

Other Viewpoints

Protect the aquifer to boost economy

Kansas has had a highly productive relationship with the Ogallala Aquifer for years. Rainfall is short for raising crops and cattle in the western sector of the Sunflower state. The aquifer has filled the moisture gap, enabling agriculture to thrive bountifully there.

Indeed, the aquifer has been vital in making agriculture one of the reliable and prosperous players in the state's economy.

But the partnership, which many thought could never be disrupted, is in trouble.

Too much is being asked of the aquifer, a reservoir of water that lies beneath eight states in the middle of the country. This valuable resource cannot replenish itself fast enough to meet the relentless, even irresponsible, demands placed on it by farmers, ranchers, cities and industry.

The aquifer, a water-bearing rock formation, has a long, long history. Scientists believe it formed millions of years ago as glaciers pulled back and streams from the Rocky Mountains flowed eastward onto the permeable gravel and sand of the plains. The result is a broad expanse of water that lies roughly between South Dakota and Texas.

Now the time has come to prevent further damage to the Ogallala.

Both users and the government are obligated to pursue efforts to ensure the asset is used in the most efficient way possible, including judicious reductions in the taking of the water.

The imbalance between supply and consumption is substantiated in a recently released study by Kansas State University. If current trends continue, the study found, 69 percent of the aquifer in Kansas would be depleted by about 2060.

Only 15 percent of the water that is withdrawn is replaced through natural recovery, David Steward, a KSU professor of civil engineering and the study leader, said in an interview.

The study, four years in the making, shows that water-use efficiencies have been increasing about 2 percent a year in Kansas through technology, crop genetics and strategies in water management. These measures cannot overcome the current rate of consumption, however.

At some point, Steward observed, the rate of pumping will have to be cut back. The researchers propose five scenarios for prolonging the life of the aquifer through reduced usage of between 20 and 80 percent.

The aquifer issue is not lost on Gov. Sam Brownback. In recent days he focused on solutions at the quarterly meeting of this Council of Economic Advisors in Dodge City, Kan.

Corn is the irrigated area's main crop. Last year's harvest brought in \$1.75 billion. Retail beef added \$384 billion. The 56,000 people employed in those operations added \$3.2 billion to the economy. An analysis showed how much less the revenues would have been without the aquifer.

At the conclusion of the session Brownback wisely called for development of a 50-year plan for improving use of the aquifer. Some steps have been taken. The Legislature enacted a law last year that allows conservation programs at the local level. That process is underway in some areas.

The Ogallala has been an essential ingredient in the raising of food for generations, both for the United States and its exports abroad. Nature has provided us with a resource that is readily available and relatively inexpensive. We cannot afford to let it be drained into oblivion.

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September is great, except for flies

I love September. In a lot of ways, it's my favorite month.

But the first month of fall does have its drawbacks, thousands of them, buzzing, angry black mobs of flies.

I don't mind that September sometimes thinks it's still August, like it must this year. That'll pass with the next cold front. But in September, I have to give up breakfast on the porch when the flies try to carry it away.

I start eating outside in May. We love to eat on the back deck. Some days, not many, not enough, anyway, we find time to have breakfast, lunch and dinner out there.

Having lunch on the deck can be tricky, because you've got to finish before the sun peeks around the corner of the house, or you're toast. You, not the lunch.

By supper time, on the other hand, the sun is behind the trees to the west and all is good. You can almost always have dinner on the deck — until September.

We have a nice glass-topped table out there and some plastic deck chairs that are adequate. They're not as nice as the solid-wood lounge chairs we use in the evening, but they're easier to sit up in.

Cynthia bought some big, plastic leaves to use as placemats, but the shape was kinda hard to adjust to. We finally gave up on them and started using regular bamboo mats. We have



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

to shuttle more things out to the table to eat outdoors, but you just don't want to leave the salt and pepper out there when it might rain.

In spring and early summer, it's ideal to eat on the deck. Breakfast oatmeal seems to taste better with the scent of morning dew on the grass. The coffee smells better. The sky is clear most mornings, and the air is clean.

