

from our viewpoint...

Chances evaporating to save area reservoir

Bonnie Reservoir is on the verge of disappearing, and when gone it will take some great fishing, hunting and a refuge for migratory birds evaporates along with the water.

The reservoir was not built as an irrigation dam, but rather a flood control dam after the 1935 Republican River flood that killed more than 100 people in northwest Kansas, southwest Nebraska and caused damage all the way to Concordia.

Colorado is a unique state having six major rivers with headwaters that flow out of the state. Anytime someone downstream feels they have been shorted they look upstream to Colorado to give them more water.

Growing up in the Arkansas River valley the ongoing problems along the river between Colorado and Kansas became a major lawsuit that cost both states millions of dollars in attorney fees, and when the Supreme Court Master was done it cost Colorado more millions in damages.

Drought conditions exist today in the southwest part of Kansas and the southeast part of Colorado, and the major source of irrigation water remains the Arkansas.

A major sticking point in trying to keep water in John Martin Reservoir over the years was the question of evaporation, and Kansas farmers insisting holding the water was costing them more water. The Colorado-Kansas Arkansas River Compact goes back to 1949, and over the past 60 years John Martin has been emptied at least three times we know of.

Built for flood control and irrigation the reservoir can hold about 640,000 acre feet when full. The dam was really tested for flood control in 1965 when thousands of acre feet of water rolled down the Fountain and Arkansas River from a huge amount of rain to nearly fill the empty reservoir in less than a week taking it from basically zero to about 400,000 acre feet of water.

Some of those who are familiar with the Arkansas River below John Martin will remember the small creeks flooded the river basin in 1965 from Lamar, Colo., to Dodge City, and caused damage in Syracuse and Garden City.

John Martin was drained within a few years of the flood, and again the issue was evaporation as an excuse for both sides of the compact.

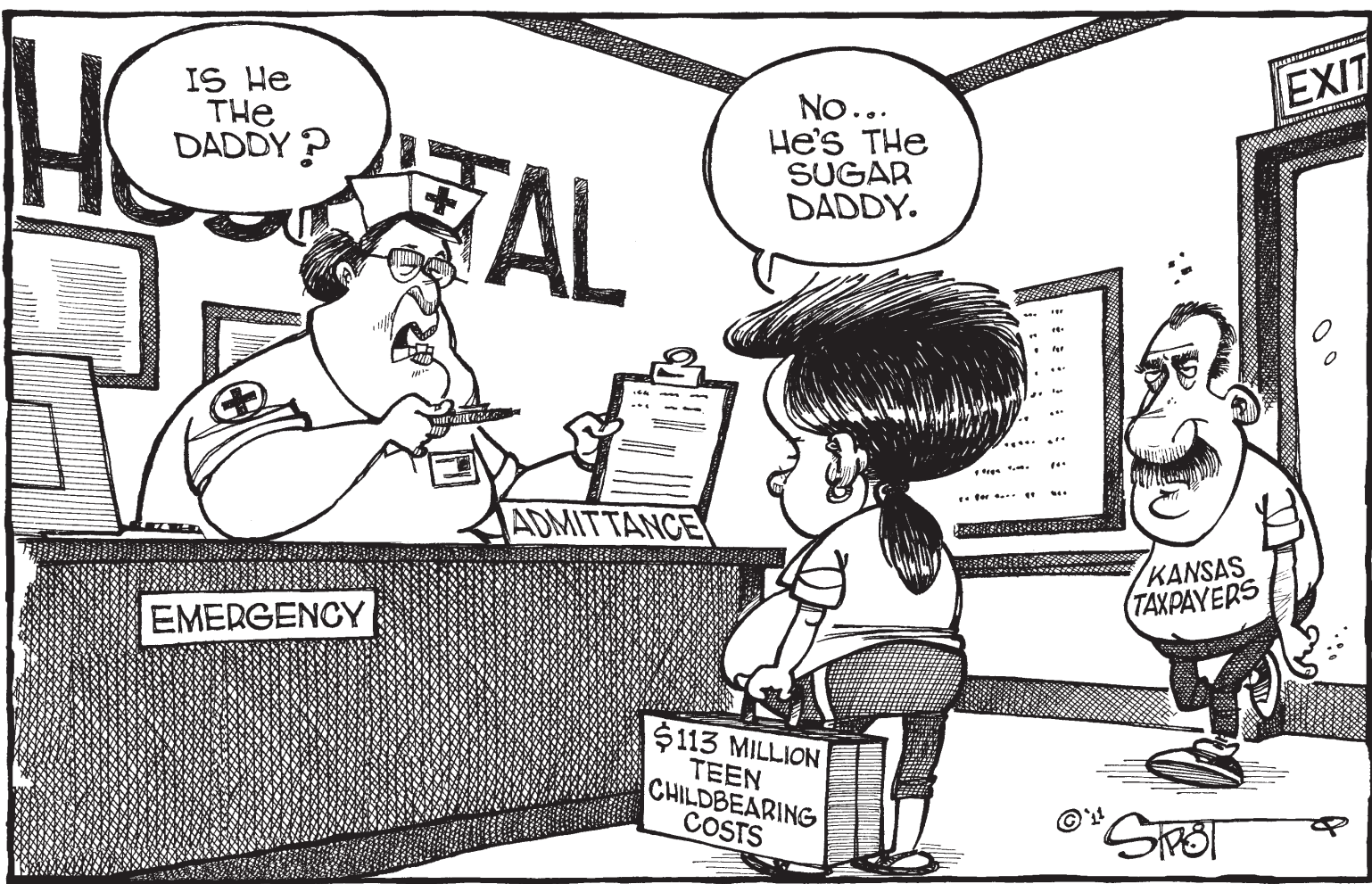
Finally a winter storage agreement was reached to allow compact members to “bank” water, and the federal government approved a permanent pool for recreation. The agreement helped bring the lake back and today part of the western portion is a Colorado state park.

