

## Board of Directors

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## Executive Director's Note

As spring settles across South Dakota, we're seeing the grass green up, livestock move to pasture, and producers once again making daily decisions that shape the future of our land. This time of year always reminds us that grasslands are not just a backdrop to our operations; they are the foundation that supports our ranches, wildlife, water resources, and rural communities.

Over the past several months, the South Dakota Grassland Coalition has stayed busy working alongside producers, partners, and communities across the state. From planning educational events and strengthening partnerships to continuing conversations about the future of grazing and grassland management, we've been encouraged by the growing interest in practical, producer-focused solutions that help operations remain both profitable and resilient.

One of the highlights coming up this summer is our free half-day Grazing Workshop at the Bien Ranch near Veblen on June 3. This event will focus on practical ranch management, grazing strategies,

flexibility in decision-making, and understanding the resources available to producers. Neil and Nate Bien will host a ranch tour and discussion centered around holistic management and adaptive approaches that can help producers navigate changing conditions while improving long-term ranch health. The afternoon will include open discussion time, planning conversations, and demonstrations before transitioning directly into our annual Bird Watching Tour.

Later this summer, we're also looking forward to the Leopold Conservation Award Winner Tour on August 20 at Darling Creek Ranch.



Photo courtesy of Josh Lefers, Audubon

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**June 3, Veblen, SD**  
Grazing Workshop

**June 3-4, Veblen, SD**  
Annual Bird Tour

**June 11, Ree Heights, SD**  
The Good the Bad and the Ugly Weeds Tour

**June 16-18, Wall, SD**  
Wall Grazing School

## Executive Director's Note Continued...

We've been hard at work planning this year's Annual Conference, and we're excited about the direction it's taking. Building on the momentum and strong attendance from last year, this year's conference is shaping up to be an even more engaging event focused on practical decision-making, ranch resilience, adaptability, profitability, and practical grazing & stewardship strategies. Discussions so far have included topics ranging from low-stress livestock handling and drought management to family business dynamics, succession planning, and navigating uncertainty in today's agricultural landscape. Our goal is to create a conference that delivers real-world value for producers while also strengthening connections between families, ranches, and communities. We look forward to sharing more details in the coming months, but we can already say that this year's event is one you won't want to miss.

In addition to our events and educational programming, we've continued participating in broader discussions about conservation and grassland policy. Recently, representatives from SDGC attended a stakeholder meeting hosted through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Conversations centered around the long-term future of grasslands, producer sustainability, and how conservation efforts can better support working ranches and rural economies.

As we head into the busy summer season, we encourage you to stay connected with us through upcoming events, newsletters, and social media. If you know someone who would benefit from attending a workshop or tour, invite them along. Grassland stewardship is strengthened when more people are part of the conversation.

Thank you for your continued support of the South Dakota Grassland Coalition and for the work you do every day to care for our grasslands and rural communities. We look forward to seeing many of you out on the land this summer!

## Does Soil Health Testing on Grazed Rangeland or Pasture have Value?

by Kent Vlieger

It is well established that soil testing on cropland provides nutrient management, agronomic and economic benefits to the farmer. But does pulling soil samples, sending them into a laboratory and getting back a bunch of tests with results in parts per million, percentages and pounds per acre on grazed rangeland or pasture provide value to the rancher? And with all the laboratory tests available, which do you choose?

Before you decide to send soil into a lab, it is best to take a step back and use your most valuable tool...your eyes. Perform a rangeland health assessment or find a rangeland management specialist to assist you. Here is a list of things you can assess on your own with a shovel or with the help of a specialist:

### 2026 Grazing Schools

June 16-18, Wall, SD

Sept 9-11, Chamberlain, SD

Whether you're brand new to grazing management or have been implementing grazing strategies for years, SDGC's Grazing Schools are designed to provide practical, real-world information you can take home and apply to your own operation. This year's schools will take place in Wall and Chamberlain, bringing together producers, speakers, and industry professionals for hands-on learning, discussion, and networking. We also encourage past attendees to come back again — in fact, many graduates tell us the second time through is when everything really starts to click. Returning attendees often leave with a deeper understanding, new perspectives, and practical ideas they may not have noticed the first time around. No matter where you are in your grazing journey, there's always something new to learn. Learn more and register at [South Dakota Grassland Coalition Events Page](#).

