

NEWS RELEASE

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Federal Building, 200 Fourth Street SW, Huron, SD 57350-2475 • (605) 352-1200 • (605) 352-1288 (FAX)

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Stan Boltz, Rangeland Management Specialist, Huron
(605) 352-1200 | stanley.boltz@sd.usda.gov

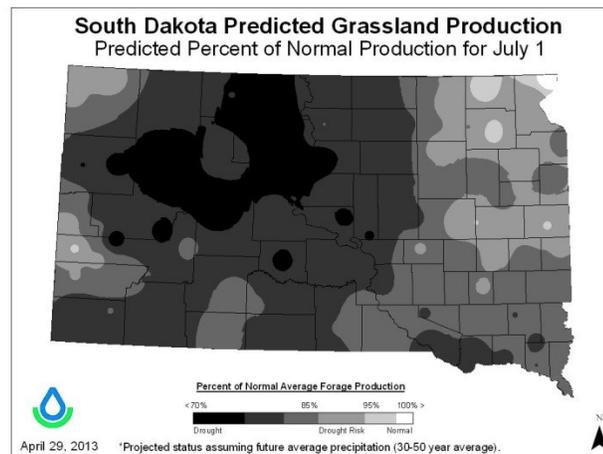
Colette Kessler, Public Affairs Specialist
(605) 224-2476, Ext. 5 | colette.kessler@sd.usda.gov

2013 GRASS PRODUCTION TAKING A HIT

Resource Planning Help Available from NRCS

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS), Huron, SD, May 3, 2013—As the spring progresses, South Dakota producers are being faced with critical decisions that will affect their operations for years to come say officials with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The U.S. Drought Monitor shows some improvement, but drought conditions persist for much of South Dakota. The NRCS rangeland management specialists are urging farmers and ranchers to take a close look at the health of their grassland. “Based on rainfall amounts received last fall, current and predicted precipitation, forage production will be taking a pretty big hit this year,” says Stan Boltz, NRCS State Rangeland Management Specialist, Huron, SD.



CAPTION: The NRCS South Dakota Drought Tool predicts the Percent of Normal Average Forage Production for grasslands in South Dakota. The map shows potential forage production if normal precipitation occurs during May and June 2013.

Forage production on grassland is affected by soil moisture and precipitation timing and amounts. Last year’s drought stressed grassland vegetation. Moisture is important in the fall,

but April, May, and June precipitation is a big factor. “It appears to me that even with the April 2013 snow and rain, right now we are looking at a 60- to 70 percent of normal grassland forage production for much of the state, especially the western half,” says Boltz. “I hate to say it, but what that means for livestock producers is possibly implementing drought contingency options involving significant herd reductions and decreasing stocking rates to avoid damaging pastures further,” he says.

“With last month’s snow storms, it’s hard to think about the soil profile not having enough moisture to sustain a healthy plant community,” says Boltz. “Even if normal rainfall comes the next two months, the grassland resource will produce about a third less forage this year.”

Livestock producers should be reassessing spring growth in their pastures and their stocking rate for the condition of their water and grassland resources. Grazing drought-stressed pastures too soon and with too many animals reduces forage production in the long term because the plants lose their ability to regenerate themselves explains Boltz. “Over grazing also opens the door for less desirable plants to become established.”

On site farm and ranch resource consultations are free of charge from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. “We can help you determine the current condition of your pastures, estimated forage production projected through July 2013 based on your operation’s soils and conditions, and how grasslands will be impacted with various scenarios,” says Boltz. Updated drought contingency planning guidance is also online at http://www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/Range_Pasture.html.

Ensuring a healthy reserve and diversity of forage in their pastures enables better moisture infiltration and retention in the soil profile that benefits operations in the long-term. “We want that rain to go into the soil, not run off,” says Boltz. By evaluating the percent of normal forage expected to be produced, farmers and ranchers can feel better about difficult herd management decisions as they make adjustments to their operation early in the growing season. “No one likes what is happening, and the way 2013 is shaping up, producers should be seriously reviewing the health of their pastures and rethinking their grazing strategies for the year,” says Boltz.

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CAPTION: Plant residue leftover from the previous year protects soil in pastures from erosion and increases organic matter. It also helps keep moisture in the soil profile. Photo

shows overgrazed pasture with little cover left to protect the soil. With summer heat, soil temperatures can rise fast stressing or even killing vegetation. “If you can see bare ground between plants, that’s not good,” says Stan Boltz, Rangeland Management Specialist, NRCS, Huron. Leftover plant matter on the soil surface builds organic matter and soil structure. “Those macro pores in the soil structure are essential—they are what helps water to infiltrate the soil profile,” he says. Photo Source: USDA NRCS South Dakota.

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