

IN KANSAS:"A CONSERVATIONIST'S VIEW

Article by Joyce Wolf

Governor Brownback's call at the 2013 Water Conference to examine Kansas' future water needs through the 50-Year Water Vision correctly laid out the two primary water-related issues facing the state: 1) nearly 70% of the population gets its drinking water from reservoirs that have been filling with sediment; and 2) the Ogallala Aquifer in western Kansas has been depleted by irrigation. Neither of these problems, however, is new. It has been known for more than 30 years that irrigation has taken its toll on the ability of the Ogallala-High Plains aquifer to meet the needs of western Kansas' communities and agriculture. And it has been several decades that sedimentation has been recognized as a challenge for reservoir and watershed management.

Timeline for Planning and a Name Change

As described on the Kansas Water Office's (KWO) website this visioning process was to be completed and the final document released during the 2014 Governor's Water Conference. But because Kansas' water issues tend to be complicated, that deadline has come and gone. It appears, however, that they were listening to comments by the general public and representatives from conservation organizations who attended several meetings with the Vision Team members during the spring and summer of 2014. As a result of those meetings the second Vision is now called: "A LONG-TERM VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF WATER SUPPLY IN KANSAS." That seemingly simple change in the title reflects the numerous comments made about the first draft:

- it did not include any notion of sustainability;
- it did not promote a diversified, ecologically-based system of agriculture which reflects available resources;
- it did not mention the potential ramifications of climate change;

- it did not call for full funding of the State Water Plan;
- it neglected to include the negative effects on wildlife because the state does not enforce its policy of ensuring Minimum Desirable Streamflows (MDS);
- it did not recognize the economic benefits of water-based recreation;
- and furthermore, water-quality issues were barely mentioned.

Those are but a handful of the hundreds of comments that were made between the time the visioning process was announced in 2013 and when the second version was distributed in November 2014. But merely emphasizing water supply, without giving recognition to the overall context in which it occurs, is shortsighted at best. Unless we address the issues mentioned above, and protect all of our natural resources, there will be no long term.

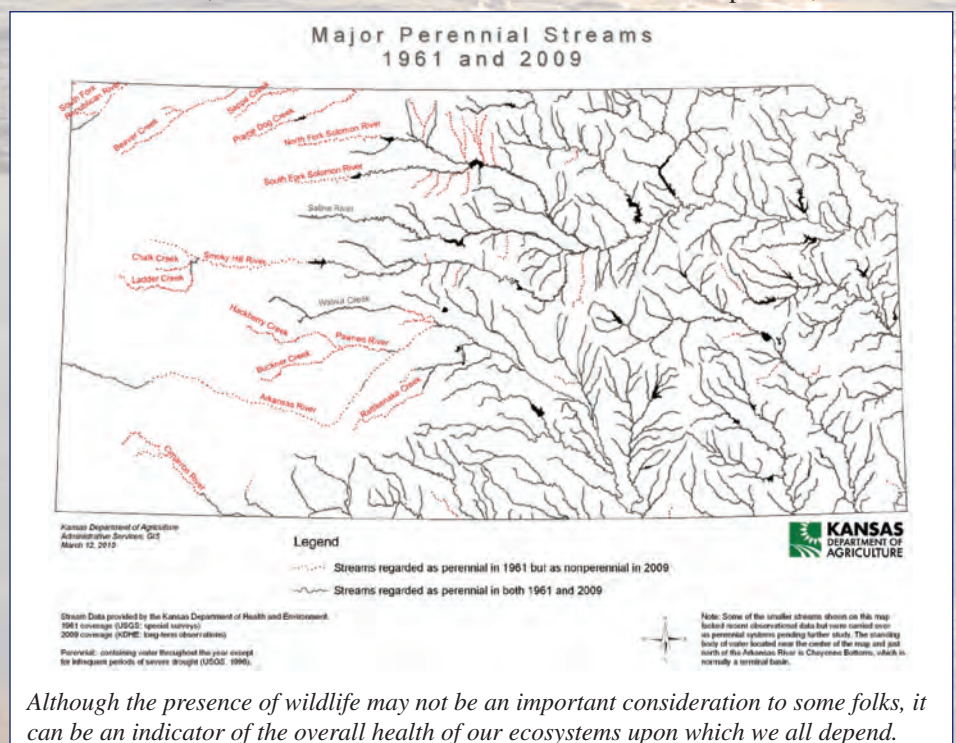
Where Are We Now in the Process?

