

Board of Directors

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Executive Director's Note

It's been a busy and rewarding season for the South Dakota Grassland Coalition. Over the past several weeks, we've had the opportunity to bring producers, partners, educators, and conservationists together to learn from one another, celebrate our grasslands, and continue building momentum for the work ahead.

Our Grazing Workshop and Annual Bird Tour near Veblen brought together producers, conservation professionals, bird enthusiasts, and partners for two outstanding days of learning and fellowship. We are incredibly grateful to the Bien family for opening their ranch and sharing both their operation and their experiences with everyone in attendance. Their willingness to host these events makes learning practical, relevant, and inspiring.

Events like these also depend on strong partnerships, and we want to extend our sincere appreciation to our partners, presenters, volunteers, and the many individuals who worked behind the scenes to plan this event and keep everything running smoothly.

From educational sessions and field demonstrations to bird identification and logistics, countless people contributed their time and expertise to make these events a success. Thank you to everyone who helped create a fun, memorable experience.

Looking ahead, we're excited that the National Grazing Lands Coalition will soon be visiting South Dakota as part of their summer tour. We're especially proud that one of the featured stops will be at the farm of South Dakota Grassland Coalition Board Member Jeff Zimprich. Jeff and his family have demonstrated a long-standing commitment to thoughtful grazing management and stewardship, and we're honored to showcase the outstanding work being done right here in South Dakota.



Photo courtesy of Josh Lefers, Audubon

UPCOMING EVENTS

Aug 4, Lemmon, SD
Working Lands Workshop: Bale Grazing

Aug 18, Prairie City, SD
Working Lands Workshop: Grazing for Profit,
Production, & Soil Health

Aug 20, Meadow, SD
Leopold Award Winner Tour

Aug 22, Sioux Falls, SD
Prairie Fest 2026

Sept 9-11, Chamberlain, SD
Grazing School

Executive Director's Note Continued...

We're also pleased to share that the South Dakota Grassland Coalition recently awarded three scholarships to young producers to attend the Ranching for Profit School for Young Adults in Buffalo, Wyoming. Investing in the next generation of ranchers is one of the most important things we can do for the future of our grasslands and rural communities. We look forward to hearing about what these scholarship recipients learned and how they'll apply those ideas back home.

As we continue planning for the months ahead, I encourage you to take advantage of the many opportunities to learn, connect, and spend time on the land with us. We have two Working Lands Workshops coming up in August that offer producers the chance to see different operations, ask questions, and share ideas in an informal, hands-on setting. In August, we'll also head to the Leopold Conservation Award Winner Tour to learn from one of South Dakota's outstanding examples of land stewardship. Then, be sure to save December 3–4 for our Annual Conference at The Box Events Center. Planning is well underway, and we're excited to share more about this year's program in the coming months.

We're also thrilled to introduce an entirely new event this summer: **Prairie Fest 2026: A Family Celebration of Dakota Grasslands.**

Prairie Fest is designed to celebrate South Dakota's grasslands in a fun, welcoming atmosphere for people of all ages. It will be an opportunity to bring together ranching families, outdoor enthusiasts, community members, and conservation partners for a day filled with music, local food, fun activities, and opportunities to experience the incredible landscapes and wildlife that make our prairies so special. From people who have spent their whole lives on the prairie to those that are just beginning to appreciate its importance, we hope Prairie Fest becomes a place where people connect, learn, and celebrate the landscapes that sustain all of us. You can read more about Prairie Fest on page 5 or visit <https://prairiefest.wherethingsgrow.org/>.

Thank you for your continued support of the South Dakota Grassland Coalition. Whether you volunteer your time, attend an event, become a member, or simply help share our message with others, you are an important part of this work. Together, we're helping ensure that South Dakota's grasslands remain productive, resilient, and thriving for generations to come.

We look forward to seeing you at an upcoming event!

A Special Invitation

Sept 9-11, Chamberlain, SD

If you're someone who has considered attending a grazing school but haven't quite made the time for it yet, consider this the kick in the pants you needed. Come to the Grazing School in Chamberlain this September 9-11. Of all the feedback we've gotten at the grazing schools over the years, we've never had someone say they wish they wouldn't have come. We have, on the other hand, had many people say, "I wish I had come a long time ago."

If you have attended a grazing school already, this part of the message is for you. It's one thing to come and learn the concepts; it's entirely another thing to put those principles into practice. It takes a lot of time and effort. Whether you're still trying to figure out how to get started or you're working through some challenges, coming back for a second time through the grazing school is a fantastic opportunity for you to gain a deeper understanding of the material and the support you need to get over those hurdles. If you're interested, reach out to us for a special graduate discount.

