

### Lack Of Rain Begins Stressing Crops, Pastures

SIoux FALLS (AP) — A week of warm and dry weather has helped field work in South Dakota, but some areas are beginning to notice signs of stress on crops and pastures from lack of rain. The Agriculture Department says in its weekly crop and weather report that livestock conditions improved slightly, even though some pastures are showing signs of stress from decreased moisture. Soybeans setting pods are at 95 percent, behind the previous year of 99 percent. Eighty-seven percent of corn is at or beyond the dough stage, with 26 percent in the dent stage. That's well behind the 5-year average of 39 percent. Small grain harvesting is nearly complete with the exception of barley. Cattle and sheep conditions are mostly in the good to excellent range.

### Authorities ID Lake Drowning Victim

WAUBAY (AP) — Officials have identified a 26-year-old Colorado man who drowned in Enemy Swim Lake in northeast South Dakota's Day County over the weekend. The *Aberdeen American News* reports that Lathan D. Sylvester was wading in the water when he went under. Friends told officials the man couldn't swim. Authorities say Sylvester was a Colorado native and a member of the Navajo Nation. He had been living with friends in Old Agency for about six months. His body was recovered about 8 a.m. Sunday from Enemy Swim Lake near Waubay.

### Hastings Man, 19, Fatally Injured In Crash

HASTINGS, Neb. (AP) — A 19-year-old Hastings man has been fatally injured in a car crash. Hastings television station KHAS says the man was identified as Jared Demuth. Deputies say Demuth was driving alone in his car on Saturday afternoon when it went out of control at an intersection south of Hastings. The car struck a guardrail, left the roadway and landed in a creek. Demuth was pronounced dead later at a hospital. The cause of the crash is being investigated.

### S.D. Transportation Board Has New Member

PIERRE (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard has appointed a Madison man to the state Transportation Commission. Mike McDowell is general manager and CEO of Heartland Consumers Power District. Daugaard says he has extensive business experience and a "level-headed approach." The nine-member Transportation Commission determines South Dakota's road construction priorities and advises the state Transportation Department. McDowell succeeds John Kranz of Mitchell, who resigned in July after six years of service.

## Some South Dakota School Districts Face Opt-Out Urgency

SIoux FALLS (AP) — The increasing number of South Dakota school districts that are opting out of the state property tax freeze to make up for cuts in state aid is putting a burden on some other districts that rely heavily on federal funding. Districts whose local revenue is limited by a federal area such as an Air Force Base or American Indian reservation that isn't taxed can get federal "Impact Aid." However, to qualify for full funding their tax rates must be 95 percent of the state average or the average of similar-size districts. At least 71 of South Dakota's 152 school districts have approved an opt-out for the 2012 tax year, the *Argus Leader* reported. As more districts raise taxes through opt-outs, the state average goes up, and Impact Aid districts must raise their own rates or risk losing their federal dollars. "It's about impossible to maintain the funding without an opt-out," said Maxine Schochenmaier, a consultant for South Dakota

school districts that receive Impact Aid. Voters in the Wagner Community School District will decide Sept. 6 on a 10-year opt-out that would raise taxes by up to \$300,000 per year. Far more money than that is at stake. Superintendent Susan Smit said that without the opt-out, the district would fall below the 95 percent threshold, costing it about \$3 million per year. "Because so many schools in South Dakota have opted out, we no longer qualify," she said. "The federal government isn't going to pay more unless we pay our share." The South Central School District lost \$400,000 last year when its mill levy fell below the minimum required to qualify as a heavily impacted district. Voters approved a 10-year, \$200,000 opt-out this month in response. At Andes Central, a 10-year, \$300,000 opt-out approved this year will protect \$950,000 in annual Impact Aid, Superintendent Darrell Mueller said.

