



Custer County Conservation District was established in 1940.

Special points of interest:

- Drought and cost-share assistance

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CUSTER COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT NEWSLETTER

Wind and Drought and Fires, Oh My!

This past winter and spring will not be soon forgotten by residents in Custer County. The atypical weather patterns brought a combination of record-setting winds, an unprecedented warm winter, drought, and an early start to wildfire activity.

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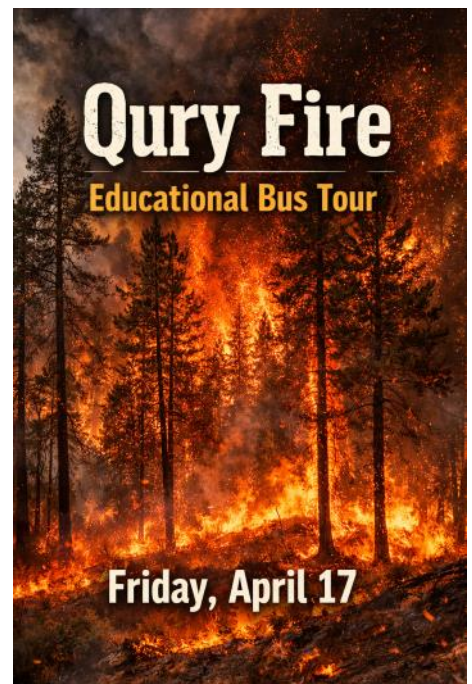
(Left) Soil drifting along a fence line after the 79 Fire. **Trees blown down in Custer State Park during the December 2025 wind storm (above, top photo). Grey Rocks Fire burning near the County airport (above, lower photo).**

District Sponsors Qury Fire Bus Tour

On April 17, the District hosted a free bus tour of areas impacted by the Qury Fire, offering community members a firsthand look at wildfire effects and the importance of proactive mitigation.

Local fire professionals highlighted how Firewise and other mitigation actions taken before the fire help to protect homes and structures when wildfires occur. Professionals from South Dakota Wildland Fire and

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Bus Tour continued

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the U.S. Forest Service provided information on fire ecology and steps landowners can take to reduce wildfire risks.

The tour included two stops, including one at a property, where the fire initially started after a tree fell onto a power line. This stop offered a powerful example of how quickly wildfire can ignite and spread, as well as how defensible space and advance planning can save homes.

The District extends a sincere thank you to the Custer YMCA for graciously providing their bus for transportation, to our speakers (Lane Ostenson, Justin Virtue, James Bachelor), and to the landowners that granted access to their properties. Their generosity helped to make this educational opportunity accessible to the public.

Scenes from the Qury Fire bus tour. The upper right photo includes the site of the initial fire.



Wind, Drought, Fires continued

(Continued from page 1)

Signs of an unusual winter/spring began back in December when the region experienced one of the strongest wind events on record. The December 18 windstorm brought record high winds to much of the Black Hills. According to the National Weather Service, downtown Rapid City witnessed wind speeds reach 101 mph, west Fairburn had winds up to 95 mph, while Custer experienced wind speeds as high as 75 mph. The storm caused wide-spread damage—many residents are still recovering from.

Alongside the powerful winds, the region also endured an unusually warm winter. The winter of 2025-26 was the warmest on record in the Black Hills since observations were officially recorded in the late 1800s. In addition to warmer temperatures, below normal precipitation contributed directly to worsening drought conditions across the area. Soils dried out early, vegetation became increasingly vulnerable, and water concerns began to grow as spring approached.

These factors combined to set the stage for an early and

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**United States
Department of
Agriculture**

Farm Service Agency

USDA Approves Emergency Conservation Assistance for Custer and Fall River Counties

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA) in Custer and Fall River Counties is accepting applications for the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) to address pastures where water sources are drying up or not keeping up due to the ongoing drought and damages from the Hwy 79 fire that occurred in March 2026. ECP provides cost-share and technical assistance to producers to restore farmland to pre-disaster conditions following a qualifying natural disaster. ECP signup begins on May 18, 2026 and ends on July 17, 2026.

