

After Disaster

South Dakota ranch families share experiences after the devastating early October blizzard.

Commentary by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

When an early-season blizzard struck the Black Hills region of western South Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming Oct. 4-5, 2013, the aftermath for cattle producers was devastating.

The storm — which started with freezing rain and then turned to 3-4 feet (ft.) of heavy snow and 60 mph winds — killed more than 20,000 head of cattle and other livestock that were out on summer range and lacked the energy reserves and winter hair coat to survive the elements.

For ranch families, picking up the pieces after this disaster has been difficult. Generous donations totaling more than \$3 million have been made to a Rancher Relief Fund, and money and cattle have been donated to the Heifers for South Dakota project. While these contributions are helping address

the losses that were suffered, the question remains: How are ranch families coping with and adjusting to the new “normal” after the storm?

On Dec. 4 — two months to the day after the devastating blizzard dubbed Atlas struck — I was privileged to be invited to a supper where several ranch families wanted to share their experiences, and, more importantly, thank a good Samaritan they view as a hero who helped them through the difficult weeks since the storm.

The five ranch couples included Jeff and Shelane Graham; Terry and Cheryl Hammerstrom and their son and daughter-in-law Clint and Lisa Hammerstrom; and Delbert and GeorgiAnn Cobb and their son and daughter-in-law Clint and Donelle Cobb. All have commercial Angus-based ranch

operations east of Sturgis, S.D., in the remote rangeland along a 50-mile stretch among the tiny towns of Hereford, Red Owl and Alkali.

While the families were familiar with each other as neighbors with adjacent summer pastures, they agreed one silver lining since the storm is that going through this trying time together has forged a friendship among them.

Also joining our group for dinner were the guest of honor, Hime Bourk, and his wife, Betty, who are semi-retired and live near Sturgis, as well as Tanse Herrmann, the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) district conservationist in the Sturgis field office. The ranch families wanted to thank Bourk and Herrmann for the time they devoted to helping them retrieve and properly dispose of their cattle that perished in the storm.



► Gathering to recount their experiences two months after the South Dakota blizzard were Tanse Herrmann, Cheryl and Terry Hammerstrom, Clint and Lisa Hammerstrom, Donelle and Clint Cobb, GeorgiAnn and Delbert Cobb, Betty and Hime Bourk, and Jeff and Shelane Graham.

►**Right:** Hime Bourk (left) helped several South Dakota ranch families retrieve and bury carcasses after the October blizzard, including rancher Jeff Graham.

The group gathered at the Dakotah Steakhouse in Rapid City — which they had selected because of the restaurant's support of the local beef industry and their recent \$21,000 contribution to the Rancher Relief Fund.

As we sat down to dinner, the two-month anniversary date since the storm was mentioned. One of the wives commented, "One month ago we couldn't have done this." The men nodded, the somberness of what they'd been through since Oct. 4 evident in their eyes.

Heartbreaking scene

Throughout the evening, their stories came out in bits and pieces, mostly shared by the wives as their husbands nodded in agreement. I sensed that their healing process had begun, but it will still take time.

The families checked their cattle on Friday morning, Oct. 4, as the heavy snow was accumulating, but with their summer pastures located many miles from ranch headquarters, they recounted, the weather conditions were too bad to move them closer to home.

Although the families don't pasture together, when the wind and snow stopped they found that most of their herds had drifted to Delbert and GeorgiAnn Cobb's pasture. Blinded by the snow, about 1,200 head of cattle perished. Some died in snow drifts and on the flats; others tumbled over steep cliffs and cut banks into Elm Creek, a large tributary to the Belle Fourche River.

To add insult to injury, when the snow melted and Elm Creek flooded on Oct. 11, many of the carcasses were dispersed along a zigzag stretch of the steep-banked creek, which would make the job of retrieving the carcasses even more difficult. Herrmann explained that though it was only a straight-line distance of 4 miles, the switchbacks in the creek made it equivalent to 10 stream miles. The elevation ranged 150 feet from ridge tops to valley bottoms. The soil and pastures were too soft to begin the retrieval



process, so they could do nothing but wait.

Jeff Graham shared, "It's hard for your mess to be on someone else's property."

As the group waited for the ground to firm up, it became apparent they felt overwhelmed by the task ahead of them. Not only did they have a very personal connection to all the animals that died, retrieving the hundreds of carcasses seemed an impossible task because of the steep banks and sheer size of the area.

A hero helps

Somewhat by happenstance, Hime Bourk came to their rescue. Bourk was a client of Cheryl Hammerstrom, who has cut his hair for several years. When he learned the plight of these ranch families, Bourk, who grew up on a ranch near Blunt, S.D., was moved to help.

Bourk has several pieces of large equipment, and in early November he began using chains and cables along with a wheel loader, telehandler, Polaris ranger, ATV, semi and trailer, and pickup and trailer to pull the carcasses from ravines and the creek bottom.

The families also used some of their equipment and even rented a skid steer and backhoe to retrieve and bury the cattle. They buried them in pits on the Cobb's property that Herrmann had designated as environmentally appropriate locations.

