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Recognizing Jim Faulstich for Over 20 Years of Leadership

At the end of 2025, Jim Faulstich closed a remarkable chapter of service on the South Dakota Grassland Coalition board—more than two decades spent helping guide SDGC’s mission, strengthening partnerships, and championing the idea that healthy grasslands and strong ranch businesses go hand in hand.

Jim began serving on the SDGC board in 2000, after experiencing firsthand what thoughtful grassland stewardship could do for an operation—economically, ecologically, and for the long haul. Over the years, he served as Chairman and Vice Chair, bringing steady leadership and a clear, practical vision: conserve working grasslands by helping producers succeed.



Jim and his family’s Daybreak Ranch near Highmore is often described as diverse, resilient, and conservation-forward—but it didn’t start that way. As Jim has shared in interviews over the years, tough conditions pushed him to rethink “the way we’ve always done it.” In the 1980s, he began shifting toward approaches that reduced inputs and matched the land’s natural strengths, including rotational grazing and a stronger focus on plant diversity.

That same mindset—learn, adapt, and share what works—has shaped Jim’s contribution to SDGC from the very beginning. It’s also why his operation has become a place where others come to learn. His ranch has hosted tours and educational outreach for producers, agencies, and leaders, extending the impact well beyond his own fence lines.

Jim’s influence isn’t limited to SDGC. In 2013, he received the National Private Lands Fish and Wildlife Stewardship Award from the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, recognizing his commitment to profitable ranching alongside habitat stewardship.

UPCOMING EVENTS

March 3-4, Mitchell, SD
Grasslands Summit

Feb 6, Zoom
Cedar Trees, Conservation Programs, and
the Role of Private Burn Associations in
South Dakota

Jim Faulstich

His family's conservation work at Daybreak Ranch has also been recognized through major industry honors, including the Society for Range Management (SD Section) "Excellence in Range Management Award" (1998) and the Environmental Stewardship Award for Region VII (2009).

And in May 2024, South Dakota State University awarded Jim an honorary doctorate, one of the university's highest honors—recognizing his integrity, leadership, and decades of commitment to grassland conservation and education.

One of Jim's most significant strengths has been his ability to build bridges—between producers and partners, conservation and profitability, tradition and innovation.

Over the years, Jim helped bring big, lasting efforts to life in South Dakota, including playing an instrumental role in establishing the Leopold Conservation Award in South Dakota, and helping launch major conservation initiatives and partnerships that continue to serve landowners today.

If you've ever heard Jim speak, you've likely heard him frame stewardship in straightforward terms: take care of the resource, and everything else gets healthier—soil, water, wildlife, livestock, and the people managing it. In one featured story, he put it simply: "We changed our priorities to taking care of the natural resources..." and saw the whole system respond—ecologically and economically.

That perspective has mattered inside SDGC board discussions, in producer-to-producer conversations, and in the way SDGC continues to approach education: practical, grounded, and built for real operations.

Jim, thank you for giving SDGC your time, your leadership, and your steady belief in what's possible when people manage grasslands with intention. Thank you for helping shape the Coalition into a trusted voice for grassland conservation and grass-based agriculture, and for modeling what it looks like to lead with humility, curiosity, and long-term commitment.

Your impact will be felt for years—in healthier grasslands, stronger operations, and the next generation of land managers who now have better tools, better networks, and better examples to follow.

Conference Recap

Thanks for your continued support!

This year's Annual Conference was our biggest yet, with 245 attendees, and we are incredibly grateful to everyone who joined us. It was especially encouraging to see so many new faces alongside longtime supporters, and we hope that whether this was your first conference or one of many, you found value in the conversations, connections, and shared learning. Planning is already underway for next year's conference, and we always welcome suggestions for topics and speakers. If you enjoyed the event, we encourage you to spread the word and invite friends and family to join us next year as we continue to grow this community together.

In Memory of Carl Madsen

A steadfast champion of partnerships, prairie habitat, and the people who steward working lands

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition joins many friends and partners across the state in mourning the passing of Carl Madsen.

For SDGC, Carl was more than a supporter—he was a builder. He believed deeply that the best conservation happens when it works for people and the land. Long before “collaborative conservation” became common language, Carl was demonstrating what it looks like in real life: practical, voluntary habitat work carried out through trust, local relationships, and shared purpose.

Carl was an early supporter of the Grassland Coalition and helped provide funding years ago for step-in posts on SDGC grazing demonstration sites—a simple but powerful tool that helped producers see, measure, and discuss grazing outcomes on the ground.

He also left a lasting mark—literally—on one of the most recognizable tools we hand out at our Grazing Schools: the “DO NOT GRAZE” mark on the Grazing Stick. That phrase wasn’t about rules; it was about possibility. Carl said that if we could get everyone to leave four inches of grass, we’d improve habitat for all. It’s a small, memorable benchmark that has helped countless producers connect grazing decisions to wildlife outcomes and long-term grassland health.

