

South Dakota Rancher®

Management tips for South Dakota livestock and grassland managers

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Managing Winter Pastures During Drought

With harvested forages in short supply in some areas of the state, grazing drought-stricken pastures and rangelands this winter is going to be considered by many ranchers in an effort to stretch feed supplies. Grazing during the winter, even during drought, is an excellent way to extend the grazing season and reduce the reliance on harvested forages. However, winter grazing strategies must be adjusted this year to compensate for the lack of moisture in the soil profile.



Photo: E. Mousel

The primary concern associated with winter grazing during severe drought revolves around winter stocking rate. In normal years, winter grazed pastures and rangeland should be stocked at the recommended rate for your area. This stocking rate (SR) also takes into consideration any grazing that occurred during the growing season:

Recommended SR - Summer SR = Winter SR

In drought years, it is recommended to use a more conservative stocking rate, which can be tricky since pastures were likely grazed off during the summer grazing season.

Contrary to popular belief, slicking winter pastures off to the ground, even during winter, is not an advisable management strategy and this becomes even more important during drought.

Plants need some residual material left at the surface for insulation from cold, dry air which will wick any available moisture out of the soil. When vegetation is not well insulated we will see significant winter kill of overused plants species.

Overgrazing winter pastures can also lead to significant erosion problems and lack of effective precipitation. With little residual vegetation left at the soil surface, wind erosion can be a challenge over the winter, especially if snow cover is limited.

Also, runoff from heavy spring rainfall will increase as the amount of residual vegetation cover decreases leading to less moisture from these spring rains actually soaking into the soil for plant use (effective precipitation).

As general rule, plan on leaving at least 50% (by weight) of the total vegetation as residual this winter to protect next years grass crop. Fifty percent may sound like a lot, especially in the face of a potential feed shortage, but that's only about 2 to 3 inches of stubble height on most west river rangeland and 4 to 5 inches on most east river pastures. Before turning cattle out this winter, make sure your pastures weren't already used up this summer.

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