Approved ECP applicants can receive up to 75% of the cost of the approved restoration activity with a maximum cost share of \$500,000 per natural disaster event.

Approved ECP practices include:

Water sources for pastures:

- Drought emergency measures (pipelines, tanks, spring development, wells)

Hwy 79 fire:

- Removing debris from farmland
- Grading, shaping and releveling
- Replacing or repairing permanent fence
- Restoring conservation structures
- Emergency soil erosion measures
- Field Windbreak and farmstead shelterbelt restoration

Check with FSA before beginning work to ensure required compliance measures are complete to be eligible for cost share payment.

ECP cost-share assistance can provide advance payments for up to 25% of the total allowable cost for all ECP prac-

tices before the restoration is carried out. The advance payment must be spent within 60 days.

Producers who lease federally owned or managed lands, including tribal trust land, as well as state land, are eligible to participate in ECP.

Conservation concerns present on the land prior to the qualifying natural disaster event are not eligible for ECP assistance.

Eligibility and Environmental Requirements

Producers with damage from qualifying natural disaster events must apply for ECP assistance before beginning reconstructive work. FSA's environmental compliance review process is required to be completed before any actions are taken. A waiver can be requested for necessary activities that are taken as emergency action to prevent further loss. Producers who apply after reconstructive work has been completed are at risk of not qualifying for ECP.

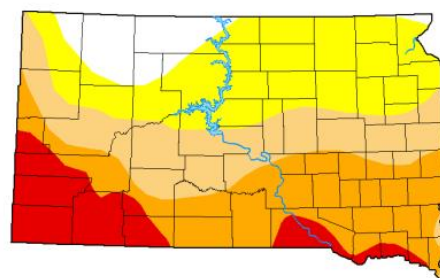
FSA county committees will evaluate applications based on an on-site inspection of the damaged land, taking into consideration the type and extent of the damage. An on-site inspection does not guarantee that cost-share funding will be provided.

More Information

To learn more about ECP, producers can contact the Custer – Fall River County FSA Office at 605-745-5716 ext 2 or visit farmers.gov/protection-recovery.

U.S. Drought Monitor South Dakota

May 26, 2026
(Released Thursday, May 28, 2026)
Valid 8 a.m. EDT



Intensity:

- None
- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Moderate Drought
- D2 Severe Drought
- D3 Extreme Drought
- D4 Exceptional Drought

The Drought Monitor focuses on broad scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. For more information on the Drought Monitor, go to <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/About.aspx>

Author:

Adam Algood
NOAA/NWS/NCEP/CPC



2026 Recipients of the Conservation District's Annual Scholarship

The Custer Conservation District is pleased to announce the recipients of the 2026 scholarship: Keira Alfson and Keira Nelson. The District received several well-qualified applications.

Both students will receive a \$1,000 scholarship to further their education after high school. Keira A. plans on attending Northwestern College and pursue a degree in Agricultural Business. Keira N. plans on attending Iowa State University and will major in Architecture. Congratulations to both students and best of luck to you in your future endeavors!



Keira Alfson (left) and Keira Nelson (right) were awarded college scholarships for their upcoming school year.



Arbor Day

The District continued its annual tradition of celebrating Arbor Day with the youth of Custer County. Tree seedlings were given away to first grade students in Custer and Hermosa, and to all students at the Elk Mountain School. A tree planting demonstration was also performed at the Custer and Hermosa schools by Josh Larson, community forester, with SD Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Students were quizzed on what trees provide people and shown the importance of planting trees at the proper soil depth. Most importantly kids (and adults), remember to regularly water your new trees—especially during this drought!



1st grade students at Custer Elementary (top left, lower right) and Hermosa Elementary (lower left). Students were each given a free tree seedling for their participation.



