

Half of Kansans Say They Haven’t Heard of the Ogallala Aquifer. Here’s Why You Should Care

By Calen Moore

H A S K E L L COUNTY, Kansas — For a farmer like Bret Rooney, not a day goes by that he doesn’t ponder the pond under his feet. That is the Ogallala aquifer.

The subsurface reservoirs trapped between fractured layers of rock and soil saved this region after the infamous Dust Bowl, and remain the source of economic life in the present day.

But that groundwater has been running out after generations of pumping to support agriculture and the state’s economy.

Rooney bundles up on a cold morning and drives his truck out to his water pumps. These pumps are the soul of most western Kansas farms, but he’s been aware that something has been wrong. From decommissioning pumps to water just not spraying at the same rate it used to.

“Since my first day farming, we’ve noticed things were going on,” Rooney said. “We felt the physical effects of the depletion of the water and we’ve had to make adjustments and changes.”

If losing a third of the state’s main water source sounds like a big deal, it’s because it is. But these farmers seem to be the minority in their concern.

“It’s not just a farmer’s issue. You’re gonna struggle, whether you depend on them or their services,” Rooney said.

Not only is the aquifer physically invisible, but this environmental crisis has been broadly ignored.

Depletion of the water supply would be a critical blow to major farming and beef industries, which would send reverberations across the state. Simply living farther east in places like Wichita, Topeka or the Kansas City area won’t make you immune to the effects of lost jobs and tax revenue.

But the potential upset hasn’t drawn attention among Kansans, overall. A recent survey from the Midwest Newsroom and Emerson College Polling found that 48% of Kansans said they have never heard of the aquifer.

That number came to no surprise to state officials and academics who work with Kansas water issues.

“In my personal interaction with some people in the city, they don’t really even know that

we do have a problem below us,” Jonathan Aguilar, water resources expert for Kansas State University, said in an interview.

For some in Kansas, water is taken very seriously.

Large parts of the region have seen more than half of their water disappear since the dawn of irrigation. Wallace County on the Colorado border for example has lost roughly 80%. And Kansas State University predicts that in 75 years, almost all of the Ogallala aquifer in Kansas could be depleted.

For someone like Aguilar, the lack of awareness is frustrating. Even his children have heard the same speeches from him by now when he sees water being wasted.

“If I see the sprinkler going off right after a rainstorm, they say ‘Papa, don’t. Don’t be mad at them’,” Aguilar said.

But Aguilar suspects part of the reason for this imbalance of attention is plainly because western Kansas is less populated, leading to more focus on water issues in the eastern half of the state.

“That’s why there’s more emphasis on erosion or reservoirs, rather than groundwater conservation,” Aguilar said.

Most of eastern Kansas gets drinking water from rivers and reservoirs. But that still doesn’t mean those places are immune to the effects of the depleting aquifer.

Some people may not worry about something until it’s happening in their own backyard.

Connie Owen, director for the Kansas Water Office, said since Kansas water systems are connected, when water drops in one area, other places will feel it.

“If you deplete the groundwater, that’s going to deplete the stream flow and there are parts of northwest, north central Kansas where depletion of the Ogallala can impact the Kansas River basin,” Owen said.

That means that when the Ogallala continues to be over pumped, even if you live far away in Lawrence or Topeka, your water quality will be affected. Less stream flow means more sediments in rivers and reservoirs that northeast Kansas communities use for their drinking water.

And that is costly because it forces municipalities to

develop more intense water treatment centers.

“The rest of the state will have to have to deal with the fallout and make up the difference,” Owen said.

Owen also believes preserving natural resources is the right thing to do. She said that alone should be reason enough to get people’s attention.

“If there is a natural resource that exists, I think that there is a moral obligation to be a good steward of that and not decimate that for profit,” Owen said.

About 85% of the water used in Kansas is for crops, but in western Kansas, that water is also needed for its residents. Losing that water will lead to more than just crops being thirsty.

The Ogallala aquifer is not just a natural resource, but it made the economic life of western Kansas possible.

Nathan Hendricks is an agricultural economist for Kansas State University. He said without its stability, thousands could lose their jobs, and be displaced due to a lack of water.

“Western Kansas, has a significant livestock industry that’s been built up. That’s really based on the aquifer production,” Hendrickson said.

Almost a quarter of all U.S. beef consumed is processed in western Kansas.

Haskell County for instance contributes over \$1 million to the state’s economy. That’s nearly \$1,000 per person.

Farming in western Kansas powers an \$11 billion beef industry, a multi-billion-dollar food production industry and tens of thousands of jobs, all of which have some direct connection to the groundwater.

Including indirect and induced effects, agriculture and agriculture-related sectors have a total impact of \$81.2 billion in output and 253,614 jobs in Kansas.

A major drop in water resources would wreak havoc on the entire state’s economy.

Officials have said education will need to be part of the solution to get more eyes on the Ogallala aquifer.

B r a y d e n Schumaker is a student at Kansas State University studying geology. He is really passionate about the Ogallala aquifer in Kansas but said other young people

around him aren’t, even in some environmentally conscious circles.

But there’s reason to hope that there could be water left for Schumaker’s generation in the future. If more people pay attention to the problems at hand.

