

“These dead cattle will burden people here for a long time. If these ranchers aren’t under enough stress, they now have to dig trenches for livestock they’ve spent years cultivating. I’ve watched good men break down. I feel for these people.”

FRED LAMPHERE

Blizzard Ravages West River Herds

BY JOHN M. GLIONNA
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BELLE FOURCHE — From inside a small plane cruising over cattle country here, Scott Reder spied the carnage and felt sick to his stomach.

Mile after mile, half-buried by snow, the dead animals lay huddled in groups, calves close to their mothers — carcasses by the dozens strung out along field fences and packed into ditches, black hooves poking up through the drifts like macabre stakes.

“In 20 years of flying, I’ve never been sick, but I had to let my friend take over,” Reder recalled. “I looked down and saw 120 of my cattle laying there dead. After I’d finally had enough, I said ‘Let’s go home.’”

Reder is among thousands of ranchers who last week watched helplessly as a killer early-autumn blizzard decimated 80,000 head of cattle. Calling it the state’s worst economic disaster in decades, officials say the storm has ravaged South Dakota’s \$7 billion livestock industry.

On Friday, as rain pelted the region near the historic Black Hills, ranchers continued tallying their grim toll, roaming the soggy backcountry, collecting carcasses from melting snow, knowing that perhaps tens of thousands more still lay buried.

Silvia Christen, executive director of the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association, called the die-off a “perfect storm” of bad weather and — amid the federal shutdown — worse political timing.

The disaster has already caused a “noticeable jump” in the price of live cattle, a rise that could eventually be felt by consumers, she said. “Beef prices will depend on how fast we can get cattle to market again,” Christen said. “If people want to help, go out and buy a steak tonight.”

South Dakota ranks sixth in the country in livestock production, with nearly 4 million head of cattle. Officials say 6,000 ranching operations suffered losses from the storm.

The blizzard hit just days after 80-degree weather, before ranchers had moved their herds from less-protected summer grazing lands. Most ranchers were set to bring calves to market — the satisfying payday after another year of grueling labor. Thousands of head had been recently relocated here from Texas and New Mexico to escape punishing droughts in those states.

“Some ranchers lost all their cattle. They’ve yet to find one alive,” Christen said. “They’re facing absolute destruction.”

Yet Washington’s shutdown has deprived people here of a traditional safety net: Congress hasn’t passed a new farm bill to subsidize agricultural producers, and the lockout means legislators won’t be voting on the topic any time soon.

These days, Reder passes a federal Farm Services Administration office whose doors are closed. Like most American ranchers, the 47-year-old is a resilient small businessman used to tending to his own problems, with help from neighbors whose families settled this land generations ago.

Still, he’s frustrated and feels that federal lawmakers have turned their backs on the nation’s heartland in a time of need.

“We’re just a bunch of ranchers from South Dakota — it’s hard for our voices to be heard,” he said, sitting at the kitchen table at dawn Friday, drinking coffee, fielding calls from fellow cattlemen. “You see crises across the country, the hurricanes and tornadoes, and officials are on right on top of it. But something of this magnitude, that has just about leveled this part of the country, and there’s nothing.”

Many residents in this conservative region had supported the government shutdown as a way to make Washington more fiscally responsible. “But one appropriate role for these guys is to lend a hand after disasters like this,”



South Dakota rancher Scott Reder, who lost 200 head of cattle in a recent blizzard, displays ear tags of his dead animals on Oct. 11.

Christen said, “and they’re not here.”

Reder’s losses are steep. Out of 750 head of cattle he grazed across 40,000 acres, 200 are dead and others are missing. He lost 100 of the 450 calves he had planned to market this month. He says he’s already lost between \$250,000 and \$300,000 and expects the losses will grow.

Many exhausted cattle could die in coming months. Ranchers also face the task and expense of burying their lost herds and are scrambling to beat any warm spell that would spread a reek of decomposition across the range.

“These dead cattle will burden people here for a long time,” said Butte County Sheriff Fred Lamphere. “If these ranchers aren’t under enough stress, they now have to dig trenches for livestock they’ve spent years cultivating. I’ve watched good men break down. I feel for these people.”

Ranchers described how the fluke storm struck Oct. 3, with heavy rain that rapidly turned into flurries. By the next day, as much as four feet of snow, combined with 70 mph winds, doomed cattle and sheep trapped out in summer grazing land known as gumbo fields for their soft sticky soil.

Lamphere, a former ranch hand, said the cattle lacked their warmer winter coats to protect them from wet snow that stuck to bodies already chilled by freezing rain. He said cattle caught in the open field by bad weather instinctively head downwind, their heads low,

as they seek shelter.

“They go into survival mode,” he said. “Some animals walked 12 miles, breaking through fences, crossing highways, until they finally met their end.”

Unable to see, many livestock fell into ditches, quickly covered by trailing animals in a tragic chain reaction. Some animals were so weary they stood frozen in groups, eventually suffocated by piling snow. Cattle collapsed along fences, perishing from hypothermia, others hit by passing cars.

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SCOTT REDER

Last Saturday, snow plows moved scores of dead animals from roadways. “I found two cattle still alive laying in the road,” Lamphere said. “They were just flailing on the pavement, unable to get up.” He finally put them down with his .45-caliber service pistol.

On Sunday, when the blizzard finally quit, Reder and his wife, Angela, rode snowmobiles into isolated country miles from any road, stopping to collect the ear tags on cattle that carried their brand. Locating one animal they had given to their 9-year-old son, Reese, they hugged each other and wept, standing in the field in their snowsuits.

“These aren’t just inanimate objects. I personally know each and every one of these animals,” said Reder, a tall rangy man in a well-worn cowboy hat. “I bottle fed most of them as calves.”

Ranchers here have survived freak weather. In 1996, a spring squall killed numerous livestock, but that time the federal government responded with partial compensation, often paying ranchers a third of an animal’s cost. The last year brought drought, and many ranchers sold off parts of their herds rather than pay for expensive store-bought feed.

The fall blessedly brought rain, turning brown fields to green, and many started to feel good again.

And then, this.

Rancher Steve Schell, who lost half his herd, said he can’t bear the idea of finding more dead animals beneath the melting snow. “I’m just so damned whipped,” he said. “I’m played out.”

The 52-year-old recalled the shock of seeing mountains of dead animals. “I can’t explain what it’s like because, mister, you can’t imagine it until you witness it with your own eyes,” he said. “To see 15 or 20 cattle piled up — the fruits of all your hard labor — you just have no concept.”

The sight, he said, broke his nerve. “I just sat down and bawled,” he said. “Then I got up and threw up. And then I got angry. I don’t what exactly I was angry at.”

He paused. “It hurts just to talk about it,” he said.

Reder feels the rancher’s pain: “For all these animals, that was just a cruel way to die.”



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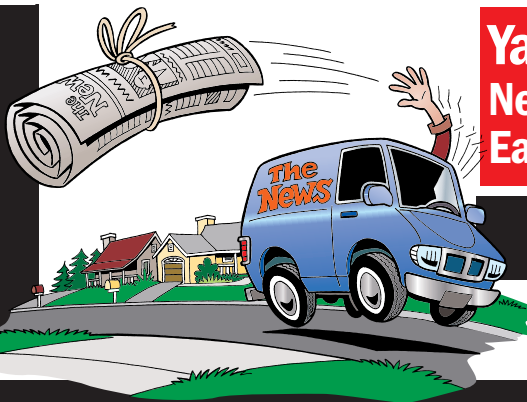
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