

Water Wise

Investment in watering facilities was this South Dakota rancher's best decision.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor



Access to water for the cow herd is one of the biggest challenges ranchers face. In western South Dakota, rancher Monte Reichert says, “We were always out of water, or cows were watering out of a little mud hole.”

► **Left:** Monte and Loni Reichert ranch in western South Dakota. Investing in watering tanks and pipelines has allowed for better grassland management.

Reichert manages commercial-Angus cow-calf pairs and yearlings, with the number of head varying depending on the year's forage conditions.

He ranches in the rugged rangelands north of New Underwood, S.D., on land homesteaded by his great-grandfather in 1909. The rolling hills of prairie make it a scenic setting, but with drought more common than not in this region, through the generations there has always been one constant challenge — lack of water.

So in 2000, when an abandoned missile control center that bordered Reichert's property came up for sale, he bought it for the 2,980-foot (ft.) well and the “reliable water source” that came with it. He calls it one of the best decisions he's ever made to improve the grazing system on the ranch operated with wife Loni and 12-year-old son Radley. Daughters Lacey and Marissa and son-in-law Jake Duprel live 50 miles away in Rapid City and assist on the ranch when they can.

The Reicherts' home ranch includes about 2,000 acres of native rangeland and 860 acres of hayland, and Monte leases additional acres from a long-time neighbor who “has similar conservation and range management goals.” Working with conservation programs through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) during the past 14 years, they've installed 33,660 ft. of pipeline and 13 livestock/wildlife watering tanks.

With the watering locations in place, 2,583 ft. of cross-fencing has been installed to help subdivide large pastures and further enhance grazing distribution of their cattle.

Reichert says, “Each pasture now has water.” As a result, they can better manage their range because the constant supply of water for the cattle allows them to move on and off of pastures whenever the forage needs to be grazed or rested.

“Before we could only move to certain pastures when water was available in stock ponds,” Reichert explains.

Water development tips

For Reichert's extensive pasture watering system to work, the well water is pumped to a storage tank on a high point and then the water is gravity-fed from the



► During a ranch tour, Monte (center) talks about the Cobett waterer that he uses in his winter pasture. They are designed not to freeze.

storage tank to the massive pasture pipeline system.

Reichert credits NRCS with assisting to design both the pipeline and cross-fencing plan. He also received cost-share funds for the projects through enrollment in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offered through the Farm Bill.

Like many ranchers, Reichert has used the large tire watering tanks. He says they work well in summer, but he did make some modifications to help winterize the tanks he uses in winter pastures. Specifically, Reichert dug down 8 ft. below the tank and installed 14-inch (in.) pipe to act as heat tubes that bring up the ground heat to keep the float from freezing. He also built a wood lid with drink holes in it and insulation on the bottom side of the wood to minimize the tank from freezing over.

In fall 2014, Reichert installed two Cobett automatic waterers in two of his winter pastures. The units are placed into the ground and also use ground heat to prevent the waterer from freezing.

Reichert reports that he has been extremely happy with these waterers and is interested in installing more in his other winter pastures.

“If we have sub-zero temperatures with some wind, the top layer may have a thin sheet of ice on it, but it’s easy to break open,” he notes.

Though the Cobett waterers are small and only allow two or three head to drink at a time, Reichert says it has worked well in a pasture with 52 head watering from one unit.



► Reichert’s tire tank has an insulated cover he made to prevent it from freezing over.

Additionally, he says it could easily handle watering more cattle.

For the future, Reichert says he will continue to fine-tune his watering system and keep rotationally grazing his pastures. Reichert also utilizes yearly monitoring to determine forage condition. With grazing conditions different every summer, he says there’s no exact science to their methods.

The Reicherts have planted several hundred trees and built seven man-made

V-windbreaks from steel for livestock and wildlife protection and will continue that effort.



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

Constructing a creek crossing

A shallow creek in one of South Dakota rancher Monte Reichert’s pastures always posed a nuisance to cross with a pickup or tractor, so Reichert worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to install a rock crossing — and got some surprising results.

They quickly learned that the cattle preferred to use the crossing to get across the creek as well, which helped with grazing distribution and minimized mud and disturbance of the riparian area.

Within a couple of years, the creek banks showed visible signs of healing with more grass growing on them and fewer erosion areas, which is allowing for improved infiltration during rainfall and runoff events.

To install the crossing, 2 feet (ft.) of soil was dug out and a fabric liner was put down. Jagged, 8- to 10-inch (in.) rock was then put on top of the liner, and the crossing was packed and built back up to the water line. On top of that, 3-in. rock was deposited to make the crossing easier to drive across or walk across by the cattle.



► A rock crossing along a creek has been valuable to the Reicherts to get their vehicles across, as well as providing a dry crossing used by the cattle, thus enhancing the riparian area.