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- News from the SD Section of the Society for Range Management

By: Emily Helms

SD Section of the Society for Range Management would like to continue recognizing the Excellence in Range Management award winners from 2019. The Excellence in Range Management Award is given to agricultural operations across the state of SD. Award winners are typically announced at the Annual Section Meeting, which is normally held in the fall of each year. The 2020 meeting has been postponed, so award winners for 2020 will be announced at later date.

The 777 Bison Ranch was awarded the Area IV Excellence in Range Management Award at the SD Section SRM meeting in September 2019 (pictured right). The 777 is owned by Mimi Hillenbrand and managed by Moritz Espy. The ranch was nominated for this award by SD SRM member Matt Odden (current Resource Unit Conservationist located in Hot Springs, SD). The ranch boasts over 26,000 acres of native range and is located in Custer County.



Moritz Espy, 777 Bison Ranch manager, and Matt Odden, NRCS, receiving the Excellence in Range Management Award at the SD SRM annual meeting in Deadwood, SD (Photo by S. Smart).

The ranch has been in Mimi Hillenbrand's family since the 1970s, initially as a cattle ranch. In the 1980's the family decided to switch to bison as their animal of choice. Along with their switch to bison, they decided to focus on holistic management to help take care of the land and the people involved with the ranching enterprise. Since the switch from cattle to bison, and the switch from economic driven production to holistic management, the 777 has seen an increase in diversity of native plants and animals, as well as better soil health.



Mimi Hillenbrand and Moritz Espy, 777 Bison Ranch, pose in the South Dakota Amazing Grassland video shoot. Watch their story online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pftlH77MM>

The 777 tries to mimic bison herds that pre-existed European settlement, by moving large herds across the landscape, quickly moving from pasture to pasture. The ranch has a growing season grazing plan as well as a dormant season grazing plan – which allows the entire

ranch to be resilient and adaptive to changing weather conditions.

The biggest change the ranch has seen over the years is going from 3,000 acre pastures to 250 to 300 acre paddocks. This change puts about 10 animals per acre, which allows for better utilization of the resources and greater rest periods for the landscape. Bison are only in each pasture for a very short amount of time, usually only 1 to 3 days. The ranch also utilizes temporary electric fences to improve management from year to year.

The 777 was featured in the 2019 SD Grassland Coalition Planner and video series. Mimi is also a Voices for Soil Health and part of the SD Mentoring Network.

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