

Spleens spell the future for one N.D. farmer

Paul Smokov predicts a mild winter, with no major storms.

By James MacPherson, Associated Press

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STEELE, N.D. - Paul Smokov doesn't need radar or other high-tech equipment to forecast a major snowstorm on the prairie. He consults pig spleens.

"It looks like a normal year with no major storms," said the 84-year-old Smokov, peering at two of the brown, glistening, foot-long organs on his kitchen counter like a Gypsy gazing into a crystal ball. "That's what the spleens tell me."

Smokov and his wife, Betty, raise cattle on their 1,750-acre ranch north of this town of about 760 people. He is happy to share his forecast with his neighbors or anyone else willing to rely on the reading of animals' innards.

If the spleen is wide where it attaches to the pig's stomach and then narrows, it means winter weather will come early with a mild spring, Smokov said. A narrow-to-wider spleen usually means harsh weather in the spring, he said.

The spleens obtained by Smokov this year are pretty uniform in thickness, which means no drastic changes.

Janice Stillman, editor of the Old Farmer's Almanac in

Dublin, N.H., said she had heard of at least one other pig spleen weather prognosticator - Gus Wickstrom of Saskatchewan - but he died earlier this year.

"It's folklore and a dying art, obviously," she said.

Smokov's Ukrainian parents brought their knowledge of pig spleen forecasting with them when they came to the U.S. a century ago. As for listening to forecasts on the radio - electricity didn't reach Smokov's ranch until 1949.

"The spleens are 85 percent correct, according to my figures," he said. As for the weathermen, "Those guys aren't any better."

At the National Weather Service office in Bismarck, meteorologist Vic Jensen relies on Doppler radar and other sophisticated scientific instruments. But he is charitable toward folk methods such as Smokov's.

"I can't discount some of these kinds of theories," Jensen said. "It's just another way for people to forecast what's going to happen."

The weather service's three-month outlook is typically at least 60 percent accurate, Jensen said. Forecasters are calling for a normal winter for North Dakota. That matches Smokov's gut feeling.



Paul Smokov examines pig spleens in his Steele, N.D., kitchen earlier this month. The 84-year-old rancher says that the width of the spleens can be used to predict the weather. (James MacPherson / Associated Press)