Carl’s professional life reflected that same partnership-centered approach. He spent more than three decades with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a wildlife biologist and became known as a pioneering leader in private-lands conservation. Long before “collaborative conservation” became a common phrase, Carl demonstrated what it could look like on the ground: landowner-driven habitat restoration supported through cooperation among agencies, conservation organizations, conservation districts, sportsmen’s groups, and—most importantly—private landowners. Throughout his career, he remained dedicated to waterfowl and the prairie wetland and grassland habitats they depend on, while championing practical solutions that respected both wildlife needs and agricultural livelihoods.

Carl’s impact was widely recognized through major service awards, including the U.S. Department of the Interior Distinguished Service Award, along with other honors acknowledging a lifetime of conservation leadership. Yet those who knew him best remember more than accomplishments—they remember a steady mentor, a trusted partner, and a friend who brought people together around shared goals.

To Carl’s family and all who had the privilege of working with him, **we extend our sincere condolences.** We honor Carl best by continuing to strengthen the partnerships he believed in and by staying committed to conservation that is collaborative, practical, and rooted in respect.



Grasslands: South Dakota's Most Valuable Resource - Join Us at the 2026 Summit

by Laura Kahler

In March 2024, the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative hosted more than 200 people for the inaugural South Dakota Grasslands Summit. This two-day event took a comprehensive look at the status and role of grasslands in South Dakota. Participants heard from more than fifteen speakers and panelists, with a strong emphasis on the economics of grassland conservation. The Summit concluded with partners coming together to help shape the goals and focus of the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative.



Two years later, we are excited to once again convene for the 2026 South Dakota Grasslands Summit, themed Grasslands: South Dakota's Most Valuable Resource. This event will provide an opportunity to reflect on the progress made across the state over the past two years and to continue the conversation about the many ways grasslands contribute to South Dakota's economy, environment, and communities.

We hope you will join us on March 3-4 at the Highland Center in Mitchell, SD. Participants will leave inspired with new information and ideas, with new connections, and renewed excitement for the grasslands in our state.

Similar to the first Summit, the first day will feature a series of succinct and impactful speakers who will explore how grasslands intersect with South Dakotans in a variety of ways, including livestock production, tourism, apiculture, water quality, and cultural connections.



Grasslands: South Dakota's Most Valuable Resource - Join Us at the 2026 Summit Continued...

On Tuesday evening, participants will have two optional activities to choose from during the break between speakers and supper. In recognition of the many videos created in partnership with the South Dakota Grassland Coalition and others, an hour-long film festival will showcase several special filmed moments.

At the same time, individuals involved with local conservation districts are encouraged to attend a dedicated session focused on how the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative can best collaborate with conservation districts to support grassland conservation efforts.

Tuesday evening will also include a robust meal, opportunities to view grassland research posters, time to visit with sponsors, and space to connect with both new and familiar faces.

On Wednesday morning, a coffee hour will provide participants with the chance to engage in one-on-one conversations with the event's speakers at small tables and dive deeper into ideas and discussions. This will be followed by a special panel on grassland restoration, featuring panelists at different stages of their restoration journeys.

Later in the morning, attendees will hear inspiring stories from across the state, followed by facilitated conversations focused on next steps and opportunities for action.

All participants are invited to stay for Wednesday afternoon's Conservation Fund Forum. This session will introduce how conservation funds are structured in neighboring states and provide space for a collective conversation about conservation funding needs in South Dakota.

The South Dakota Grasslands Summit is open to everyone. We hope you will join us by registering at www.sdgrassinitiative.org/summit/. On this page, you can also find a schedule, sponsorship opportunities, and accommodation details. Producers, volunteers, and **those not attending on behalf of an employer** are invited to use the promo code GRASSLANDVOICE to cover the \$75 registration cost. One of the most valuable aspects of the 2024 Grasslands Summit was the diversity of attendees, and we hope you will join us in 2026 and be part of that mosaic.

Welcoming Two New Board Members by Briana Rupp

At this year's Annual Meeting, SDGC members voted to welcome two new board members to the Coalition: Jared Knock of Willow Lake and Ben Juelfs of Wagner. We're grateful for their willingness to serve and excited to have their perspectives helping guide SDGC's work.

JARED KNOCK

Jared brings deep experience as a diversified livestock and crop producer in eastern South Dakota, where he and his wife Kati, along with their family, manage cattle, sheep, hogs, and a range of crops including corn, soybeans, oats, wheat, alfalfa, rye, and grazing cover crops.

