed for the next year.

Jim warns others to be very careful before deciding to feed through a drought.

Alejandro replied, “We walk each pasture in the fall to determine the amount of dormant forage available until the arrival of the summer rains. Then we cull or add to the herd based on this inventory.” During the growing season, Alejandro, regularly assesses the forage base to help with culling decisions.

Both ranchers summarized by explaining the positive changes they have seen on their ranches since beginning their own unique style of regenerative resource management.

Alejandro and Jim agreed an increase in diversity of rangeland plants led the list of positive improvements to their land. Both ranchers commented on the increase in water infiltration rates on their ranches results in more rainwater staying on their land ultimately extending the “green” season.

To view the recorded webinar, go to: sdgrass.org/drought-planning/

Dan is a third-generation cattle rancher living in south central South Dakota. Dan served as a past board member of the Grassland Coalition and is currently the Grazing School Follow-up Ranch Consulting Coordinator for the Coalition.



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- News from the SD Section of the Society for Range Management 2024 Rangeland and Soils Days by Emily Rohrer

The Codington County Conservation District, along with SDSU Extension, SD NRCS, and the SD Section of the Society for Range Management, hosted the 40th Annual Rangeland Days and 19th Annual Soils Days in Watertown June 12 and 13th. The event was held at the Codington Extension Building and used field sites belonging to the South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks, and Jim Dailey.

Over 120 students from age 8 to 18 attended the event, along with their parents and teachers. The weather barely cooperated, with rain and hail occurring in the morning – just before the students got out to the field. But the sunshine was plentiful and quickly dried out the grasses and soils.

The first day of the event, students that were part of the Rangeland Days event, learned plant identification skills, soils, ecological sites, and how to judge the range for beef and grouse habitat. Students that were part of the Soils Days event, learned all about judging soils and their capabilities – for different land uses and for homesites. After lunch, the ‘littles’ or New Rangers (ages 8-10) returned to the extension building to press plants that they had collected, and do other fun activities. The rest of the students were out in the field for the rest of the day, and returned to the extension building for supper and to listen to talks.

Students from all age groups took part in the Rangeland Days talks portion of the event. Topics varied from robotic grazing machines to holistic management. All the students did a great job informing on various range topics. Some students also put together displays that either complemented their talks, or another topic. A few students put together plant mount displays as well.

The following students took top honors for their talks and displays:

1st Place New Ranger Talk & Display – Harley Heber, Wessington Springs, SD

1st Place New Ranger Plant Mounts – Cora Larson, Langford, SD

1st Place Wrangler Talk – Haven Heber, Wessington Springs, SD

1st Place Wrangler Display – Kyle Gebhart, Meadow, SD

1st Place Wrangler Plant Mounts – Wyatt Lambert, Doland, SD

1st Place Scout Talk – Karlie Kammerer, Piedmont, SD

1st Place Go-Getter Talk – Adrik Schoon, White River, SD

1st Place Go-Getter Display - Johnathon Neuharth, Ft. Pierre, SD

2024 Rangeland and Soils Days Continued on Page 7

2024 Rangeland and Soils Days Continued by Emily Rohrer

The second day of the event was contest day! Students spent the morning judging the range and soils contest sites. While results were being tabulated, Ryan Forbes and Craig Veldkamp from the Brookings NRCS Field Support Office ran the rainfall simulator and wind simulator for all the students to take in. Afterwards, everyone had lunch and listened to the results.

Go-getter teams were divided into two categories: FFA Division and 4-H Division. Soils teams were also divided between FFA and 4-H. Top 4-H teams qualify for the National Land and Range Judging Competition in Oklahoma City the following May. Top judges for each category and division were:

1st Place New Ranger Judging – Mya Koenig, Fairfax, SD

1st Place Wrangler Judging – Jesse Schoon, White River, SD

1st Place Scout Judging – Lidia Dupraz, Aurora, SD

1st Place Go-Getter FFA Individual Judging – Dakota Boersma, Sunshine Bible Academy FFA

1st Place Go-Getter 4-H Individual Judging – Ridge Roduner, Jerauld County 4-H

1st Place Go-Getter FFA Team – Sunshine Bible Academy FFA (Coached by Jason Burma) - Dakota Boersma, Daraby Boersma, Tessa Hinman

1st Place Go-Getter 4-H Team – Jerauld County 4-H (Coached by Wade Christensen & Brady Duxbury) - Ridge Roduner, Hayes Christensen, Robert Hine, Landen Christensen

Soils Judging Results were as follows:

1st Place 4-H Soils individual – Brooks Foss, Corson County 4-H

1st Place FFA Soil Individual – Logan Nielsen, DeSmet FFA

1st Place 4-H Soil Judging Team – Kingsbury County 4-H (coached by Dave VanderWal) - Gavin Temme, Chase Temme, Breyton Johnson

Finally, participants that did all three competitions (talk, display, and judging) were in the running for the “Top Hand” award. The following were the top hand award winners for each age group:

New Ranger – Harley Heber, Wessington Springs

Wrangler – Jesse Schoon, White River, SD

Go-Getter – Adrik Schoon, White River, SD

A full list of results can be found on the SD SRM website: www.sdrangelands.com/judging-results.html

The 41st Annual Rangeland Days and 20th Annual Soils days is tentatively schedule for June 10 & 11, 2024 in Lemmon, SD.



Sandy Smart
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SDSU
Brookings, SD 57007

Calendar of Events

Event	Date	Location	Contact Person	Phone/email
Pasture Walk	July 31	Clear Lake	Joe Blastick	jblastick@tnc.org
Fire Effects Tour	Aug 1	Henry	Pete Bauman	Peter.bauman@sdstate.edu
Leopold Award Tour	Aug 8	Castlewood	Judge Jessop	605-280-0127
Grazing School	Sep 10-12	Chamberlain	Judge Jessop	605-280-0127
Yankton Area	Sep 19	Yankton	Pete Bauman	Peter.bauman@sdstate.edu
Mitchell Area	Sep 26	Mitchell	Pete Bauman	Peter.bauman@sdstate.edu
Regenerate 3-Day School	Nov 19-21	Pierre	SDGC website	www.sdgrass.org

Please remit any comments, suggestions, or topics deemed necessary for further review to: Sandy Smart, SDSU Box 2207D, Brookings, SD 57007, alexander.smart@sdstate.edu, (605) 688-4940