# Changes In Farm Property Taxes Eyed

PIERRE (AP) — Despite a warning from a state tax official, a legislative task force agreed Monday to look at substantial changes in South Dakota's new system for determining the value of agricultural land for property tax purposes. Members of the panel, which includes state lawmakers, local tax assessors and others, said they want to study ways to speed up increases in the taxable value some land and improve the system's fairness so it treats cropland and pasture land in a more equal fashion. The Agricultural Land Assessment Implementation and Oversight Advisory Task Force did not vote on any proposals, but agreed to look at some proposed changes in more detail when it meets again Oct. 11. The panel may submit proposals to the full Legislature, which would have the final say in any changes to tax law. Sen. Larry Rhoden, R-Union Center, said the panel must be careful in what it proposes because other lawmakers will be skeptical that any change might shift the tax burden from agricultural land to urban property. "We're going to be very prudent in how we approach things," said Rhoden, chairman of the task force. Property taxes used to be based on the selling prices of comparable farm land, but that system was scrapped because there were not enough agricultural sales to set a valid market price. Taxable value is now based on income produced by the land. The taxable value of pasture land is based on average cash

rent over an 8-year period. The taxable value of cropland is calculated according to income based on an 8-year average of yield and crop prices. And changes in each county's taxable values are limited to 10 percent a year until 2017, when values are to be set according to whatever the formulas determine. The panel agreed to look at increasing the 10 percent cap so taxable values in some counties could catch up to actual land values more quickly. Another proposal would base the valuation of cropland on cash rent, the same as grassland. Deputy Revenue Secretary David Wiest said something should be done to boost the tax value of cropland more quickly so it is treated fairly compared with grassland. But the Legislature should move slowly in making any changes to the 2-year-old assessment system, he said. "Let's not try to change the rules when we've barely started the game," Wiest said. Colleen Skinner of the state Revenue Department said 46 of South Dakota's 66 counties were able to raise the taxable value of grassland to its full value this year, but the 10 percent limit prevented 14 from making full increases and barred six from making full decreases. For cropland, only Lincoln County was able to set taxable value at its full value according to the productivity formula, Skinner said. The 10 percent cap prevented all other counties from raising the

value of crop land to where it should be, she said. Burton Plueger, an economics professor at South Dakota State University, said the university's annual survey showed the overall value of agricultural land in South Dakota grew 16.5 percent from February 2010 to February this year. The biggest factor in the growth of land prices appears to be escalating prices paid for corn and other

grains, he said. Sen. Jason Frerichs, D-Wilmot, noted that taxable values for farm and ranch land have increased substantially more than those for homes and commercial property in the past year. "Ag is doing our share, doing more than our share, in providing property tax dollars through this process," Frerichs said.

## Neb. Schools Struggling To Enact Math Standards

BY GRANT SCHULTE  
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Test results released Monday showed four out of 10 students failed to meet Nebraska's new math goals, and administrators from a half-dozen districts said improvement would take time as schools are still adjusting to the new requirements. The State Board of Education adopted the new math standards last year, and this was the first year of testing. It was the second year for reading, and test results showed nearly 72 percent of Nebraska students met or exceeded state goals, up from 69 percent the year before. The state has tested writing skills since 2001, and the scores trended upward until last year. The 2011 results showed 89 percent of students were proficient in writing. Nebraska Education Commissioner Roger Breed said the reading and math scores form a benchmark for future measurements. "By and large, school districts take this data and they go to work," Breed said. "That has been the history of Nebraska schools. The writing examination is a clear indication of that over time. But it doesn't turn quickly. It takes time to do the alignment, to retool your curriculum, and to get students into it and through it."

The initial results released Monday could change slightly when the final numbers come out in October, he said. School district officials said it's too soon to talk about trends, and many use separate tests to gauge student learning. Omaha Public Schools test students in September and then follow-up in February to measure their academic growth, said Renae Kehrberg, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and learning. Kehrberg said the timing of both tests give teachers a chance to adjust their methods to help students. Kehrberg said an early review of Omaha's scores suggests the district's move to full-day kindergarten and early childhood education years ago is paying off now with higher reading scores. The Omaha district numbers also could be influenced by the more than 800 English Language Learner students who enrolled last year, a 14 percent increase. The Hastings School District in south-central Nebraska is still weaving the new math standards into its curriculum, said Superintendent Craig Kautz, who oversees a district of 3,600 students.

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