If it's windy, I stay inside, since it's next to impossible to read the morning paper in the wind. Other than that, I love eating on the deck. Most summers, we don't even have that many mosquitoes.

Until September.

The other day, I managed to squeeze in time for breakfast on the back deck. It was one of those days that the mercury was headed for 105, and it was warm already, but not warm enough to be unpleasant.

I had a quarter of a cantaloupe and a sausage, plus my coffee, made fresh for breakfast. I ate the melon first, then shifted my attention

to the meat. I'd set the rind aside, and when I looked over at it, the rim was covered in flies. At least a dozen of the little buggers had found a place to roost on the rim of that melon slice. A dozen more tiny fruit flies, the kind we used in college biology experiments, had swarmed into the bowl.

That, I thought, is disgusting. But it's just August. Flies are everywhere.

At the feed lots, where they have flies all summer, they're epidemic by August. I'm sure they have to break out the spray.

A friend reported being called to spray a neighbor's cattle, which were beside themselves over the flies. He said he got a couple of passes in with his spray plane before he figured they were too spooked for a third to do much good.

But you have to figure, if the poor cattle were running that hard, they probably left the flies behind for a while. So maybe it was worth the trouble.

So hang on. It'll cool off this week, and the weather will be beautiful. September is known for that, and it's really a pretty nice month.

Except for the flies.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers. When he has the time, he'd rather be reading a good book or casting a fly.

More moisture needed in spite of rain

Rainfall during the end of July and the first week of August has provided hope for farmers and cattlemen across Kansas — even in the far western corners of the state.

As southwestern Kansas farmers prepare for fall wheat seeding, there are more happy faces than during the last couple years, but that's not to say some areas don't need moisture.

"I don't believe we're out of the drought by any means," says Stevens County farmer Ben McClure. "I know we haven't gone back to a wet period. We were just blessed to have rain when we needed it badly."

McClure received five inches of rain on his farm during the first week of August. Stevens County averages 17 inches of moisture annually. Most farmers in this county are still at least 12 inches shy and in many cases more.

The rains that fell in early August were spotty. A couple miles south of McClure's fields, thirsty crops received half about two inches. Two miles north, even less.

For those dry-land wheat farmers in this region of Kansas, the rains have given them the prospect of planting wheat this fall. Many haven't harvested a crop here in three years.

"Maybe we can get it up," McClure says. "That wasn't the case before the rain."

If, and this is a big if, these wheat growers receive another half, three-quarters or even a full inch of rain between now and the end



John Schlageck

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of October, dry-land wheat will have a good chance of getting up and going heading into the winter.

"Just the possibility of planting, growing and harvesting a dry-land wheat crop would be great," McClure says. "After three years of little, if any moisture, the early August rains allowed everything out here to take a deep breath."

From a soil conservation point of view, these summer rains were a real "life saver." Farmers like McClure were able to go into fields that hadn't grown a crop for three years and plant a crop to cover the bare soil. Watching the precious top soil blow during this three year drought has been especially painful with no residue to hold the soil in place.

Last winter the Stevens County farmer watched the soil blow down to the hardpan — a layer of soil so compacted that neither plant roots nor water can penetrate.

That's gut-wrenching. It leaves a scar on a

farmer and the land.

This year will be different, thanks to the summer rain.

"We planted some feed on some of our land after we received the moisture," McClure says. "If we hadn't received the rain, the crop wouldn't have grown."

Instead, the feed crop covers the land and stands between three and four feet high.

The pheasants are enjoying the feed and cover, McClure says. He's hoping for a couple good hunts in November.

This year even the road sides sport green weeds. Last year was totally brown.

"The pigweed and kochia are doing well since the rain," McClure says. "It's even been nice to see some weeds grow in places."

When's the last time you heard a farmer talk about "liking" the looks of weeds on his land?

Troubled times and conditions lend themselves to unlikely conversation, especially in western Kansas during a prolonged drought. Let's just hope and pray these farmers receive the much needed rain they are desperate for.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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