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Dry Soil Conditions Threaten 2025 Grazing Season

by Kaylee Wheeler and Sandy Smart

Understanding Dry Soil Conditions

Drought conditions across much of South Dakota have persisted from late last summer, through fall and winter with a lack of significant winter precipitation. As soils have thawed in recent weeks and spring is inching closer, the drought conditions have become very apparent. According to the South Dakota Mesonet (<https://climate.sdstate.edu/>), many locations are experiencing very dry soil conditions even down to 40 inches.

Through the latter half of 2024, Lemmon experienced very dry soil (<10% moisture) in the top 8 inches. Even lower depths of 20-40 inches experienced < 20% moisture through the end of that year. Also important to note is the lack of fall precipitation. Looking at 2025 so far, the soil froze down to 50 inches when a cold snap hit in January but began thawing out again in early March. Since thawing, Lemmon is showing 17-20% soil moisture in the top 4 inches, with 9% at a depth of 8 inches, and 17% and 14% moisture at 20 and 40 inch depths, respectively.

Using the South Dakota Mesonet

The [South Dakota Mesonet](https://climate.sdstate.edu/) is a network of automated weather stations with a variety of weather information and tools. If you are interested in looking at soil moisture on the SD Mesonet for a station near you, go to their website (<https://climate.sdstate.edu/>) and click on the tab “Archives” and then click on “Local Data”. Select the nearest station near you in the left pull down menu (highlighted in red), then choose the month or months you are interested in (middle menu), then click the year (right menu), and finally click the Submit button (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Screen shot of the SD Mesonet website to obtain local data.

Dry Soil Conditions Continued by Kaylee Wheeler and Sandy Smart

The Importance of Spring Precipitation

In the northern Great Plains, spring precipitation is extremely influential on the amount of forage produced during the growing season ([Smart et al., 2021](#)). However, temperature and precipitation during the dormant season determines where we start the race for the spring green up. When dormant season precipitation is scarce, combined with warmer temperatures, moisture is quickly depleted from thawed soils.

Currently, we are so far behind on precipitation since the start of the water year (October 1st, 2024), that we would need above average precipitation for the next three months (April, May, and June) in order to get close to normal growing season conditions. Based on historical data from the weather station at Cottonwood, the number of times > 125% of normal precipitation has occurred was 24 times out of 104 years of observation or 23% chance. Thus, we need to keep an eye on the up coming forecast.

Using the Climate Prediction Center

The [Climate Prediction Center](#) is home to short and long-term outlooks on both temperature and precipitation. These prediction maps are regularly updated as new climate information is gathered. Because of how important spring precipitation is to forage growth, particularly because the dormant season has set us so far behind, we recommend viewing the short term and 1-3-month (seasonal) outlooks on both temperature and precipitation.

Looking out at the next several weeks, the outlooks show above normal temperature for South Dakota and equal chances of precipitation. Currently, the chances of receiving above average precipitation for the next three months are slim. Additionally, warmer temperatures continue to deplete soil moisture in the meantime. Although there's nice weather for spring calving, it doesn't bode well for this coming summer.

What are your plans for summer?

Given current soil moisture conditions and weather outlooks, reduced stocking rates are a very real possibility. Due to the lack of dormant season precipitation, it is more important than ever to get adequate spring precipitation. Producers should take time to assess their resources and regularly monitor soil moisture and climate outlooks in preparation for the grazing season.

April 1 is a good [trigger date](#) to investigate the following questions:

- How much precipitation was received during 1) last year's growing season, and 2) since October 1st 2024?
- What are current weather outlooks predicting in the coming days, weeks, and months?
- Are your soils thawed? If so, how much soil moisture exists now?
- What is the current condition of your pastures (how much residual forage, soil cover, etc.)?
- What are your current feed resources?
- Are you prepared to feed livestock longer if grazing is delayed or reduced?
- Do you have a de-stocking / herd flexibility strategy?

Strengthening Grazing Communities: Our Partnership with Powerflex Supply

by Bri Rupp

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition (SDGC) is always looking for ways to support our members, strengthen grazing communities, and advance regenerative agriculture across our state. That's why we're excited to announce our partnership with Powerflex Supply—one of North America's most trusted sources for rotational grazing supplies.

