

### **South Dakota Ranchers Reeling From Cattle Loss** **News**

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Posted on : 2013/10/14 4:50:00

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) -- Western South Dakota ranchers are reeling from the loss of tens of thousands of cattle from the blizzard, and many will dispose of carcasses in pits set to open Monday.



Rancher Heath Ferguson said the storm killed 96 percent of his herd of 100 black Angus and Limousin cattle, a hit worth about \$250,000. He said total losses topped more than 1,000 head, as six other herds were roaming the family's 16,000 acres east of Sturgis.

Up to 4 feet of snow fell in the Black Hills area last weekend. Reports of 20 or more inches of snow were common, and 21 1/2 inches in Rapid City were a record for both a 24-hour period in October and the entire month. At least two deaths were attributed to the storm, and it took a particularly heavy toll on livestock.

Ferguson said the vast majority of ranchers don't have insurance covering storm-related damage.

"It's cost-prohibitive for a producer," he said Sunday in an interview with The Associated Press. "Unless you're a really big operator, you can't afford to pay for the insurance."

Cattle ranchers dealing with weather-related losses would typically turn to the federal Livestock Indemnity Program, but that farm bill provision has expired and its future is in flux due to congressional gridlock and the continuing federal shutdown.

"We're an independent, pretty self-sufficient bunch, but we need help," Ferguson said.

South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard and U.S. Sen. John Thune did an aerial assessment Thursday of the blizzard damage and livestock losses. State officials said at least 10,000 to 20,000 head of livestock died, but the estimate will likely rise.

The South Dakota Stockgrowers Association estimates that western South Dakota lost at least 5 percent of its cattle, much of which are raised for slaughter. Nearly a third of the state's 3.7 million cattle and calves reside in the western part of the state.

Ranchers who lost cattle will be able to dispose of the carcasses for free at several pits being dug in Pennington County, according to the county's Emergency Operations Center. The county is coordinating the effort because the U.S. Farm Service Agency is closed during the shutdown.

Livestock owners are encouraged to document all animal losses with pictures, vaccination and hauling receipts in case disaster payments are available in the future.

South Dakota Farmers Union president Doug Sombke said that even if the federal government was open and Congress could reach a compromise on a new farm bill, it would take months to implement the Livestock Indemnity Program.

Meanwhile, the Stockgrowers Association, the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association and the South

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Dakota Sheep Growers Association are seeking donations to a relief fund that has been set up to help ranchers, and a couple of Montana groups are asking local farmers to donate cattle and sheep.

Ferguson, who also makes his living by working in the Wyoming coal fields, said he owns his herd, but many struggling ranchers have had to borrow money to stay in business.

"There's an awful lot of producers out here that sold our herds down because of the drought," he said. "A lot of people are into the financial institutions pretty hard."