## Does Soil Health Testing on Grazed Rangeland or Pasture have Value? Continued...

- **Bare Ground (Soil Cover):** is your soil protected from erosion and exposure to the elements?
- **Compaction:** is there a layer of compacted soil restricting root growth and water movement
- **Surface Aggregate Stability:** is the soil well aggregated to provide structure and pore space?
- **Infiltration:** water infiltration rates will vary depending on soil type, but there are established rates in South Dakota that should be aimed for.
- **Plant Diversity**
- **Plant Recovery**
- **Biotic Crusts**
- **Surface Organic Matter Depletion**
- **Insects and Animals (Biological Diversity)**



After your rangeland health assessment is complete, I prefer to use soil testing on rangeland to establish a baseline then track trend over the years. For example, percent Soil Organic Matter is a common soil lab test and an important indicator of soil health, and under good grassland management, should be slowly increasing or at least maintaining.

Here is a list of laboratory soil tests you may consider on rangeland:

- **Soil Health Analysis:** It provides: Water extractable organic carbon, Water extractable total and organic nitrogen, H3A Phosphorus (organic, inorganic, total), H3A Minerals (aluminum, ammonium, calcium, copper, iron, magnesium, manganese, nitrate, potassium, sodium, sulfur, zinc), Soil Respiration (ppm CO<sub>2</sub>), pH, Organic Matter (LOI %), Excess Lime, Soluble Salts
- **Phospholipid Fatty Acid (PLFA):** Samples from different soil managements are compared to identify changes or continuous, yearly samples of the same areas are tested to help support soil health improvement over time.
- **Aggregate Stability**
- **Water Holding Capacity:** This soil property is tied closely to soil texture and organic matter. It provides WHC (g water/g soil), WHC (inch of water/inch of soil), WHC (inch of water/depth of sample)
- **Permanganate Oxidizable Carbon (POXC):** POXC is a measure of the biologically active carbon fraction of the soil. POXC quickly responds to soil management changes and can provide an early indication of practices that promote stabilization of organic matter.

Soil labs are usually more than willing to help you determine which tests are best for your land use and in understanding your test results.

I encourage you to use your rangeland health assessment and soil testing to support your management decisions and/or validate management changes you have made. For example, if your testing shows a downward trend in soil biological activity, you may consider targeted livestock rotations to promote better manure distribution and nutrient cycling. Here are some resources to help you get started: SD Soil Health Coalition, SD Grassland Coalition, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

# Private Lands Partners Day 2026 | Fergus Falls, Minnesota | September 22-24 by Steve Jester

Partnerscapes, and our co-hosts including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife – Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, are excited to bring the 18<sup>th</sup> annual Private Lands Partners Day to Minnesota. Private Lands Partners Day is the only gathering of its kind, gathering landowners and practitioners that work with landowners together from all over the country to both celebrate public-private partnerships on our national working landscapes and learn how to work more easily together around shared natural resource and agricultural goals.

Partnerscapes is a national landowner-led organization that focuses on the people, partnerships

and relationships critical to voluntary collaborative conservation of natural resources and production systems. Partnerscapes has learned over the last two decades that the challenges and opportunities related to working across perspectives are largely similar no matter where you go in the country. The specific issues, production systems, partners, landscapes and human communities vary broadly, but the basics of working together remain the same.

Minnesota, much like South Dakota, has a broad range of partners and partnerships that are working together around shared natural resource goals, and multi-perspective partnerships are active across all types of landscapes and natural systems. Attendees will only get to see and hear about a few of these partnerships as a part of the two days of field tour and presentations, but it will also be an opportunity to meet and share with landowners and those that work with landowners from across the state, region and country. Folks that continue to get good things done, together on their lands and in their rural communities.

The agenda is still in draft form, but the meeting will feature a full day of field tour in the Fergus Falls area to see where and the work is happening and hear from the landowners and partners who are doing it. The field trip will feature a catered lunch and dinner along the route and will be followed by a day of presentations and discussions from and with landowners and their partners engaged in efforts in Minnesota as well as from other areas of the central states.

We hope you will consider joining us in Fergus Falls. Registration will be open soon and details are found here: [Partnerscapes is a national landowner-led](#). Reports from previous Private Lands Partners Day along with more information about Partnerscapes and our work beyond Private Lands Partners Day can be found here: ([www.partnerscapes.org](http://www.partnerscapes.org)).

For questions about Private Lands Partners Day or Partnerscapes, please reach out directly to us at [info@partnerscapes.org](mailto:info@partnerscapes.org).

Thank you for all you do for your land, your community, your state and by extension for our country every day!



# SD Grasslands Initiative Update

By Laura Kahler

The South Dakota Grasslands Initiative continues to bring together organizations, agencies, producers, educators, and conservation partners from across the state around one shared goal: supporting healthy grasslands, strong rural communities, and working lands for future generations.