The major difference between John Martin Reservoir and Bonnie Reservoir is the one on the Arkansas has an annual amount of runoff from the Rocky Mountains to the west to provide water for irrigation along the extensive ditch system that reuses the river water several times before it reaches the dam, and again is used and reused several times as it flow downstream to Kansas.

Bonnie Reservoir does not have a major runoff recharge, and must depend on Mother Nature to drop enough moisture to fill the creeks to get water to that part of the Republican River.

Draining Bonnie will not improve the situation in northeast Colorado, and unlike the Arkansas it would take another flood like in 1935 to remind people why Bonnie was created.

We hope Colorado will reconsider their decision to drain Bonnie, and urge Kansas and Nebraska to solve the evaporation issue before the lake disappears. — Tom Betz



Scorched, scalded and burnt up

If you're a Kansas farmer you've probably jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. The fire in this case is the continuing scalding temperatures and lack of precipitation.

Here's what I'm talking about.

Ben McClure, Stevens County farms a few miles from the Oklahoma line and not far from the Colorado border. Here in far southwestern Kansas conditions are bone dry.

McClure has received one inch of moisture (including rain and snow) since he drilled his wheat crop back in mid-September. That's 10 months ago.

Ben told me he's looked at the Garden City K-State Research Station stats and the average precipitation from October through May is 8.93 inches. These records go back to 1921. That means he's nearly eight inches short.

"All I can say is it's dry," McClure says. "It's hard. It's not going to be a good year."

Temperatures have been topping the 100 degree mark and it's hurting our the young producer's crop every day. While he can't say for certain, the Stevens County farmer believes corn yields will be down 100 bushels per acre in some fields, especially in southwestern Kansas. Some may even be abandoned.

As of mid-July he's still hopeful he'll harvest 200-bushel corn. But that may be a stretch, especially if no help in the form of moisture comes from Mother Nature.

The really bad thing about his fall crops of corn, sunflowers and cotton is their yields will be down on the heels of a disastrous wheat crop. McClure's dry-land wheat was a complete bust as crop adjusters estimated it to yield one-third of a bushel per acre. He did harvest 800 acres of pretty good irrigated wheat.

Still the fall crops suffer each day without moisture—even the irrigated crops. With temperatures as hot as Hades, the fall crops require



Insight this week

• john schlageck

a ton of water. By 9:30 in the morning, as McClure drives through his fields looking at the crops, his corn is already starting to stress and the temps are still only about 80 degrees.

"The leaves on the corn are already starting to curl up and trying to protect any moisture the crop has," McClure notes. "A half day after the sprinkler moves past the corn it's already suffering from lack of moisture. We can't keep enough moisture on our crops. We need help from above."

The Stevens County farmer is pouring as much water to the thirsty crop he can. Standard operating procedure is for the pivot irrigation system to make a complete circle over a quarter (160 acres minus the four corners) in three and one half days. During this period, one inch or moisture is delivered to the corn crop.

That's under ideal conditions if each irrigation well can provide enough water. Some of McClure's wells don't pump enough water to put one inch of water on the crop in three and a half days.

Some of his systems take longer – up to five days. That's too long and the crop yields continue to decrease.

"When Mother Nature cooperates, you have an easier time farming," McClure says. "This heat is cooking our crops."

Just a little further north of McClure's farm – between Sublette and Garden City – the corn plants have already flashed. There's no green pigment left, he says.

"These crops are scorched, scalded and burnt up," the Stevens County farmer says. "Corn

fields are uneven. Some are tasseled while others are knee high."

McClure knows 2011 is going to be a difficult year income wise. He knows all too well that even though commodity prices are high, a farmer still has to grow the bushels to sell.

So how's the 38 year old grain producer doing facing such challenges?

"Oh, I guess good," McClure says. "There's still plenty to worry about when you put your head on the pillow at night. There's still tomorrow."

Absolutely there's another day. He's got sprinklers to keep running. McClure believes he has "a great group of guys" helping him. He knows they're doing all they can to keep the thirsty crops watered.

McClure realizes he's not in this dilemma by himself. He's concerned about his neighbors who farm, businesses in his community and other farmers and towns across western Kansas that will suffer because of the ongoing drought.

"If only we could get some rain, but even with rains, it'll take several years to heal," McClure says.

In spite of the current situation, McClure wouldn't trade his farming vocation for any other. He considers himself blessed to be a farmer and have the opportunity to grow crops and livestock for others.

"It's a real privilege and honor to be able to do that," McClure says.

Make no mistake about it. He will persevere.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau has been writing about farming and ranching in Kansas for more than 25 years. He is the managing editor of "Kansas Living," a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.

Battling the debt limit question

Although President Obama continues to meet with top House and Senate Republicans in an effort to reach a budget agreement before the Aug. 2, deadline for raising the debt limit, it is unclear how far-reaching the final deal will be.

Obama wants to achieve the boldest possible package through an agreement that would save up to \$4 trillion over the next decade, which would consist of large cuts in Medicare and other entitlement programs – while requiring new tax revenue. Meanwhile Republicans advocate for a more modest deal to avoid a default on the national debt that contains some spending cuts and has no tax increases.

Despite these differences the President and the Republicans have agreed that the nation's budget problems must be addressed, and Medicare reform is a critical part of any agreement.

Throughout negotiations, it is critical that cuts to the Medicare program are responsible and productive. Medicare reform must still protect policies and programs that work while eliminating those that are no longer effective.

One productive Medicare program that must be kept intact is Part D, the prescription drug benefit program. Part D is the most cost-effective and successful entitlement program the federal government runs. Thanks to strong competition, the program costs the government and beneficiaries far less than initial projections. This year, the Congressional Budget Office reduced its baseline 10-year spending projection for all of Medicare by \$186 billion, two-thirds of which is accounted for by a reduction in Part D spending.

The Medicare Trustees report released this year says this competition will continue to drive savings. Research shows in the Part D program, the proportion of prescriptions filled with a generic drug has increased each year, as plans strive to keep premiums low.



from other pens

• commentary

While Medicare Part D is an example of an effective Medicare program, it is clear not all Medicare policies and programs are as productive.

The Independent Payment Advisory Board that was created with the passage of last year's health care law is one such provision that should be eliminated. Essentially, The board would allow unelected people to make binding "recommendations," or rather, demands, to reduce Medicare spending.

The board is a threat to all Medicare beneficiaries. Proponents of the board argue the plan will lead to improved quality of care as a result of the cost-cutting measures it enacts in order to save. This is doubtful.

The board must make cuts that reach annual targets, and can only look at specific parts of the health care system when making these decisions. Standard line item cuts will result, only reinforcing systemic problems – not fixing them – meaning unsustainable savings.

Major changes in the Medicare program should be decided by elected officials who are held accountable for their decisions. The Independent Advisory Board's arbitrary system lacks transparency and oversight.

Our political leaders should look at other ways to help reduce Medicare spending and increase savings as negotiations progress.

For example, increasing the savings mechanisms in the current health care law could be done by guaranteeing the law's \$500 billion worth of savings from reduced Medicare payments to health providers and insurers by accepting a "trigger" for further cost cutting if those savings don't materialize.

Lawmakers could cut subsidies for beneficiaries to buy supplemental "Medigap" insurance, and save \$92 billion by 2021. While increasing premiums beneficiaries pay for Medicare doctors' coverage by just 10 percent would save \$241 billion. Also, raising the eligibility age for Medicare to 67 from 65 would save \$124 billion.

Employers and employees could be incentivized to select more cost-effective health plans by capping the tax exclusion of employer-provided health benefits in 2018, and then phasing it out over 10 years. The exclusion of employer-provided health care benefits is the single largest tax expenditure. It is estimated to cost the government more than \$1 trillion over the next five years.

Medicare's copayment structure could be modernized with a deductible and out-of-pocket maximum indexed to increases in spending per beneficiary – saving about \$14 billion through 2018.

Bundling Medicare's payments for post-acute care to reduce costs and increase incentives for efficiency would result in cumulative budget savings from 2012 through 2018 of \$5 billion.

There are many options lawmakers have to reform Medicare without resorting to drastic measures. Cuts must be made, but not at the expense of programs that work. Parts of the Medicare program that are effective must be left alone, while those that are not must be changed.

Douglas Schoen is a political strategist and author of *Mad as Hell: How the Tea Party Movement is Fundamentally Remaking Our Two-Party System*, published by Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins.

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