

South Dakota State University

# Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange

---

SDSU Extension Fact Sheets

SDSU Extension

---

1973

## Livestock Theft in South Dakota

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

Follow this and additional works at: [https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension\\_fact](https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_fact)

---

### Recommended Citation

South Dakota State University, Cooperative Extension, "Livestock Theft in South Dakota" (1973). *SDSU Extension Fact Sheets*. 683.

[https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension\\_fact/683](https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_fact/683)

This Fact Sheet is brought to you for free and open access by the SDSU Extension at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in SDSU Extension Fact Sheets by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact [michael.biondo@sdstate.edu](mailto:michael.biondo@sdstate.edu).

# Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.



For current policies and practices, contact SDSU Extension

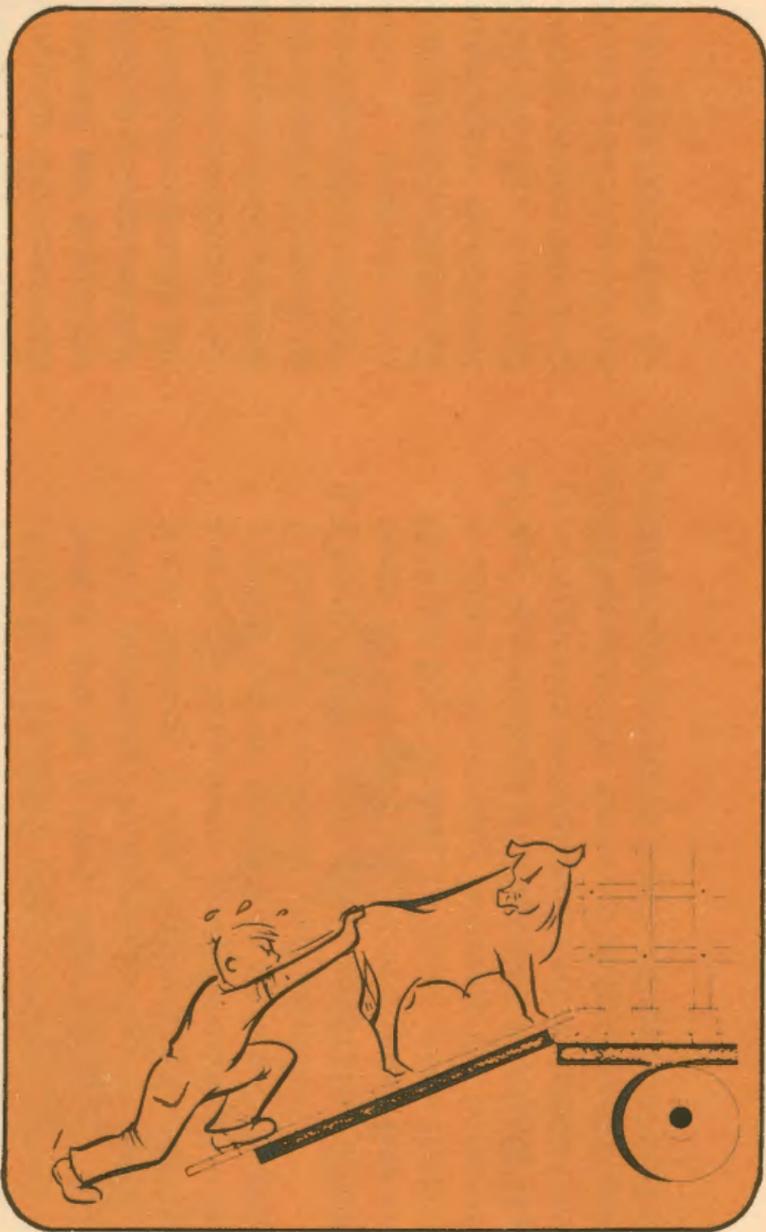
Website: [extension.sdstate.edu](http://extension.sdstate.edu)

Phone: 605-688-4792

Email: [sdsu.extension@sdstate.edu](mailto:sdsu.extension@sdstate.edu)

SDSU Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer in accordance with the nondiscrimination policies of South Dakota State University, the South Dakota Board of Regents and the United States Department of Agriculture.

# Livestock Theft in South Dakota



**COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE  
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

# Livestock Theft in South Dakota

by J. A. Minyard<sup>1</sup>, Extension livestock specialist

Livestock production is big business in South Dakota. Livestock theft, or "rustling," is also big business.

Production of livestock has always entailed elements of risk—drought, winter storms, heat, lightning, disease, and plain "bad luck." Livestock production has become more specialized, scientific and sophisticated; and producers have learned to cope with many of the traditional risks. However, livestock theft has apparently also evolved into a specialized and sophisticated business. It is still a menace in the industry.