Wind, Drought, Fires continued

(Continued from page 2)

dangerous wildfire season. Multiple fires broke out across the region, including the Qury Fire (9,168 ac.), Hwy 79 Fire (5,408 ac.), Sundance Fire (25 ac.), and Grey Rocks Fire (58 ac.). These early-season fires strained local resources, threatened communities, and served as stark reminders of how quickly dry, windy conditions can turn hazardous.

Hopefully the rest of 2026 brings more typical weather patterns.



Burning Beetle Learning Event

On January 15, the Conservation District and the Custer Area Arts Council co-sponsored the 2026 Burning Beetle Learning Event, a part of the annual Burning Beetle celebration in Custer. Although the dry winter prevented the actual burning of the giant beetle effigy, the learning event went forward as planned.

A variety of speakers shared expertise on forest health, wildfire preparedness, wildlife, and the recent extreme weather event (December windstorm). Paul Horsted of Dakota Photographic, LLC opened with *History and Photography: 1997-2017 Pine Beetle Epidemic (From Forest to Yard)*. Paul shared photographs he has taken over the years as a comparison to photos from the 1874 Custer Expedition into the Hills. His photos illustrated how the forest has changed in the 150 years since that expedition, and how the beetles and fire suppression played a role in those changes.

Fire preparedness was addressed in *Preparing Your Home & Property for Fire*, featuring Tim Behlings, a landowner and retired firefighter alongside Lane Ostenson of SD Wildland Fire. Tim emphasized the importance of managing your forests to keep fires, when they occur, more manageable and less destructive. Lane provided advice on methods for managing your forests to reduce wildfire risks to homes and properties.

Ben Puckett, Private Lands Habitat Biologist with South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks, presented *A Wildlife Primer for Black Hills Landowners*. Ben talked about common



wildlife issues and reviewed a couple cost-share programs his agency offers to improve wildlife habitat.

The evening concluded with *The Historic December 2025 Windstorm – Event Review and Recovery*, led by Keith Sherburn of NOAA's National Weather Service and Michael Bordelon of SD DANR Resource Conservation & Forestry, who reviewed the storm's impacts and recovery efforts and potential cost-share for affected landowners.

The 2026 Burning Beetle Learning Event succeeded in sparking thoughtful discussion, increasing awareness, and strengthening community connections—underscoring the spirit of resilience and stewardship that defines the Burning Beetle celebration.





It is the mission of the Custer County Conservation District to promote conservation of soil, water, and natural resources for residents and visitors now and in the future.

Pine Engraver Beetle Watch after the December Windstorm from article by Dr. John Ball, SDSU Ext. / SD-DANR

The 70 to 100 mph winds toppled and snapped pines and spruce from the central to the Southern Black Hills. This has generated lots of falling pine branches and pine with canopies filled with snapped or broken branches – a perfect recipe to trigger a pine engraver beetle (*Ips pini*) outbreak in the summer of 2026.

Pine engraver beetles are small bark beetles that feed in declining pine trees and in recently fallen branches. They need live inner bark tissue to feed their young larvae, but the adults do not colonize healthy pine unlike their close bigger cousin – the mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*). The fallen branches (1/2-inch diameter and larger) and broken canopies may remain green enough to be attractive brood material for the engraver beetles this spring. This can create the perfect environment for a buildup of beetles which can attack standing pines. However, this still requires the pines to be stressed, with drought being the most common agent. Pine engraver beetles success-



Pine engraver beetle (*Ips pini*). Photo by Natasha Wright, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Bugwood.org .

fully attack standing pine when the April to June precipitation is less than 75 percent normal. Of course, we will not know if we will have below-normal levels until summer, so it is best to prepare for the worst. This means proper brush disposal and protecting standing storm damaged pine trees.