In addition to his work on the land, Jared is an entrepreneur and advocate for resilient agriculture. He co-founded Dakota Vision Ag, a local ag services business focused on quality seed, livestock genetics, and improved grazing systems. Jared also has recent work experience with Millborn Seeds and AgSpire. AgSpire a company dedicated to helping producers and agricultural partners advance economic and environmental sustainability through regenerative practices and incentive program support.



Jared's passion for sustainable agriculture extends into education and outreach. He has shared his insights widely—most recently through a TEDx talk in Sioux Falls on circular systems and resource stewardship, as well as a co-host on the podcast Roots and Ruminants. He is also on the board of directors for the South Dakota Cattlemen's Foundation.

BEN JUELFs

Ben brings a fresh producer perspective and hands-on experience in managed grazing and infrastructure improvement from his family's ranch in northwest South Dakota.

Ben along with his wife Lacey, their 3 children, and his dad Greg are all actively involved in the operation. Since he and his wife took over management in 2020, they've focused on strengthening grazing infrastructure—such as water distribution and fencing—and implementing managed grazing systems that support both livestock performance and grassland health. His approach reflects a commitment to thoughtful grazing planning, forage utilization, and adaptive management that benefits the land and the ranching business.

In 2024, Ben shared insights from his operation as part of a producer panel at the Grasslands Summit, where he highlighted the importance of intentional grazing and planning.



We look forward to Ben's contributions to the SDGC board and to the broader grassland community as we work together to advance stewardship and productivity on working landscapes.

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- News from the SD Section of the Society for Range Management

by Kaylee Wheeler

The Society for Range Management (SRM) is an international professional and scientific organization dedicated to the sustainable management and stewardship of rangelands. SRM brings together scientists, ranchers, land managers, students, educators, and policymakers with one shared purpose: to ensure the health and productivity of rangelands worldwide. To learn more, visit the [Society for Range Management](#) website. The 2026 Annual Meeting will be in Monterey, CA from February 7-11. The meeting brings together symposia, talks, posters, and workshops that share practical lessons from those that steward rangeland landscapes, including insights that support biodiversity and sustainable land management.

A key factor for SRM is that it is built upon a grassroots network of local and regional sections, including the South Dakota section. To learn more, visit the [South Dakota Society for Range Management](#) website. Current president of the South Dakota section is [Logan Vandermark](#), SDSU Extension Precision Livestock Field Specialist. South Dakota will be represented well by a multitude of attendees at the national meeting in February 2026.

Adam and Jacquie Roth of Highmore, SD were chosen for the Excellence in Range Management award by the South Dakota section of the Society for Range Management in 2024. They then hosted the 2025 South Dakota meeting for a tour of their operation. Attendees were able to see the success of their restoration and reseeding efforts to bring back a native prairie ecosystem. They will represent South Dakota at the national meeting and compete against many other sections for the national award. Future nominations for outstanding rangeland managers from South Dakota can be submitted [here](#).

Six undergraduate students from South Dakota State University will represent our state at the upcoming national meeting. They will be participating in the Undergraduate Range Management Exam (URME), the Plant Identification Competition, and the Rangeland Cup. Throughout the semester, these students have been working closely with Dr. Krista Ehlert and Dr. Sean Di Stefano (new co-leads of the SDSU Range program) to prepare for the breadth of ecological knowledge, applied problem-solving, and professional teamwork these competitions require. Their commitment has involved weekly practice sessions on complex stocking rate problems, honing their plant ID skills, and thoughtful discussion of real-world rangeland management challenges.

Additionally, two high school students from South Dakota were selected to be delegates for the High School Youth Forum (HSYF) at the national meeting. The HSYF is designed to give students the opportunity to network with rangeland professionals from across the world while introducing them to the mission of SRM. Activities include ecological tours of the local landscape and time spent enhancing leadership and communication skills. The delegates also compete in a presentation competition. Karlie Kammerer, of Piedmont, South Dakota, won first place in the national contest of 2025 for her presentation on holistic ranch management in her family operation. For winning first place, Karlie will return to the national meeting in 2026 to help with the forum and give her presentation to the entire national society membership during general session. Katelyn Gebhart, of Meadow, South Dakota, will be the new 2026 HSYF delegate. Katelyn won first place in the speech competition at the [2025 South Dakota Rangeland and Soil Days](#) youth contest for her presentation on prescribed fire.



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A SPECIAL NOTE TO OUR VALUED MEMBERS

Your support helps keep this work moving forward. The future of South Dakota's grasslands, ranches, and rural communities depends on continued care, collaboration, and commitment—and we're grateful to have you with us on that journey. We welcome your feedback and invite you to reach out anytime—whether you're looking for more information, want to suggest a topic, or just have ideas to share. And as always, we encourage you to stay involved, spread the word, and help others connect with our work.