Before the Drought: Building Resilience Through Grazing Management

by Briana Rupp

Drought planning is a frequent topic of conversation in South Dakota and for good reason: we're always either in a drought or expecting one soon. Planning for drought often brings to mind the decisions that have to be made when rain stops falling - when to sell cattle, when to wean calves, or how to stretch limited forage. But some of the most important drought preparation happens long before conditions turn dry.

How pastures are managed during good and average years heavily influence how well they withstand the dry ones.

One of the most important aspects of preparing your ground for drought is allowing plants adequate time to recover after grazing. Recovery gives plants an opportunity to rebuild leaf area and root reserves before they are grazed again. Repeatedly grazing new growth

before plants have recovered weakens root systems and reduces future forage production - exactly what a ranch can least afford when moisture becomes limited.

Recovery, however, is not simply a set number of days. Temperature, moisture, time of year, and plant growth all affect how quickly a pasture is ready to be grazed again. During periods of rapid growth, recovery may happen relatively quickly. As conditions become hotter and drier, it can take much longer.

A grazing plan helps producers account for those changing conditions rather than relying on the same rotation year after year. By monitoring forage, adjusting grazing periods and recovery times, and matching livestock demand with available forage, producers can make better use of what they have while protecting the plants that will provide future grazing.

Good grazing management helps make better use of the moisture that does fall. Maintaining plant cover and litter protects the soil surface, while healthy plants and root systems support water infiltration and help keep more moisture where plants can use it.

As you well know, none of this makes a ranch drought-proof. When rainfall is limited for long enough, forage production will decline regardless of how well the land is managed. The advantage of building healthier, more resilient pastures is that producers may enter those dry periods with stronger plants, better soil cover, more available forage, and perhaps most importantly, more options. Those options can make a significant difference when conditions begin to change.

The goal of grazing planning isn't to predict exactly what the growing season will bring; it is to build enough flexibility into the system that you have other options when reality doesn't match the plan. And when drought does develop, knowing when to shift from managing for recovery to actively reducing forage demand becomes critical. All this is covered in the [Grazing School](#) and the Grazing School Follow-up Program.

Next in this series: How to build a drought plan with trigger points that help you make those decisions before your options become limited.



Plant Tour Highlights the Incredible Diversity of South Dakota's Native Prairie

by Candice Lockner

"It's squishy!" exclaimed the intern, referring to the feel of the verdant, healthy grassland beneath his feet. More than 50 pink and white plant ID flags dotted the emerald hilltop, fluttering in the strong Dakota wind—pink marking native species and white identifying introduced plants.

The Good, The Bad and The Ugly (Invasive) Plant Tour was held June 11, 2026, in the grazing pastures of Thousand Hills Ranch near Ree Heights. More than 50 lifelong learners from across South Dakota wandered among the flags identifying grasses, flowers, and forbs, marveling at the diversity and beauty of the native prairie ecosystem. County weed and pest employees, Game, Fish and Parks staff, The Nature Conservancy, Audubon, SDSU Extension native plant specialists, ranch interns, agricultural professionals, children, seniors, and ranchers all gathered to learn together.



Photo by Joe Blastick, Nature Conservancy

Participants dug prairie turnip (timpusula/Indian breadroot) tubers and discovered that, even during drought, the soil beneath the dense prairie cover remained moist, airy, and rich—like chocolate cake. They compared the subtle scent differences between fringed sagewort and cudweed sagewort while exploring the remarkable diversity of native plants.

Even experienced range managers were surprised by the abundance of blooming wildflowers, including stiff stem flax, sundrops, yarrow, bracted spiderwort, scarlet globemallow, dwarf false indigo, scarlet gaura, purple coneflower, wild rose, meadow anemone, and many more. Participants also discussed how thoughtful grazing management—including short-duration, high-intensity grazing followed by adequate rest periods—helps maintain the diverse plant communities that healthy grasslands depend on.

Native grasslands are among the world's most endangered and least protected ecosystems, yet they support an incredible web of life. Pollinators, birds, wildlife, livestock, and people all depend on healthy prairie. Participants observed monarch butterflies, soldier beetles, blister beetles, and other beneficial insects while discussing the vital role pollinators play in healthy ecosystems and food production.