The best approach for disposal of the fallen branches on forest land is by lopping and scattering the slash. This will dry out the wood so it will not be attractive to the beetles this spring. Chipping or mastication now will also dry the material. What should not be done is piling the brush into small mounds – 6 to 8 feet.

These piles will keep the woody debris in the center cool and moist – perfect breeding material for the engraver beetle this spring. Green logs cut from fallen pine trees can also be attractive host material for the pine engraver beetle this spring. This wood should be cut into 2-foot lengths, if possi-



Tree damage (left) from the December 2025 wind storm.

Beetles continued

(Continued from page 6)

ble, and left in a sunny exposure to facilitate rapid drying. High-value pines that were stressed by the windstorm – canopies with broken branches – should be pruned to remove the broken and hanging branches. These trees should also be treated with an insecticide – labelled for treating bark beetles – by April 1 to protect them from becoming colonized by the beetle this spring and summer. Pine tree owners should contact a professional company with sprayers with enough pressure to reach and coat the canopy with the insecticide.

John Ball is a SDSU Extension Forestry Specialist and SD-DANR Forest Health Specialist. Article taken from “Cleaning up fallen pines after the Black Hills windstorm” in the December 24-31, 2025 edition of the Tree Pest Alert.

Notice of Board Vacancies

The following offices will become vacant on December 31, 2026 due to the expiration of the present term of office of the following board supervisors: Tamarah Caster and Greg Neugebauer. Term length is four years.

All parties interested in election to the board may begin circulation of nominating petitions. Petitions must be filed in the office of the county auditor located in the Custer County Courthouse during regular business hours.

The deadline for filing nomination petitions is July 1, 2026 at 4:00 p.m. If a petition is mailed by registered mail by July 1, 2026 at 4:00 p.m., it shall be considered filed.

Contact our office for questions about obtaining and circulating a petition.

Newsletter Mailing List

We are always interested in expanding our audience. Let us know if you would like to be added to our newsletter distribution list. Just give us a call @ 605-673-5680 or send an email to custercd@sdconservation.net.



Calendar of Events

- June 3-4—Birds. At Home on the Range Annual Bird Tour, Veblen, SD, hosted by the SD Grassland Coalition. <https://sdgrass.org/bird-watching-tour>.
- June 9-10—42th Annual Rangeland Days and 21st Annual Soil Days, Belle Fourche, SD. Contact Kaylee Wheeler (605-842-1267) for additional information.
- June 11—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.
- June 16-18—Grazing School in Wall, SD, by the SD Grassland Coalition. For more information, visit <https://sdgrass.org/grazing-school/>
- June 23-24—Virtual Fence Workshop in Rapid City, SD, hosted by the SDSU Extension. Visit <https://extension.sdstate.edu/event/virtual-fence-workshop>.
- June 24-25—West River Soil Health School by the SD Soil Health Coalition, Caputa, SD. For more information, visit www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/.
- July 9—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.
- August—no Board meeting
- September 9-11—Grazing School in Chamberlain, SD, by the SD Grassland Coalition. For more information, visit <https://sdgrass.org/grazing-school/>.
- September 10—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.
- October 8—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.
- November 12—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
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10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30



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-district/

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publication to multiple recipients.

Newsletter of the Custer County Conservation District

District Board

Dave Thom - Chair
Paul Nettinga - Vice-Chair
Oonagh Wood - Treasurer
Tamarah Caster - Supervisor
Greg Neugebauer - Supervisor
Advisors: Stuart Adrian and Gladwin Paulsen
Mike Baldwin - District Manager
Mike Linde - County Commission Liaison

NRCS Staff

Paige Uher - District Conservationist, Rapid City
Brad Humbracht - District Conservationist, Hot
Springs

Partners / Cooperators

SD Dept. of Agriculture and Natural Resources
SD Game, Fish & Parks
SD Wildland Fire
National Wild Turkey Federation
USFS, Buffalo Gap National Grassland
USFS, Black Hills National Forest



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