Since the second version was released in November 2014, there have been

multiple meetings across the state, including those held during March 2015 in the new regional planning areas. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the 50-Year Vision process was switching from statewide watershed-based planning areas to a combination of watersheds and political boundaries in central Kansas and to purely political boundaries in the western counties. In the latter case, this appears to be recognition that the planners no longer have any expectation of those rivers and streams ever sustaining year-round flows. And with no flows in the streams and rivers, they will not support aquatic wildlife. Not only will this affect the biota within the rivers and streams in those areas but it essentially eliminates water-based recreation for Kansas citizens there as well.

Wildlife and Environment Historically Have Been Addressed in the State Water Plan

It should be noted that in 1985, to ensure that stakeholders throughout the state had an opportunity to be heard in the State Water Plan process, Basin





Proposed New State Water Plan Regions

RACs/GOALS_
RAC_August
2015.pdf

A quick review of each of the RAC's goals found no mention of water for wildlife, very little about protecting water quality, a lot about sedimentation in

that took place under former Governor Mike Hayden, which established the State Water Plan Fund, I'm somewhat at a loss to understand why those efforts are being abandoned. The Water Plan Fund is supposed to receive about \$6 million annually from the State General Fund, about \$2 million from the EDIF (lottery monies), and the remainder from fees on fertilizers, pesticides, stock water, and municipal and rural water districts. Those negotiations took two legislative sessions to reach an acceptable compromise, and in my opinion we ended with a system where "everyone pays and everyone benefits."

Unfortunately, since his first election, Governor Brownback has chosen to never fully fund the State Water Plan Fund. Instead those funds have been diverted from the Water Plan Fund and used for other purposes. Over the last 5 fiscal years, the General Fund transfer has only been made once, in FY 2011 in the amount of \$1.3 million (and that budget would have been passed during the 2010 legislative session before his election).

ACTIONS AND CHOICES HAVE CONSEQUENCES

Sedimentation in Kansas Reservoirs

As previously mentioned, most Kansans get their drinking-water supply from reservoirs and also rely on them for flood protection. Unfortunately, many reservoirs are losing their capacity for both functions as sediment accumulates on the bottom of the lakes, significantly reducing their storage capacity. And in some cases this process is happening at a far faster rate than originally projected. The most critical of these reservoirs is John Redmond, near Burlington, which provides cooling water for Wolf Creek Nuclear Power Plant. Current estimates for dredging John Redmond Reservoir and implementation of upstream watershed protection practices came in at nearly \$25 million. Bonds have been approved and that process is now underway. Ultimately nearly all of Kansas' major reservoirs will need sediment removed – at similar costs. If the General Funds that were supposed to be "dedicated" to the State Water Plan had not been swept away, a large portion of the nearly \$24 million could have been

Advisory Committees (BACs) were established in each of the 12 river basins in Kansas. All BACs had seven "core" categories with a representative from each of the sectors: agriculture, conservation/environment, fish and wildlife, industry/commerce, municipal public water suppliers, recreation and one slot for an at-large public member.

By December 2014, the Kansas Water Authority established the Regional Advisory Committees (RAC) pictured above, which will transition from the 12 Basin Advisory Committees. As noted earlier, because water for wildlife was not part of the original 50-Year Vision, it should not come as a surprise if new "core" categories of concern will change as well. If previous meeting schedules continue, these RACs will meet a few times a year to provide recommendations to the Kansas Water Authority for evaluation and adoption in future State Water Plan changes. However, it seems highly likely that for now, these Regional Advisory Committees are tasked with looking mainly at water supply issues – with even less attention given to wildlife concerns.

The following is an August 2015 quote from the chairman of the KS Water Authority: "The KWA and I want to commend the stakeholders in each of the 14 regions who put in so much time and effort to produce water supply goals (emphasis added) to help ensure their area's water future," said KWA Chairman Gary Harshberger. "With Governor Brownback's leadership on Kansas water priorities this will enable the KWA and KWO to change the way water planning will be done in Kansas going forward." Each of the Regional Advisory Committee's goals can be read at: <http://www.kwo.org/>

Kansas reservoirs, and also seeking new sources of supply by building new reservoirs or increasing the storage capacity of current reservoirs either by dredging, which is expensive, or by raising the conservation pool. The latter option might mean either diminishing the flood-storage capacity of a reservoir or increasing the height of the dam, so that the reservoir can hold more water without losing its flood-water storage capacity.

