

# *South Dakota Rancher*®

## Management tips for South Dakota livestock and grassland managers

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### **Another Dry Summer?**

This has been a tough winter. Not because of too much snow, but because of too little. When no snow cover is present, temperatures are relatively mild, and ground frost is thin, pastures and hay fields slowly dry out.

Dry winter air wicks moisture out of the ground leaving soil moisture levels at greater deficits than previously thought. With pasture soil profiles running larger moisture deficits, grass yields this year are going to be more dependent on rainfall this spring. So what does this mean to the average producer?

If we don't get good rain this spring when most grass growth develops, pastures could be short all summer long and hay could be scarce come winter. To minimize problems, now is a good time to start planning for both summer and winter feed shortages.

Many ranchers have expanded herds greatly over the past year or two to take advantage of high calf and bred cow/heifer prices. But if feed is short this year, a herd reduction strategy is going to be a must. And the strategy will become even more important if neighboring states experience droughty conditions as the market for culls, pairs, etc. will become saturated quickly. Be prepared to wean calves early, cull heavily, dump yearlings quickly, and retain fewer heifers. All of these actions will save forage for the base herd.

Using a little leftover hay this spring to delay turn-out on drought stressed pastures could be a good strategy to allow pastures to accumulate

some growth before grazing and provide more forage if dry conditions prevent regrowth.

Hay fields could produce lower yields if the rains don't come. Be prepared to have at least some hay lined up early for winter. Waiting until fall to buy winter feed could be an expensive mistake.

Taking advantage of opportunities to plant annual forages like oats, sudangrass, or turnips, if possible can alleviate grazing pressure on permanent pasture and reduce total feed costs.

If arrangements for fall grazing crop residues like cornstalks haven't been made, locking in leases early this year may be necessary as demand for crop residues will likely increase if grass and hay are short.

Hopefully the rain will fall this spring, but if good rains don't come this year, do you have a contingency plan in place? Planning and acting now can save a lot of headaches later in the year.

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