For over 25 years, Powerflex Fence has been at the forefront of providing high-quality fencing and grazing management solutions. Their commitment to regenerative agriculture aligns perfectly with our mission to promote healthy grasslands, regenerative land management, and profitable operations for producers. By working together, we can expand the reach of their product insights, research, and services to better serve our community—no matter where you are in your grazing journey.

Why Powerflex?

Regenerative grazing is more than a method; it's a movement. It's a way to improve soil health, increase forage production, enhance water retention, and create resilient ecosystems while maintaining profitability. Powerflex understands this and provides the tools necessary to make effective grazing management possible. From high-quality polywire and step-in posts to energizers and paddock setup solutions, Powerflex's products help producers implement rotational grazing systems that maximize land efficiency and animal health. More importantly, they share our belief that farmers and ranchers are stewards of the land—committed to sustaining their soil, water, and livestock for future generations. By supporting practices that improve both environmental health and financial outcomes, Powerflex is an ideal partner for the SDGC and our members.

What This Partnership Means for You

This collaboration is about more than just products—it's about community support. When you choose Powerflex, you're not just getting high-quality fencing supplies; you're also supporting the SD Grassland Coalition's initiatives. A portion of every purchase made using our discount code, **SDGC10**, goes back to helping us continue our work in education, advocacy, and producer outreach.

In addition to financial support, our partnership with Powerflex ensures that our members have access to expert guidance on fencing strategies, grazing system design, and product innovations that can enhance their operations. Whether you're just beginning your regenerative grazing journey or looking to refine your existing system, Powerflex and the SDGC are here to help.

How to Take Advantage

We encourage all SDGC members and supporters to take advantage of this opportunity. By using **SDGC10** at checkout when purchasing from Powerflex Supply, you'll receive a **discount on essential fencing supplies** while also contributing to the Coalition's ongoing efforts. It's a win-win for your operation and the broader grazing community.

We're excited to see how this partnership benefits producers across South Dakota. Strong, well-managed grasslands are the foundation of our agricultural future, and with the right tools, knowledge, and support, we can ensure that future remains bright.

To learn more about Powerflex Supply and explore their product offerings, visit their website and don't forget to use **SDGC10** for your discount. Together, we can continue building a thriving, resilient grazing community.



South Dakota Grassland Initiative's Workgroups offer Opportunities to Support the Grasslands for South Dakota by Laura Kahler

South Dakota Grassland Coalition members are invited to support the work of the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative by participating in a workgroup, or by taking action on projects brought forward by the workgroups. Below are a few opportunities you are encouraged to keep consider for ways that you can help support our grasslands, and those who utilize them.

Grasslands Education Workgroup

To ensure that all South Dakotans have an appreciation for the grasslands that surround us, a key step is to make sure that South Dakota youth grow up with an understanding of the plants, life, and importance of our grasslands. The Grasslands Education workgroup realized that a step to help address this is having ready-to-go activities that can be used by producers, youth group leaders, home school groups, and others who have the opportunity to connect with youth. Geared towards elementary and early middle school, these activities are hands-on and include instructor guides so they can easily be led by someone with minimal background knowledge. Currently, four totes with these activities have been funded and can be checked out from Outdoor Campus West, Outdoor Campus East, and the Game, Fish & Parks offices in Watertown and Ft. Pierre. The workgroup hopes to have four more totes available around the state this summer.

Activities in the tote include:

- **Critter Scene Investigations:** *Participants use critical thinking skills and provided resource guides to evaluate clues at up to six recreated critter "crime" scenes.*
- **Tallgrass Printmaking:** *Participants will create a color print of one or more native grass species. By observing, tracing, and then printing the various grass seed heads and anatomy, students will develop skills in recognizing plant physiology and identifying some main tall-grass prairie species.*
- **Web of Grassland Life:** *In this activity, each participant will represent a component of the grassland ecosystem. As the group discusses how plants and animals interact with, and depend on each other, a rope will be passed between participants to develop a web of connectivity.*
- **Grassland Mural Scavenger Hunt:** *Using a large grassland scene poster, students will look for components of a grassland ecosystem, considering the components of habitat, looking for domestic livestock and wildlife, pollinators, and more.*

This workgroup is also recruiting volunteers who would be interested in helping share the grassland message at upcoming youth-education events that are taking place around the state this spring. If you'd have an interest, email laura.grass@sdconservation.net

Connecting Grassland Producers & Programs Workgroup

One area this workgroup is working on is supporting the Dakota Conservation Network at ConserveSD.org. This free site includes a listing of resources for working lands conservation, including contractors who drill wells, build fence, remove trees, provide seeding, consultation, etc. Contractors are encouraged to visit the website and submit the information needed to share their offerings.