Livestock theft represents a substantial economic loss to producers because in many cases, most of the costs of producing an animal have already been incurred at the time of theft. Therefore, theft losses are a direct debit against the producers' net profit.

It is difficult for many to appreciate the magnitude of losses due to theft because a relatively small percentage of producers encounter the problem directly. However, the total loss is substantial and there is no way to predict when or where a thief will strike. Therefore, no producer can be assured of exemption from livestock theft activities.

The frequency and magnitude of livestock theft probably relates to animal identification, accessibility, current value and disposition possibilities, weighed against the probability of being apprehended; in brief, opportunity.

Livestock theft is a complex problem because it is a "people" problem. It is a social rather than a production problem.

## Peace Officers Polled

It is estimated more than 5,800 head of livestock were stolen in South Dakota in 1972. At current market prices, this represents a loss of about \$900,000.

In July 1973, a questionnaire was sent to 64 sheriffs with the cooperation of the State Division of Criminal Investigation. Only sheriffs were contacted to avoid duplication of loss estimates. Each sheriff was asked to provide information for his county (based on office records and/or his estimate) such as:

1. Number of livestock reported stolen in 1972 by class.
2. Estimated number of livestock stolen not reported.
3. How promptly livestock losses are reported.
4. Changes in incidence of livestock theft.
5. When livestock are stolen.
6. Where livestock are stolen.
7. Suggestions to reduce livestock theft.

<sup>1</sup>Appreciation is expressed to Rol Kebach and his staff, Division of Criminal Investigation of the Attorney General's Office, for their assistance in the study. The author is grateful to the county sheriffs in South Dakota who made the report possible.

Of the 64 questionnaires distributed, 57 were returned. Data were summarized and projected to reflect the livestock theft situation for the state. In summarizing the results, the state was arbitrarily divided into six districts: southeast (15 counties), northeast (13 counties), southcentral (9 counties), northcentral (10 counties), southwest (9 counties) and northwest (8 counties).

## Magnitude of the Problem

Of the 57 county sheriffs responding, 36 indicated livestock theft is a problem while 21 did not consider it a major problem. A "no problem" response did not mean no livestock were stolen. Responses in this case reflected a lower priority rating of livestock theft in relation to other law enforcement problems. Livestock theft appeared to be more prevalent in the southeast and northeast than in other areas of the state.

The survey indicates livestock theft has increased in South Dakota over the past three to five years. However, most respondents suggested the increases were small to moderate. Most consistent increases were reported from counties in the southeast and northeast. Greatest percentage increases were indicated for counties in northcentral South Dakota. Of 54 county sheriffs, 24 indicated an increase (perhaps by as much as 25 percent), 23 indicated no change, 7 indicated a decrease.

Estimates of livestock stolen in 1972 are presented in table 1.

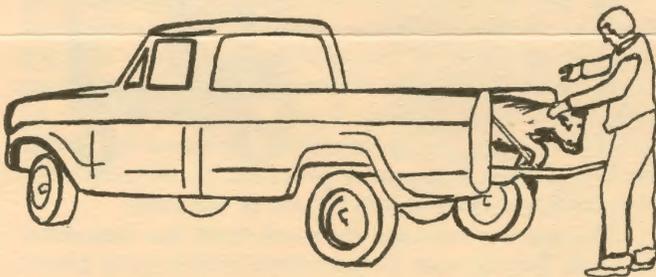
Relatively few horses and dairy animals were reported stolen. A surprising number of sheep and swine were believed stolen. Livestock theft, expressed as a percentage of total livestock numbers, appeared to be greatest in the northeast for beef cattle, in the southcentral, northeast and southwest for sheep, and in the southcentral and northeast for swine. For example, the northwest district showed the second greatest loss of sheep (665 head). However, that district has the largest number of sheep, and theft loss in proportion to total sheep in the district was relatively low. In general, except for swine and feedlot cattle, incidence of livestock theft did not appear to be associated directly with livestock numbers. Theft appeared to be related more to other factors such as animal identification, accessibility, and market for stolen livestock. Total of all livestock estimated stolen in 1972 was 5,806 head.

## How Livestock Are Stolen

There probably are or have been as many schemes and devices employed in the theft of livestock as there are people with sticky fingers. Of all the characteristics of livestock theft, the one most consistent and almost

universal characteristic is the absence of the owner or caretaker. Few thieves would undertake such a venture unless convinced the people looking after the livestock are elsewhere. Actually, separation of the owner from his livestock—isolated pastures, strays, predictable absences from farm or ranch—is very natural in many livestock operations.