This spring, the Initiative hosted its May Quarterly Partner Call, which included updates from organizations and projects happening across South Dakota. Participants heard from the 2026 South Dakota Leopold Conservation Award recipients, Darling Creek Ranch, along with discussions about upcoming grassland events, the traveling International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists display, and the Whooping Crane Chronicles project moving through the region. These quarterly calls are open to anyone interested in grasslands, conservation, agriculture, wildlife, or rural communities, and they continue to serve as a valuable opportunity for people across different sectors to stay connected and informed.

Another major highlight this year was the 2026 South Dakota Grasslands Summit held in Mitchell in March. More than 250 attendees gathered around the theme, “Grasslands: South Dakota’s Most Valuable Resource.” The event featured a wide range of speakers sharing perspectives on the importance of grasslands to South Dakota’s economy, wildlife, water resources, and rural way of life. Participants also had opportunities to discuss future priorities for the Initiative and explore ideas surrounding conservation funding and long-term grassland sustainability.

Several workgroups within the Initiative have been advancing projects throughout the year. The Grasslands Outreach Workgroup is partnering once again with the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture to support the Grassland Triple Crown bike races taking place on National Grasslands this summer. Events are scheduled near Fort Pierre, Lemmon, and Wall, with organizers working to connect participants not only to recreation opportunities, but also to the landscapes and stewardship efforts that make these grasslands unique.



# WALK 250



The Outreach Workgroup is also leading a new “46.9 for the Grasslands” campaign as part of America’s 250th celebration. The project encourages people to spend time enjoying South Dakota grasslands by walking, biking, riding, or exploring a combined 46.9 miles — representing the estimated 46.9 million acres of grasslands that once covered the state.

## SD Grasslands Initiative Update Continued...

Meanwhile, the Education Workgroup continues developing youth-focused resources tied to the South Dakota Grassland Coalition's "Our Amazing Grasslands" video series. New monthly activities included in the 2026 South Dakota Grasslands Planner are designed to help teachers, parents, and youth leaders connect young people with grassland topics through hands-on learning opportunities and discussion prompts. The group is also developing a high school-level curriculum focused on prescribed fire education.

Other workgroups are focusing on broader conservation and producer engagement efforts, including discussions surrounding working lands conservation programs, heritage funding concepts, and producer participation in voluntary conservation programs. There is also growing interest in strengthening partnerships with agricultural lenders and improving awareness of available conservation resources for producers across the state.

The South Dakota Grasslands Initiative continues to demonstrate the value of bringing diverse voices together around a shared vision for the future of South Dakota's grasslands. Whether through education, outreach, producer engagement, or conservation strategy discussions, the Initiative remains focused on practical collaboration that supports both healthy landscapes and healthy communities.

To learn more about the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative or stay informed about future partner calls and opportunities, visit the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative website at [sdgrassinitiative.org](http://sdgrassinitiative.org).



### NATIVE PLANT OF THE MONTH

Click on the image of the flower for a full printable version, courtesy of the SDSU Native Plant Initiative!

The Pasqueflower is a perennial forb 4 to 12 inches tall. Flowering begins in April or May when flower stalks emerge before the leaves expand. Flowers are tulip-like, 1-2 inches long, varying in color from nearly white to pinkish-violet. Leaves are densely silky when young, mostly basal, and dissected into many, narrow, linear divisions.

**Fun Fact:** Dakota gave it special significance as the first flower of spring, believing its song encouraged other plants to awaken from their winter sleep and come up from the heart of the earth.

Source: Grassland Plants of South Dakota and the Northern Great Plains, [SDSU Ext.](http://SDSU.Ext)

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

by Kaylee Wheeler

## South Dakota represented in National Land and Range Judging Contest!

This year marked the 75<sup>th</sup> Annual National Land and Range Judging Contest in El Reno, Oklahoma. 32 states were represented with over 1000 students competing. From South Dakota alone, 84 4-H and FFA students journeyed to Oklahoma to compete. South Dakota SRM provides funding support to enable these teams to travel to the national contest.

South Dakota SRM members Tyler Swan, Sandy Smart, and Kaylee Wheeler in addition to NRCS staff Lance Howe also made the journey to assist with coaching the students. Students, staff, and advisors spent the entire week studying, practicing, and preparing for the contest.

The contest is split into three divisions (Range, Land, and Homesite) and students can compete in either 4-H or FFA. South Dakota was well represented on the national level! On an individual basis, eight students placed in the top 10 in their divisions. Two students were National Champions, and two students were Reserve National Champions. On a team basis, seven teams placed in the top 10 in their divisions. Two were National Championship Teams, and five teams all placed in the top five. Several other teams were close to making the stage.

KOCO 5 News: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6gw5vHDvhs>





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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.