The next Quarterly Partner call will take place on April 14th at 1 pm central via Zoom. Visit www.sdgrassinitiative.org/events/ for the Zoom link and information on other grassland events around the state.

The Great Land Swap Part IV: Fair vs. Equal by Garnet Perman



The 6th Perman generation looking to the future at Rock Hills Ranch near Lowry, SD.

One of the many things to consider when estate planning, especially if the family includes multiple children is the fair vs. equal dilemma. In many farm and ranch families, only one child comes back to the farm, while the others make their living elsewhere. Should the estate be divided as equally as possible, or should the on farm heir receive a larger portion so that the farm can continue operation without massive amounts of debt?

Our solution to fair vs. equal is not for everyone as each operation and family has their unique considerations, but maybe our story can kick start a conversation for your family's planning.

First, some background as to what influenced our choices. Lyle spent 30 years as a licensed insurance agent which included selling various financial products. He learned from his clients that good communication and timely planning tended to generate

positive outcomes in terms of family relationships. His dad had a will, but failed to update it to reflect current circumstances. Administering it required some very difficult decisions. My parents owned and operated a farm implement business that my brother and sister-in-law eventually took over, with me being the "off-farm" child.

We have two children, a son, Luke that came back after college and is raising his family on the ranch and a married daughter, Kajsa in Tennessee. Her family loves the ranch, but distance prevents them from being an integral part of the operation. Our estate will be divided fairly, but it won't be equal. I feel strongly that it is not at all fair for one child and his/her spouse to put years of blood, sweat and tears into the family operation and then have to buy shares from a sibling or siblings that didn't contribute anything, especially if a perfectly equal division could possibly jeopardize the continuance of all their parents built. Our children grew up hearing me express that sentiment in relation to my parent's situation, so it isn't a new concept now.

Since we still own most of the land and some cows and equipment, we lease those assets to Luke. He and Lyle put together a written contract every year. Tweaks in the contract over a period of about 10 years eventually turned full management of the ranch over to Luke. He will inherit the lion's share of the land upon our demise. Life insurance policies and other cash assets will go to our daughter. She will inherit some land that isn't essential to the operation of the ranch but has a family connection. Our son-in-law is a financial advisor so although we joke about him being in charge of his wife's inheritance he's been a great resource.

We've also made an effort to help both families as they have needed it rather than make them wait for everything until we die. They can build better over time if we give them a tool or two now.

Our goals are for the ranch to continue as a regenerative family operation and that our children will continue to speak to each other. We have a family meeting with them and their spouses at least every other year with copies of our financial statement and any changes to our will which we update periodically. Long-term care policies, durable power of attorney and end of life decisions are included in the discussion as have funeral and burial arrangements. Sometimes they ask questions about things we hadn't thought of before. At this point, that level of transparency has been a good thing for our family. We feel confident that the ranch will be in good hands and that all of the next two or three generations will be blessed to enjoy this patch of prairie.

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

Early Spring Prep: Setting Up for Success in a Dry Year

by Jenita Derga of Wild Prairie Solutions

As South Dakota ranchers move into the early spring, one thing is clear—this winter has been dry. With limited fall and winter moisture, many are looking to the sky, hoping for a change in the pattern. While spring rains could help offset some of the dryness, the reality is that even with decent moisture in the coming months, pasture recovery may be slow, and forage production could be below average. If the spring remains dry, the challenges will only compound. That's why now is the time to take action, planning for the best-case scenario while preparing for the worst.

Two Steps to Take Today!

Assess Forage and Stocking Plans Now

Waiting until pastures show stress to make stocking decisions is costly. Now is the time to evaluate forage conditions and precipitation history to create a flexible grazing plan that aligns with operational and ecological goals. Consider decreasing pasture size and using short-duration grazing early when grasses grow quickly to extend recovery times on resting pastures. Temporary fencing or combining herds can help, but start where it makes sense—perhaps splitting a ten-day pasture into two smaller rotations. There's no one-size-fits-all approach; the goal is to maximize grazing efficiency while ensuring rest and recovery. If conditions improve, adjustments can be made, but if the dry pattern continues, a solid plan will ease the transition to lighter stocking or early culling.