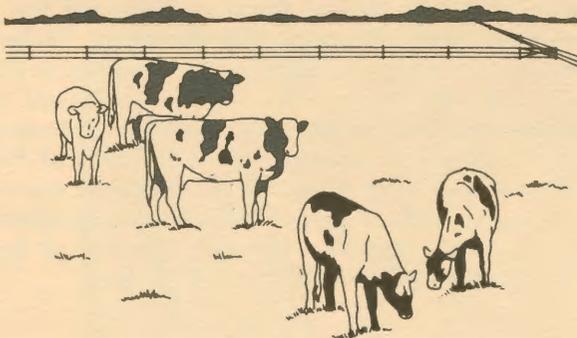
Thieves have also been known to use almost every known device for spotting and transporting livestock. Often a producer's own equipment is used for penning and loading. According to county sheriffs, vehicles most often used in the theft of livestock are pickups. A close second are vehicles with stock trailers. Stolen livestock are also transported with straight and semi trucks, enclosed campers and rental trailers. Small calves and lambs are commonly picked up and transported by automobile.



One significant factor about the type of vehicles commonly used in livestock theft is that most of them are also common to livestock operations — they are probably much like the ones you or your neighbors own. By and large, they are vehicles that tend to move about almost unnoticed by all except perhaps the very curious and those who are purposely observant.

#### Where Livestock Are Stolen

Respondents were asked to indicate what percentage of livestock thefts occurred (1) in or near occupied farmsteads, (2) from feedlots and (3) from isolated pastures. Summary of the reports revealed 13 percent of all livestock were stolen in or near occupied farmsteads, 5 percent from feedlots and 82 percent from isolated pastures and facilities.



When are livestock isolated? In a sense they can be isolated in a farmyard if nobody is home. Still, it is interesting that more than 80 percent of livestock thefts occurred in isolated pastures and facilities. In addition,

of the 13 percent reported stolen from farmsteads, it is probable most of these were stolen in the absence of the owner or caretaker. In some respects this can be a favorable situation for thieves—livestock pens and loading chute are handy and the presence, or even the loading, of a pickup or truck likely won't get a second look from neighbors or passersby. One case was reported where, in the absence of the farm family, thieves used the owner's truck, loaded the livestock, hauled them away and returned the truck to its regular parking place. Again, the near universal requirement for successful livestock theft is the absence of responsible people.

#### When Livestock Are Stolen

Survey results indicate seasonal patterns of livestock theft, at least for certain classes of livestock. Theft of beef cattle (excluding feedlot) appeared to be greatest during the spring and summer, while sheep losses were greatest in the spring, summer and fall. For most herds this would be the time when calves and lambs are small and/or the livestock are on pasture, perhaps removed from headquarters. There seemed to be little, if any, seasonal pattern in theft of swine, dairy cattle and horses.

#### Identification a Problem

County sheriffs frequently mentioned lack of positive identification as a major problem in locating and identifying strayed or stolen livestock and in obtaining convictions in seemingly obvious livestock theft cases. The problem is understandable. In the absence of identifying marks, one animal looks very much like all other animals of that particular class, age and breed. It can be virtually impossible to identify unmarked animals for positive ownership determination once they have been removed from the owner's premises. In such situations, possession (under reasonable circumstances) is a vital factor, irrespective of rightful ownership.

#### Registered Brands and Ownership Inspection

A large majority of the sheriffs responding to the questionnaire indicated a system of permanent livestock identification and ownership inspection definitely is (or would be in the east river area) an effective deterrent to livestock theft. A good example of such a system is the brand inspection program for cattle and horses carried out by the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association under contract with the State Brand Board.

The three member State Brand Board was created by the 1937 Legislature, maintains an office in Pierre and, under South Dakota law, has complete jurisdiction over the conduct of the livestock ownership inspection program. Traditionally, the Board has retained all functions relating to the recording, transfer and registration of brands, and contracts for brand inspection services with the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association. Members of the State Brand Board are appointed by the governor for a six year term. Terms are staggered so a new member is appointed every two years.

Brand registration is provided throughout the state, while ownership inspection is provided in all counties west of the Missouri River plus Brule County east of the river. Brand registration and branding of livestock is optional throughout the state. No one is required to brand, even in the ownership inspection area. All cattle and horses are inspected for ownership when they are offered for sale in this area. Additionally, market operators at Mobridge, Gettysburg, Highmore, Corsica and Sioux Falls provide brand inspection for animals coming to these markets from the ownership inspection area. These markets provide the service for their consignors from the ownership inspection area and underwrite the cost of inspection if it exceeds the fees collected. Cattle from the ownership inspection area are also inspected at 14 auction markets and 7 inspection points in Nebraska and at two auction markets in North Dakota.



Except for Brule County, no cattle or horses raised in eastern South Dakota are inspected for ownership when they are sold. While stockmen in this area can have a legally recorded brand, they have not asked the legislature for an ownership inspection program. Approximately one-third of the brands registered with the State Brand Board are held by owners who are not afforded the protection of an ownership inspection program. Approximately two-thirds of the beef cows in South Dakota are located in an area in which ownership inspection is not provided.