It was a difficult job because of the steep creek banks, lack of crossings along the creek, and the new deep silt deposits along the creek bottom, Bourk acknowledged. "It was very hard to get to the cattle."

He spent five weeks retrieving and burying carcasses in more than two dozen pits in a 7-square-mile area (4,700 acres) of the Cobb's

rangeland. Bourk lives about 70 miles round trip from the area and donated his time, fuel and equipment to help the families.

Of his efforts, Bourk humbly said, "I have some equipment. I did this to help people who got hurt real bad. I feel bad for them."

To these families, Bourk became their local hero — doing a job that seemed impossible. Early on, he did some of the carcass retrieval on his own — because it was still too gut-wrenching for the families to face.

"He took charge and took the lead. We needed someone to do that," Jeff Graham admitted.

Cheryl Hammerstrom agreed, noting that once Bourk took the lead on the cleanup, it gave the rest of the group the fortitude to help with the process, as well.

GeorgiAnn Cobb added, "It's like any death, you can't fully grieve until you bury them."

Herrmann, who has known Bourk for a decade, said helping others is simply part of Bourk's characteristically humble nature. He has put up hay for a friend for several years, and prior to helping these families, used his equipment to help another ranch friend collect and bury 300 head that died in the storm.

The group agreed that Bourk's generous example has reinforced the lesson of helping someone — even if you hardly know them.

Bourk noted, "My intention was to help

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them through it. I just hope bankers will help them work through this, as well.”

Lisa Hammerstrom said she views Bourk’s help as “an inspiration,” and, regarding the whole situation, said, “When we buried it, we buried it. We’ve got to move on.”

Moving forward

As these families adjust to the losses they’ve experienced, Cheryl Hammerstrom said, “We are so thankful there was no loss of human life. What dies in the corral or pasture can be replaced, and we need to keep that in perspective.”

In the days and weeks since the storm, these families said the simple heartfelt phone calls, prayers and donations — as well as kind acts like those by Bourk — were all appreciated and have helped their spirits.

Shelane Graham recounted that having her neighbors there helping with the cleanup and burial of the carcasses also made it easier.

“I remember one day GeorgiAnn and Delbert were helping with our mess. They had already buried theirs and they didn’t have to be there,” she said, “but they knew what it felt like, and they were there giving us support.”

Graham said they are also appreciative for the leadership, professionalism and compassion offered by Herrmann with the NRCS office. “He’s been an encouragement,” she said.

The families agreed that faith in God has been integral to getting through the



► After the early October blizzard, large equipment was used to retrieve and bury carcasses in Meade County, S.D. With elevation changing 150 feet from ridge tops to valley bottoms along Elm Creek, the Cobb, Hammerstrom and Graham families were grateful for the equipment and time donated by Hime Bourk. More than 1,200 head were buried in two dozen pits in a 7-square-mile area.

difficulties this storm has caused their families and their livelihoods.

Some of the couples have received heifers donated through the Heifers for South Dakota program. Shelane Graham called them their “herd from heaven.”

Lisa Hammerstrom called the heifers they received “a nice surprise.” She and husband Clint were very humbled by it because, she said, there are so many others who also lost so much.

As the evening drew to a close, GeorgiAnn Cobb came back to the silver lining from this

painful experience, saying, “This brought us together as husbands and wives, as a community, and as neighbors. ... We’re going to be all right.”

She added, “We all have a number in our heads of what we lost, but what Hime Bourk did for us all is priceless. We are blessed to have been brought together, that is more important than money.”



Editor’s Note: Kindra Gordon is a cattlemoan and freelance writer from Whitewood, S.D.

Dealing with emotional stress

Regarding the emotional stress that the storm’s impact has put on South Dakota families and communities, Steve Saiz, a counseling and human development liaison who works with South Dakota State University, encourages producers to take care of themselves and their neighbors.

Ag statistics from farm-crisis events in the past indicate that the suicide rate can increase by four times in a rural community affected by a major event such as the October blizzard.

“The emotional stress can be difficult because to ranchers it’s not just a business, but a way of life,” he says. “It’s very personal.”

Saiz explains that the traumatic, unexpected stress individuals experienced after the storm can make anyone susceptible to depression because stress causes a decrease in the production of serotonin — a chemical in the brain that usually makes us feel good.

If the cycle of stress and depression continues and is not treated, it can result in suicide, Saiz warns. He adds, “Depression is a treatable

disease; suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.”

Saiz encourages producers to help each other. Asking for help can be tough, he acknowledges. “Even soldiers coming back from war say the toughest thing they had to do was ask for help when they came home.”

He points out that when you let someone help you it increases their serotonin levels, and when you help someone, it increases yours.

Symptoms of depression include irritability, pessimism, guilt, self-dislike and loss of energy or fatigue. In South Dakota the 211 helpline is available to connect individuals with available resources, including counselors. The national Suicide Prevention hotline is 1-800-273-8255.

Despite the challenges life presents, Saiz emphasizes, “We need to remember to take care of one another, and remember the saying ‘Tough times never last; tough people do.’”