The inspiration for the tour began years ago when weed supervisors, conservation organizations, and SDSU Extension recognized the need to help land managers distinguish invasive species from beneficial native plants, reducing unnecessary herbicide applications. Attendees also learned about biological control methods for Canada thistle, including carefully timed grazing, maintaining healthy plant competition, and using beneficial insects. Healthy grasslands also support dung beetles, which naturally recycle nutrients and improve soil health.

The event concluded with a catered lunch, educational materials, and fellowship among participants. Sponsors included the Codington, Grant, and Hand County Weed Supervisors, The Nature Conservancy, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, SDSU Extension, the South Dakota Association of Weed Supervisors, the South Dakota Grassland Coalition, and Ducks Unlimited.

Introducing Prairie Fest: A New Way to Experience South Dakota's Grasslands

By Briana Rupp

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition is excited to announce a brand-new event coming this summer: Prairie Fest 2026, a family-friendly celebration of Dakota grasslands that will take place Saturday, August 22, at Good Earth State Park near Sioux Falls.

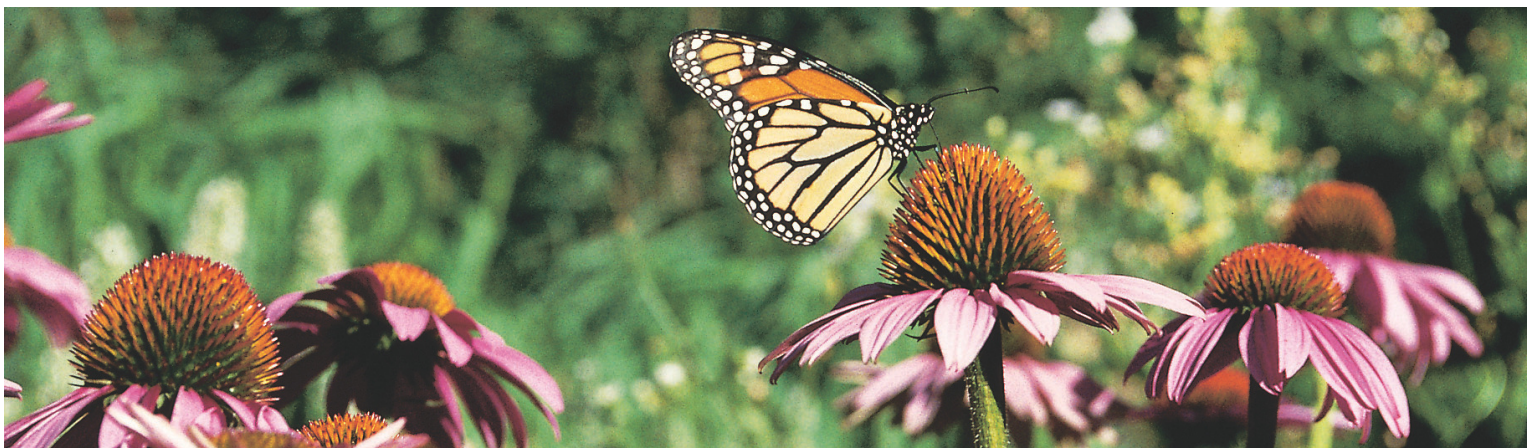
Prairie Fest is unlike anything we've hosted before.

While many of our events focus on producers and land managers, Prairie Fest is designed for everyone. Whether you're a ranching family, a bird enthusiast, an outdoor photographer, a gardener, a teacher, or simply someone who enjoys spending time outside, this event will offer an opportunity to discover the beauty and importance of South Dakota's prairie in a fun, relaxed setting.

Throughout the morning and early afternoon, visitors will have the chance to explore interactive exhibits from conservation organizations and local businesses, enjoy live music, visit with experts, and learn about everything from grassland birds and native plants to wildlife photography and prairie stewardship. Food trucks, family activities, educational displays, and hands-on experiences will make Prairie Fest a great outing for all ages.

Early risers will even have the opportunity to experience the prairie before the festival begins. We'll begin with birding and then move into mist netting and bird banding followed by a guided opportunity to explore Good Earth State Park, offering a unique chance to see the grasslands come alive during one of the most active times of day.

One of the goals of Prairie Fest is to help more people understand that healthy grasslands benefit all of us. They support wildlife, improve water quality, provide grazing for livestock, store carbon, and create beautiful places to recreate and connect with nature. Whether you make your living on the land or simply enjoy South Dakota's outdoors, grasslands play an important role in our quality of life. You can find out more about Prairie Fest at <https://prairiefest.wherethegoodthingsgrow.org/>.