Secure Grazing Resources Early

Securing additional pasture now can prevent tough decisions later. If spring rains don't come, competition for lease grazing will increase, making it harder to find quality forage. Exploring options such as renting irrigated pasture, setting up grazing partnerships, utilizing forage crops if you have farmland available, or identifying underutilized rangeland can provide flexibility. Additionally, monitoring pasture conditions closely and adjusting stocking rates early will help stretch forage resources and avoid overgrazing. Planning ahead ensures that if conditions worsen, you have grazing options in place rather than scrambling when forage runs short.

The Value of a Grazing Plan

Having a well-thought-out grazing plan in place not only helps manage stocking rates but also provides a clear picture of how quickly pastures are being utilized. By tracking pasture rotation and forage availability, ranchers can see well in advance when they are on pace to run out of feed—before they actually do. This foresight allows for more strategic decision-making, whether that means marketing animals early while prices are strong, securing additional grazing land, or sourcing supplemental feed before demand drives prices higher. A proactive approach ensures that tough choices aren't made in crisis mode, giving ranchers more control over their options as the season unfolds.

A Year for Adaptability

While no one can control the weather, ranchers who prepare now will be in a stronger position to handle whatever this growing season brings. Whether it's a year of careful pasture management following spring rains or a season of tough drought decisions, early planning will pay off. The key to success in 2025 will be adaptability—being ready to pivot based on the conditions as they unfold.



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- News from the SD Section of the Society for Range Management
2025 SRM Annual Meeting, Spokane, WA Feb 9-13 by Sandy Smart

SD Section of SRM had a fine showing at the 2025 SRM Annual Meeting in Spokane, WA Feb 9-13. The SDSU Range Judging Team placed 5th in the URME Contest out of 23 competing colleges/universities. Dr. Krista Ehlert received the Outstanding Young Range Professional Award and Karlie Kammerer received 1st Place in the High School Youth Forum contest. Bart and Shannon Carmichael of Wedge Tent Ranch received the International SRM Excellence in Rangeland Management Award. In addition to the awards, many SDSU scientists, Extension specialists, graduate students, and undergraduates gave talks and poster presentations at the meeting.



SDSU URME Team: Back row from left to right are Zane Barker, Will Werner, Ash Morell, John Sump, Nick Busse, Allison Krull. Front row left to right are: Annie Feden, Alex Medvec, Tyler Geltmacher (URME Coach), SRM Past-President Karen Hickman, Alex Johnson, and Sarah Hayden.



Krista Ehlert and SRM President Jeff Goodwin receiving the 2025 Outstanding Young Range Professional Award.



Karlie Kammerer and SRM Past-President Karen Hickman receiving 1st Place in the High School Youth Forum.



Krista Ehlert with SRM President Jeff Goodwin accepting the SRM International Excellence in Rangeland Management Award on behalf of Wedge Tent Ranch - owned and operated by Bart and Shannon Carmichael



Sandy Smart
Box 2207D, 114 Berg Hall,
SDSU
Brookings, SD 57007

Calendar of Events

Event	Date	Location	Contact Person	Phone/email/website
Prescribed Fire Class	March 20	Yankton	Pete Bauman	Peter.bauman@sdstate.edu
Prescribed Fire Class	March 25	Roscoe	Jay Hermann	Jason.hermann@usda.gov
Prescribed Fire Class	March 26	Mitchell	Cody Grewing	Cody.grewing@audubon.ogr
Prescribed Fire Class	April 8	Lower Brule	Sheldon Fletcher	Sheldoncfletcher@gmail.com
Bird Tour	May 30-31	Chamberlain	Judge Jessop	jljessop@kennebectelephone.com
Young Adult Ranching For Profit Workshop	June 2-5	Faith	Judge Jessop	jljessop@kennebectelephone.com
Wall Grazing School	June 16-18	Wall	Judge Jessop	jljessop@kennebectelephone.com

Please remit any comments, suggestions, or topics deemed necessary for further review to: Sandy Smart, SDSU Box 2207D, 114 Berg Hall, Brookings, SD 57007, alexander.smart@sdstate.edu, (605) 688-4940

