

Blizzard Lessons

One year later, South Dakota ranchers continue working to rebound from Atlas blizzard.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

After an early-season blizzard hit the Black Hills region of South Dakota during the first week of October 2013, the toll on ranchers was devastating — nearly 43,000 head of livestock, mostly cattle, perished in the storm, which included freezing rain, high winds and several feet of snow.

“I was most concerned with counting the live ones,” says Scenic, S.D., cattle rancher Marvin Jobgen as he reflects upon the days after Winter Storm Atlas altered his livelihood last October.

Jobgen, 55, and his wife, Kathy, graze 350 commercial Angus-based cows and 150 yearlings on summer grass in Badlands country about 40 miles southeast of Rapid City. The family operation was homesteaded in 1906, with that land still part of their operation today. The Jobgen’s daughter Amy and son-in-law Rustin Bertram came back to the operation in January 2013.

Like it did many cattlemen, the unexpected storm hit the Jobgens hard. They lost about 100 cows and 50 calves.

“It’s definitely something that sets you back,” Jobgen says. “I don’t expect to recoup from this in one year’s time.”

Ranchers are resilient, and most, including the Jobgens, are moving forward. Marvin’s “can’t-get-me-down” attitude is evident.

“If you’ve got one cow, you’re still in the business,” he says. He attributes their family’s recovery from the storm to several factors: high cattle prices, disaster aid funds, and having his son-in-law involved in the operation.

Starting to rebuild

With high calf prices last fall, when the Jobgens did sell their weaned calves — even though they were short 50 calves — their income was at about the same level as previous years.

Once they knew that the Farm Bill was on its way and disaster aid would become available, Jobgen also began to restock. He bought 50 bred, broken-mouth cows at a local sale barn in the fall. Then he started looking for some young cows, buying 50 2-year-old heifers with calves at side this past spring near Scottsbluff, Neb.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHY JOBGEN

► **Kathy and Marvin Jobgen, who manage a commercial-Angus herd near Scenic, S.D., are working to rebuild their cow numbers after being hit hard by South Dakota’s October 2013 blizzard.**

He and Kathy note that although they’ve worked at replacing the cattle numbers, it’s hard to replace the quality and genetics that were lost in a herd that had taken more than 30 years to build.

Jobgen says most of his neighbors who had cattle losses are also restocking. Some producers who didn’t lose as many are retaining heifers to build back their herds, as well.

As he gets ready to wean and sell calves this fall, Jobgen remains optimistic, saying, “It’s time for income coming in instead of going out.”

In addition to keeping his own operation on track, Jobgen was one of three producers representing the South Dakota Stockgrowers on the Ranchers Relief Fund distribution committee. The South Dakota Cattlemen’s and South Dakota Sheep Growers also each had three producer representatives. As of July 2014, \$5.4 million was donated and dispersed

to more than 600 ranch families affected by the blizzard. Notably:

- More than 7,500 individuals and organizations from all 50 states contributed to the fund.
- Nearly half of all donations came from South Dakota, and 13% of gifts came from seven western South Dakota counties in the storm region.
- States touching South Dakota provided 29% of donations. Wyoming, Montana and California ranked highest in amount of money donated behind South Dakota.
- The average gift was \$720; the median gift was \$150. The largest gift was \$100,000; the smallest was \$1.

Of the outcome, Silvia Christen, executive director of the South Dakota Stockgrowers, says, “We had no idea what this was going to turn into. To see the amount of money and generosity was unexpected.”

With that said, for Christen, Jobgen and many producers, the support was heart-wrenching. She explains, “I didn’t understand the amount of humility it takes on the part of ranchers and our associations to accept the help that was being offered to try and do some good.”

As part of the disbursement committee, Jobgen says they did not see any producer names, only loss numbers. He calls it one of the “harder jobs I’ve ever done” simply because of the sheer number of livestock losses and producers affected.

Jobgen was also humbled by the donations.

“The amount of money that came in and where it came from was way over my head,” he says. “It sure made a difference. We knew we couldn’t make people whole again, but it helped short-term until people could get refinancing and until the federal government programs were under way.”

“Donations from every state in the country speaks volumes for the support for our industry,” says Jodie Anderson, executive director of the South Dakota Cattlemen’s Association.

Christen adds that the news coverage after the event did allow for building some



bridges to share stories of what ranchers do every day.

“Initially, there were some misperceptions about ranchers and what they do,” she says. “I think telling our stories helped change some minds and create new awareness of what it takes to put steak on a plate.”

Anderson also credits the people in the state working with the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), including Catholic Social Services and Lutheran Social Services, for their role showing compassion to families who needed assistance and for helping with Rancher Relief Fund disbursements.

“That allowed us to maintain producer confidentiality, which is important to those who were affected,” she says.

A long-time member of the S.D. Stockgrowers, Jobgen is also appreciative of all of the industry organizations within the state.

“They went above and beyond to get things done to help producers through this — from informational meetings and dinners to the relief fund,” he says. They deserve our thanks for getting things done.”

Additional numbers

- ▶ USDA reports that \$18 million in disaster assistance funding has been paid directly to producers affected by the blizzard.

Herd management helpers

While no one can fully prepare for any disaster, South Dakota State University Extension specialists offer these management strategies that may help livestock — and producers — through the stress of a catastrophic event.

- ▶ Strive to keep livestock in good body condition, especially going into winter and calving. A body condition score (BCS; 9-point scale) 5 at calving has been shown to produce the best breed-back rates.
- ▶ Have adequate feed on hand and located relatively close to animals.
- ▶ Maintain an annual herd health and vaccination protocol so that animals have strong immune systems.
- ▶ Recognize that animal identification is important. In a storm, cattle can drift for miles. Some form of identification is essential to retrieve live animals or document dead ones.
- ▶ Discuss some type of emergency preparedness planning with your family or employees. Consider different scenarios — a blizzard, drought, a tornado, extreme flooding, even a disease outbreak. Who should be contacted, which animals will be given priority and how/where will you dispose of dead carcasses?
- ▶ After a stressful event, manage feed resumption, keeping it a gradual return to feed and water if possible.
- ▶ Allow for stress levels in cattle to level out by minimizing your movement or working with them, especially consider delaying administering vaccines.
- ▶ Seek help from veterinarians, nutritionists and extension specialists in assessing any nutritional or health needs of the herd.

- ▶ In 2014, 1,118 emergency loans to assist farmers have been issued to South Dakota producers by USDA for a total \$158.7 million.

Specifically, Cammack says, “Federal disaster aid from the livestock indemnity program accelerated the economic recovery of the area by at least a decade.”



Union Center, S.D., rancher Gary Cammack, who also operates the Cammack Ranch Supply, says high cattle prices and disaster-aid funds have certainly helped people bounce back.

Editor's Note: Kindra Gordon is a cattlemaster and field editor from Whitewood, S.D.