In South Dakota, no tax dollars are used in the work of brand recording or ownership inspection. Brands are initially recorded for a fee of \$10 for five years and \$5 for each five year renewal thereafter. Inspection fees are 22 cents per head at the markets and 22 cents per head plus mileage in the country. Only those who re-

cord a brand support the registration program of the State Brand Board, and only those who live in the ownership inspection area financially support the inspection program.

### Reporting Losses

One problem related to finding lost livestock and the apprehension of livestock thieves is the apparent reluctance to report such losses. Several sheriffs alluded to the difficulty in locating missing livestock even when reported promptly, and many indicated tracing becomes infinitely more difficult if the reporting is delayed.

Somewhat less than half of all livestock thefts are promptly reported. In many cases losses are not known even to the owner for some time. As many as 35 to 40 percent of livestock theft losses are never officially reported to law enforcement personnel.

### Suggestions for Livestock Owners

Even if you never take any precautions at all, you may never lose an animal to rustlers. But maybe they just haven't gotten around to your farm or ranch yet. The following suggestions are good management practices in themselves. They also make your livestock much less tempting.

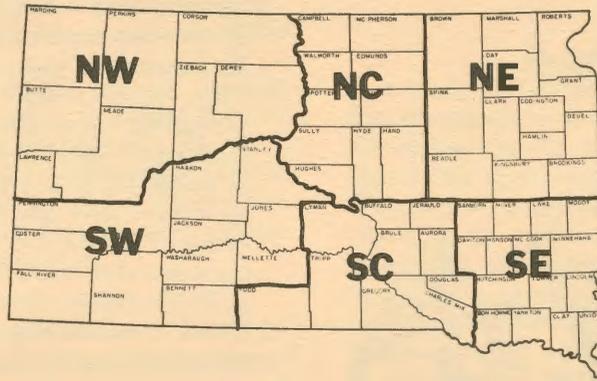
1. **Identify your livestock.** Use a permanent brand, tattoo or other marking system that positively identifies the livestock as yours only. In addition, use clear, distinct, legible brands and permanently identify all young stock soon after birth. It might also be advantageous to post bold notice at entrances to your farm or ranch that your livestock are permanently branded or marked and can be positively identified for purposes of prosecution. For information about recording a brand contact: State Brand Board, Department of Public Safety, Pierre, 57501.
2. **Check livestock frequently.** Perhaps the greatest deterrent to livestock theft is the presence of responsible people. Check livestock away from headquarters frequently and on a variable or unpredictable schedule. When you are to be away from home, arrange for someone else to check the livestock. Try to avoid predictable patterns of absence.
3. **Report missing livestock promptly.** Report all information of a criminal nature promptly to your sheriff, local police, or Division of Criminal Investigation, Attorney General's Office, Pierre, South Dakota. At best it can be a very difficult task for law enforcement personnel to locate stolen livestock and apprehend thieves. It can become virtually impossible if livestock have been gone for several weeks or even months before the loss is reported. Report promptly if livestock are found and returned.
4. **Check fences and gates regularly.** Effective deterrents to livestock strays are good fences and gates that are kept closed. In many cases there probably is a direct relationship between the incidence of strays and livestock theft. Strays obviously tend to be isolated from the owner and therefore are more likely to fall prey to the livestock thief. In addition, lock gates to outlying corrals and loading chutes.

5. **Be observant.** Take particular notice of vehicles not common to the area or neighborhood, especially pickups, stock trailers, trucks, etc. If possible, record the description and license number. If you have reason to suspect livestock theft, call the sheriff immediately. In addition, be alert and observant for remains of livestock that have been butchered.
6. **Watch young stock closely.** Be especially careful during calving and lambing. These represent the livestock most likely to be isolated. If possible, keep young stock close to headquarters or, at least, away from public roads where they are more accessible for would-be thieves.



**Table 1. Estimates of Livestock Stolen in 1972**

Class	Calves	Year-ling cattle	Cows and bulls	Feedlot cattle	Ewes	Lambs	Horses	Swine	Dairy
Southeast	179	69	16	87	46	197	1	437	8
Northeast	170	75	81	235	512	277	4	523	4
Southcentral	104	68	34	0	247	5	0	427	1
Northcentral	130	167	22	11	73	81	2	131	0
Southwest	108	25	51	77	64	130	2	14	7
Northwest	120	37	80	0	175	490	2	0	0
State totals	811	441	284	410	1117	1180	11	1532	20



Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Duane Acker, Director of Extension Service, South Dakota State University, Brookings. The South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service offers educational programs and materials to all people without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin and is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

5M-12-73-1696

# Livestock Theft in South Dakota



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE  
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE