

Ogallala summit focus of state, local effort to save aquifer

By Kayla Cornett
kcornett@nwkansas.com

The audience at Colby Community College stood on their feet as Gov. Sam Brownback was introduced at the Ogallala Aquifer Summit on Thursday.

People from all across Kansas came to voice their opinions on the issues confronting the aquifer, including a panel of municipal representatives, farmers, bankers and other groups affected by the aquifer issues.

"The planning process, which brings people together to talk about what we need to do, is critical," Gov. Brownback said, "and it needs to come from the people who have the water resource, and that's the Ogallala region in this particular case and that's folks here."

"What we have got to do is get in the position to continue this great agriculture economy in this region, to grow it, and to conserve and extend that aquifer. This is what we want to get done, this is what we need to get done for our future. The ideas, the push for it, the support

for it has to come from the Ogallala region."

Brownback said the first thing the state needs to do is repeal the "Use It or Lose It" doctrine and water law, and look at how micro-specific the aquifer is.

For the summit, three men were tasked to frame the issues surrounding aquifer and offer solutions. They presented their findings to the panel and audience, as well as to those watching the online stream of the summit.

Brown Wilson, a water information resource manager with the Kansas Geological Survey at the University of Kansas, talked about the current and projected conditions of the aquifer, showing maps and figures on powerpoint slides. His maps detailed the precipitation in Kansas, the average reported use made of water in Kansas, and the source of water, whether it's ground or surface water. The reported use made of water showed water is mainly used for irrigation, and both ground and surface water are nearly equal sources.

He discussed the Index Well Program, which monitors the current water level of about 1,400 wells in the aquifer. The program found average water levels of 100 feet. He said there have been significant drops in the water level from 1996 to 2011, and after estimating a number of factors including density, distribution and saturated thickness, he created a projection of the estimated usable lifetime of the aquifer, about 10 years.

Dr. Bill Golden from Kansas State University spoke about groundwater policy.

"If we want to extend the life of the aquifer, some kind of restriction is going to have to take place," Golden said.

He suggested the restriction should involve reducing water use per acre rather than reducing water per irrigated acre. He went on to discuss the policy implications and the barriers to adoption of limited irrigation, but concluded irrigated crop revenue will bounce back if the reduction is long term rather than short term. Overall, he claimed

reducing water use per acre for a long period of time would maximize profits.

The last to present was Dr. Joseph Aistrup, from Kansas State University. He talked about the Ogallala as a common-pool resource, and discussed the characteristics of this type of resource. The main problem is that actions of a single user doesn't have an perceptible impact on the long-term viability of the aquifer. Even though someone could turn off his irrigation system, he said, other users' wells subtract from the water resources available to all. In turn, that creates individual incentives for the over-use of the resource.

He concluded his presentation by saying the Use It or Lose It law leads to problems, and the only way to address the sustainability of a common-pool resource, such as the Ogallala, is by collective action. That means there needs to be strong communication networks among water users, collective solutions come from the users as a group, local institutions implement the

solutions, and users are accountable to each other.

"All of you working together will have a big impact on changing that future," Aistrup said. "It is your choice."

The next part of the summit gave Brownback a chance to hear the comments and questions from people in the audience.

One comment came from Bob Hower, a retired public official of Colby. He encouraged the state to develop a way to help cities finance clean-up efforts. Brownback suggested having a smaller, locally run intensive groundwater use control area, even on a township basis, for micro-level management of water. Larry Penning of Barton county stated later he believes that measure will work as long as everyone agrees and cooperates.

A question came from Jim Sipes, who asked how important the Arkansas River is in the recharge of the aquifer. Wilson and Brownback said it could help with the recharge because it lower to the water table and has a better chance of rising and

can be used for a recharge.

Another question came from Lincoln Wilson of Goodland who wondered if maybe a conference of governors from all the states that use the aquifer could talk with each other and come up with solutions.

"That could be, I've been around water litigation long enough it doesn't seem that usually works," Gov. Brownback replied. "But I appreciate the thought and the spirit it's put forward in."

After the question and answer session, the stakeholders broke up into small groups to voice their ideas about the aquifer.

Gov. Brownback said he hopes to present the ideas offered at the summit at next year's Legislature.

"We don't have a future without water; water is a critical component to all of this," Gov. Brownback said. "People are a critical component, water is the essential ingredient for us to make this continue to flower, and people in this region have done an enormously high quality job in making the agriculture bloom in this state."

Parade leaders have long history with Sherman County 4-H

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Goodland Wrestling Enthusiasts Club, and did that for about five years. He said he enjoyed doing the wrestling on the radio with Marty Melia.

"I get a kick out of writing stories and poems," Ron said.

He is on the National Limousin Association, and does some committee work.

He is on the state fair beef open show supreme drive committee.

"We have an overall supreme beef winner," he said. "The second weekend of the fair we have this competition and pack that place with a large crowd. We had Sen. Jerry Moran last year to hand out awards. We will invite Gov. Sam Brownback this year."

The Tri-State Royal is an event both Ron and Marsha are passionate

about, and the 50th show will be at 1 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 6.

Marsha said the Tri-State Royal was begun in 1962, and the Price family helped organize and ran the event for more than 20 years.

"We will try to have a special celebration and honor the Price family that afternoon," she said.

Winners from surrounding counties in Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska bring their livestock to Goodland for the special event. The Tri-State Royal is not an official fair event, but it is important to Ron and Marsha.

Marsha said they will have contestants from 20 counties, and the names of all the past winners are on the wall in the barn. She said they come each year to make sure the names are right, and in some cases the contestants are the third generation.

She said it has been a good show, and recently Penny Sheldon helped redo the boards when they were beginning to look worn. Marsha said Sheldon was doing a sign business at that time, and Cara Bowman is helping keep the boards up now.

Ron said they got financial help from some of the families to get the boards redone.

"All the history is on those boards," he said. "They come back to look. I got to meet my daughter-in-law when she was a young girl. She is on the board."

Sons Cash and Chance are at the farm helping and live in homes nearby. Cash has a custom spraying business and Chance is a Pioneer seed salesman.

Clay is a junior at K-State and plans to graduate with two degrees one in animal science and the second in ag business.

Son Clay was just back from the National Limousin show in Amarillo where he won the senior champion.

Marsha said Clay had some champions in open show, and did very well.

Ron said the boys are at the point where they are selling a lot of show cattle.

One year at the National Western Stock Show in Denver they sold bulls into at least five states including Utah and Oklahoma.

"We got to be on RFD television," Ron said. "They filmed us at the stock show in Denver for about four hours. It was about 10 minutes when it was shown in March or April."

He said the television segment can be seen in the RFD archives on the Internet.

Marsha said Clay had received champion at the national Limousin

show last year.

"We had the show in Kansas," she said, "and we had a lot of responsibilities to help set the show up. It was held in Hutchinson."

"We had great weather it rained last year."

She said this year it was dry in Amarillo, and one afternoon about chore time it looked like a storm was moving in so everyone was hurrying to get done. She said it was a dirt cloud, and it was nasty for about 15 minutes.

"It is nice to have the boys," she said. "We can get so much more done. We have added on cows and farm ground."

Ron said he feels parents are here to help their kids.

"It has been an honor to watch the boys want to come back and do what we are doing," he said. "They enjoy agriculture and people."

"We see families where the kids don't want to come back," Marsha said. "We feel blessed our kids want to come back."

Ron said he has seen lots of young kids coming back. He feel the prices are up and some of the kids can afford to come back and be on the farm.

"Our community can't succeed and grow unless they come back," he said. "The community might have a chance if we can get the kids to come back."

Ron feels they need to get people from the eastern part of the state out here to understand the story of agriculture. He said it is important for the farmers and ranchers to tell their story. He said he has relations living in Kansas City who are one generation removed from the farm and they don't know the importance of agriculture.

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