“If people really cared about environmental issues within Kansas, we can start solving them right now and not later,” Schumaker said.

Last year the Legislature and governor approved a law that requires groundwater management districts in western Kansas to develop water-saving plans. It also says that the districts need to do more outreach in the communities and get communities more involved in water conservation solutions. Action and outreach should be expected in the regions where it’s needed

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mom was hand milked and the calf was bottle fed.

When it became clear that this calf would require a lot of intervention for survival, he and mama were moved to our calf shed.

The calf shed is the closest thing on the farm to a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The shed is a small three-sided building with a few private pens that can keep mama and baby together out of wind or rain.

The baby made it through the first night but it was a long way from going without assistance because he lacked size and strength. Over the next few days, twice a day the cow was moved into a stanchion so she could be hand-milked safely. While she was being milked, I often spent time trying to get the calf to stand and walk.

By the third day, the calf had defied the odds and was able to stand for a few minutes and even wobble-walked half the length of the shed. Those steps were small and insignificant to a normal calf, but I felt pride in the little guy’s herculean efforts.

If you have read this far you probably think I am going to tell you that the premature calf defied odds and is thriving today. That is how the

most, but outreach is still needed outside of western Kansas.

The Kansas Water Office, based in Topeka, is also pushing to teach about the Ogallala aquifer in schools.

Back in Haskell County, farmer Bret Rooney surveys the land that sits above the Ogallala aquifer. He said that this is something everyone should know about.

“Every single one of us relies on water, whether you’re in agriculture production like me, or you want to have a nice, soft lawn for your kids to go play on,” Rooney said. “It touches us all.”

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Hollywood happy ending should go. Unfortunately, his little body gave up on the morning of Day Five. Anytime a calf dies, it is hard but when you invest so many hours and get invested it is completely crushing.

Farm life is full of miraculous and beautiful moments. It can also be devastating and heart wrenching. Calving season most vividly juxtaposes those two feelings in a rollercoaster of ups and downs that flow quickly through time.

Marc always tells me not to get attached to calves, but I can’t help it when invest so much time in them. I want them to have the fairytale ending of defying odds and surviving. But this isn’t a fairytale or Hollywood and happy endings are not guaranteed.

In farming you can’t worry too far into the future. It’s better to focus on the here and now, celebrating the small victories and being thankful for whatever little progress is made. This little calf made it four days when it wasn’t likely to survive two. Four days isn’t long, but for this one little calf it was a whole lifetime.

When a story reaches its end, we can find peace in knowing we tried even if we didn’t succeed.

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Position description and application may be obtained at www.tcec.coop under the Careers tab.

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Legal Notice

First published in the Elkhart Tri-State News, Thursday, November 28, 2024, Thursday, December 5, 2024, Thursday, December 12, 2024.

IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF MORTON COUNTY, KANSAS

IN THE MATTER OF THE ESTATE OF)
)
JOHN M. HOBBLE, II, DECEASED) Case No. MT-2024-PR-000025

NOTICE OF HEARING

STATE OF KANSAS, TO ALL PERSONS CONCERNED:

You are hereby notified that a Petition has been filed in this court by Terri M. Hobble, Personal Representative of the estate of John M. Hobble, II, deceased, praying that the foreign Will of John M. Hobble, II, deceased, be admitted to probate and record in this court; that no administration of this estate is necessary; that the Will be construed; and that all real estate described in the Petition and all other property owned by the decedent in Kansas be assigned in accordance with the terms of the Will.

You are required to file your written defenses thereto on or before December 20, 2024, at 10:00 o'clock a.m., of said day, in said court, in the City of Elkhart, in Morton County, Kansas, at which time and place said cause will be heard. Should you fail therein, judgment and decree will be entered in due course upon the Petition.

Terri M. Hobble, Petitioner

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Legal Notice

First published in the Elkhart Tri-State News, Thursday, November 28, 2024, Thursday, December 5, 2024, Thursday, December 12, 2024.

IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF MORTON COUNTY, KANSAS

IN THE MATTER OF THE ESTATE)
)
OF) Case No. MT-2024-PR-000026
)
GARY R. GRICE, A/K/A)
GARY GRICE AKA,)
GARY ROYCE GRICE, DECEASED)
(Petition Pursuant to K.S.A. Chapter 59)

NOTICE OF HEARING

THE STATE OF KANSAS TO ALL PERSONS CONCERNED:

You are notified that a Petition has been filed in this Court by Margaret Grice, spouse and one of the heirs of Gary R. Grice, deceased, requesting:

Descent be determined of the following described real estate situated in Morton County, Kansas:

NW/4 of S1-T35S-42W, and the S/2 NE/4 of S2-T35S-42W, Morton County, Kansas;

and all personal property and other Kansas real estate owned by decedent at the time of death. And that such property and all personal property and other Kansas real estate owned by the decedent at the time of death be assigned pursuant to the terms of the "Valid Settlement Agreement" dated October 25, 2024.

You are required to file your written defenses to the Petition on or before January 7, 2025 at 1:00 p.m. in the District Court, in the city of Elkhart in Morton County, Kansas, at which time and place the cause will be heard. Should you fail to file your written defenses, judgment and decree will be entered in due course upon the Petition.

[/s/Jeremiah Johnson](#)
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