

Kansas drought forum attended by 300 plus from tri-state area

By Rachel Miscall

Ralph Unger, a Decatur County farmer and rancher, compared the drought in northwest Kansas to the cancer doctors found in his body about three years ago.

He told a panel of state and federal officials at the Kansas Drought Forum on Monday that like a disease, drought is spreading across the state, killing crops, making it tough to raise livestock, forcing family farms out of business and ruining the economy.

A teary-eyed Unger, who is also a Decatur County commissioner, said he's on the road to being cancer free, but northwest Kansas farmers have hit a dead end.

"I'm sorry I'm getting emotional," he said, "but we need help. I too think this is a disaster, the same as a wild-fire, hurricane, flood or F5 tornado."

Unger was one of more than a dozen farmers and ranchers to plead for help from the government during the forum on Monday morning at the Goodland Elks Lodge. The response they got was that federal officials understand what they're going through and Congress is planning to find a solution soon, but until then, all anyone can do is pray for rain.

Ken Palmgren, a Sherman County farmer and chairman of the Kansas Wheat Commission, was a main organizer of the event, which was sponsored by the commission, the Kansas Association of Wheat Growers and several other farm groups and businesses.

The three-hour event attracted more than 300 farmers and ranchers from across the Tri-State area and a few approached the podium set up in the middle of the crowd to tell how

drought has devastated their operations. Many of these became emotional while sharing their story, some raising their voices in anger, others blinking back tears.

Sitting on a stage opposite the podium was Ross Davidson, administrator of the Risk Management Agency for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington; Eric Depperschmidt, a staffer for U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran in Hays; Mel Thompson, a staffer for U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts; and Jamie Clover Adams, the Kansas secretary of agriculture.

The panel heard how drought is strangling dryland and irrigated crops, forcing ranchers to sell their herds, hurting custom cutters' businesses and affecting all aspects of life in northwest Kansas. They also heard that without money from the government, many farmers and ranchers will be forced to declare bankruptcy or sell their farms to pay debts.

"It terrifies me to death to see what type of losses we'll have this year," said Larry McCants, president of First National Bank in Goodland. "I think we'll see double or triple liquidations this fall and spring."

Speaking briefly after hearing the testimony, each panel member said they understand the farmers' worries because they've been in the farmers' shoes. They said Congress will try hard to help when it reconvenes in September. Until then, they said, all they can do is listen to the farmers' problems and pray for a lot of rain.

"We're in a very good position to get some type of drought assistance," Adams told the crowd, "considering the people we have working for us in Washington."

Several drought assistance bills have been submitted to Congress, including ones from Rep. Moran and Sen. Roberts, but no decisions have been made. President Bush has said drought assistance should come out of money set aside to pay for the new farm bill to avoid a bigger budget deficit.

Many Kansas counties, including Sherman, have been declared disaster areas because of drought damage, making farmers eligible for low-interest emergency loans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But farmers say the last thing they need is another loan.

Ben Duell, a Sherman County farmer, echoed many of the speakers when he told the panel the money shouldn't come out of the new farm bill, but from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which steps in after a natural disaster.

Davidson, who is touring Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska, agreed the drought has caused enough damage to be considered a natural disaster, but said his agency would have to change its policies to help drought victims. He said the agency only helps people who have been forced from their homes because of a natural disaster.

"Unfortunately," he said, "farmers aren't being displaced from their homes, but from their livelihood."

Two northwest Kansas agriculture extension agents talked about how dry it really is here.

Dana Belshe, Sherman County agent, said between May 15 and Aug. 20, a growing period for fall crops, the county received just 3.78 inches of rain, which is more than three



JERRY SCHMIDT, with the Kansas Farm Bureau Communications Division, and Melanie Musselman, farm director for KFRM Radio in Clay Center, interviewed Ross Davidson, administrator of the U.S. Risk Management Agency, after the Kansas Drought Forum on Monday. More than 300 farmers attended the event, which many farm reporters covered. Photo by Rachel Miscall/The Goodland Daily News

inches below the normal of 6.88 inches for that period. He said it's been the second driest May, June and July in history, the first being in 1924, and the fifth hottest year on record.

Since the past few years have been drier than normal, Belshe said, thirsty crops aren't able to draw on water stored in the ground. Those reserves have dried up.

in ticket prices.

Theory Of A Deadman has recently been added as the opening act for Nickelback.

There will also be a 7 p.m. Kansas Sings! concert Monday, Sept. 9 at the grandstand. This is free and will feature Mark Schultz.

Sept. 9 will be Dollar Day at the Fair, with gate admission for just \$1 and all carnival rides on the Farrow Midway also \$1.

Phone number for the ticket office are (620) 669-3618 and 1-800-362-3247.

Tickets for the grandstand shows are also available online at www.kansasstatefair.com.

Free copies of the Party Planner, a complete list of the daily events at the fair, are available at Farm Bureau County offices and Kwik Shop locations statewide. Those wishing to receive a copy by mail can call 1-800-362-3247.

Kansas State Fair's ticket office now open

The Kansas State Fair *Party on the Prairie* will have activities and options for partygoers of every age when it opens on Friday.

It boast agricultural and commercial displays, competitive exhibits, judging, concerts, midway rides and amusement, numerous free attractions and special

events, livestock shows and stages featuring free entertainment.

Parking is free and there are free trolley rides from the parking lots as well as throughout the fairgrounds.

The fair's official opening ceremony is at 11 a.m. in Gottschalk Park.

The ticket office for purchasing tickets for the concerts and other events in the Pepsi Grandstand during the 2002 Kansas State Fair is now open.

The *Party on the Prairie* grandstand evening lineup includes: Friday, Sept. 6, Journey; Saturday, Sept. 7, Travis Tritt with Larry the Cable Guy; Sunday, Sept. 8, OTTPA Truck and Tractor Pull; Tuesday, Sept. 10, AMA Extreme Motocross; Wednesday, Sept. 11, Charlie Daniels Band; Thursday, Sept. 12, Auto Races; Friday, Sept. 13, Nickelback; Saturday, Sept. 14, O-Town; Sunday, Sept. 15, Charley Pride. Outside gate admission is not included

Book review

The Summons

By John Grisham

St. Francis Public Library

Ray Atlee is a professor of law at the University of Virginia. He's 43, newly single, and still enduring the aftershocks of a surprise divorce. He has a younger brother, Forrest, who redefines the notion of a family's black sheep.

And he has a father, a very sick old man who lives alone in the ancestral home in Clanton, Miss. He is known to all as Judge Atlee, a beloved and powerful official who has towered over local law and politics for 40 years. No longer on the bench, the Judge has withdrawn to the Atlee

mansion and become a recluse.

With the end in sight, Judge Atlee issues a summons for both sons to return home to Clanton, to discuss the details of his estate. It is typed by the Judge himself, on his handsome old stationery, and gives the date and time for Ray and Forrest to appear in his study.

Ray reluctantly heads south, to his hometown, to the place where he grew up, which he prefers now to avoid. But the family meeting does not take place. The Judge dies too soon, and in doing so leaves behind a shocking secret known only to Ray. And perhaps someone else.

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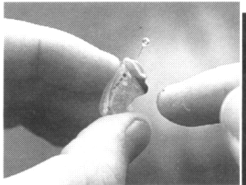
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Public Service Announcement

Notice: The **Northwest Kansas Educational Service Center** will have available for review and comment for thirty (30) days, the FY 2004 Local Education Agency Application for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) federal flow-through funds.

Contact:

Kathy Kersenbrock-Ostmeyer,
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