Help Shape the Future of the South Dakota Grassland Coalition

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition is seeking nominations for individuals interested in serving on our Board of Directors. Our board members play an important role in guiding the Coalition's work, strengthening connections across South Dakota, and helping us continue our mission of improving the health of our grasslands through education, partnerships, and practical solutions. If you know someone who would bring valuable experience, ideas, and a commitment to the Coalition's mission, we encourage you to nominate them.

The following board members are up for re-election:

Jeff Zimprich

Larry Wagner

Jori Smiley

Nominations are due September 15 and may be submitted through the contact form at sdgrass.org or to Judge at judge.jessop@sdconservation.net. Please include the nominee's name along with a brief explanation of why you believe they would be a good addition to the Board. All nominations will be considered as part of the Board's process for selecting candidates to appear on the ballot. Please note that nominations must be submitted in advance; nominations from the floor will not be accepted at the annual meeting.



NATIVE PLANT OF THE MONTH

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

Prairie Smoke is a clump-forming perennial forb from thick, black rhizomes. In May and June, drooping reddish-pink flowers appear, often 3 together on each 6- to 12-inch stem. With maturity, flowers become upright with long, spreading, feathery beaks of clustered achenes fancifully resembling a puff of smoke. Leaves are mostly basal, pinnately cleft, and hairy, with the segments lobed or toothed.

Fun Fact: Prairie Smoke is also known as torch flower and oldman's whiskers. Blackfeet boiled plants in water to wash sore or inflamed eyes. They used a root tea to treat canker sores, sore throat, coughs, open wounds, and as a general tonic.

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

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

South Dakota represented in National Land and Range Judging Contest!

by Kaylee Wheeler

South Dakota State University Extension is pleased to announce that 115 youth participated in the 42nd annual Rangeland and 21st annual Soil Days contests on June 9-10, 2026, in Belle Fourche.

A joint effort between SDSU Extension, South Dakota Society for Range Management, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Butte/Lawrence Conservation Districts, Rangeland and Soil Days gave youth an opportunity to compete through displays, presentations, a land and homesite judging contest and a rangeland judging contest.



Youth participate in range judging contest during the 2026 Rangeland and Soil Days on June 9-10 in Belle Fourche. (Photo Courtesy: Mike Beck, NRCS)

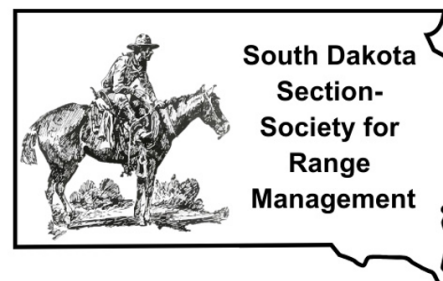
There are four divisions in the rangeland contest: New Rangers (ages 8-10), Wranglers (ages 11-13), Scouts (ages 14-18) and Go-Getters (ages 14-18 4-H or FFA). By participating in this contest, students learn how to identify ecological sites, determine cattle carrying capacity, evaluate prairie grouse habitat, plant identification, and provide management recommendations.

To be eligible for the top hand award, participants must compete in all three contest categories (display, speech, and judging). Winners of the top hand award for each division receive a custom belt buckle. Kale Williams, of Belle Fourche, won the Top Hand Award in the Go-Getter (age 14-18) division of the Rangeland Days contest. Kale has received a traveling trophy that will be his until next year's event. Mya Koenig, of Fairfax, won the Top Hand Award in the Wrangler (age 11-13) division. Ashley Gebhart, of Meadow, won the Top Hand Award in the New Ranger (age 8-10) division.

Additionally, for winning first place in the speech contest, Jesse Schoon, of White River, will represent South Dakota at the International Society for Range Management meeting this coming February 15 – 18, 2027 in Wichita, Kansas. He will participate and compete among other high school students from across the nation in the High School Youth Forum.

The soil contest is for ages 14-18 with the option to compete in 4-H or FFA divisions. By participating in this contest, students learn how to determine soil texture and type, understand soil limiting factors, and provide management recommendations. The homesite evaluation portion helps students determine suitability of the site for building foundations, landscaping, septic systems, and more.

The top Soil Contest 4-H team was Jerauld County 4-H #1 and the second place Soil Contest 4-H team was Spink County 4-H #1. These teams will represent South Dakota at the National Land and Range Judging Contest in 2027 in El Reno, Oklahoma.





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CONTACT US ANY TIME WITH
QUESTIONS OR REQUESTS

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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.