The first priority action item was implemented in May 2015: the Governor's Water Resource Sub-Cabinet was formed to include the Water Office, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health and Environment and Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. It will be the responsibility of the secretaries to represent their agency and constituencies to the governor for his consideration and approval.

Funding Is Key to Solving Kansas' Water Issues

The second priority action item: Establish a Blue Ribbon Task Force to develop a balanced, affordable and sustainable method to provide financing for water resource management and protection, including alternatives that utilize public and private partnerships. According to KWO staff members, candidates' names have been suggested and the final selection of Task Force members will be announced at the 2015 Governor's Water Conference. Given the state's budget woes, the challenge will be considerable to find acceptable funding sources.

The Original State Water Plan Fund

Having been a part of the negotiations

used to fund conservation practices in the watersheds upstream from our reservoirs. So we've not only missed the ability to decrease sedimentation, we've continued to lose fertile farm ground that serves us best when it stays in place to grow our food and feed our livestock.

DEPLETION OF THE OGALLALA AQUIFER AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

Embedded within this section of the first draft was the proposal to build an aqueduct, tapping the Missouri River in far northeast Kansas and sending the water to western Kansas. There are many stumbling blocks with this scenario -- among the first being "water doesn't run uphill." Thus it would take enormous amounts of energy to pump the billions of gallons of water 360+ miles westward and approximately 1500 feet in elevation from the source to the end users. This proposal was first floated in 1982; however, upon further study and evaluation, it was abandoned at that time.

The proposal was to only tap "excess" water from the Missouri River (during flood times), build a reservoir in far northeast Kansas, then transport that water across the state to the thirsty counties that don't get adequate precipitation to meet their needs. The first problem was that based on historic flows in the Missouri River, of the projected need for 4-6 million acre/feet annually, only a little more than 30% of the time would 4 million acre/feet be available. And those projections did not take into account the likelihood of lesser flows due to decreased snow in the upper part of the watershed.

Although engineers deemed the project feasible, the anticipated cost of the aqueduct was staggering -- perhaps as much as \$18 BILLION dollars! And those cost estimates did not include environmental remediation, litigation from downstream states, or a system of distribution once the water arrived in western Kansas. It was also projected to cost as much as \$1 billion annually to operate the aqueduct. Perhaps the final blow was the estimate of \$450 per acre/foot to deliver the water, which would mean a cost of \$45,000 just for irrigating 100 acres of land. Thankfully

this proposal has once again been abandoned, but the question remains: what will happen to agriculture in the western part of the state?

Kansas policies have continued to encourage unsustainable practices. The aqueduct proposal was being considered because the economic engine driving much of western Kansas is the so-called "Golden Triangle" -- water, corn and cattle. Recently another leg has been added to the triangle -- ethanol production from corn. As the Governor correctly pointed out, these drivers add billions to the Kansas economy. But the single factor underlying this engine is water. And just as a car stops running when it runs out of gas, the western Kansas agricultural economy, based on depletion of the Ogallala/High Plains aquifer, will certainly sputter and likely have to change dramatically if continued exploitation of water resources are not curtailed.

Certainly this fact was known at the outset of the Visioning process. The promise of transporting water across the state was being touted as a solution to depletion of the High Plains aquifers. And many of the irrigators, especially in the southwestern Groundwater Management District #3, were counting on this proposal to save the current system of agriculture. I believe it was a huge disservice to those irrigators to encourage and promote an unsustainable idea that could never successfully find funding, given the current state of Kansas' financial affairs.

ENCOURAGING FURTHER WATER CONSERVATION

The revised Vision calls for the appointment of a task force to develop educational proposals for students, adults, and communities along with specific examples of activities that promote and encourage effective conservation measures on a statewide basis. For those living in the Ogallala-High Plains aquifer region of the state, the plan promotes greater adoption of Local Enhanced Management Areas (LEMAs). Further information on LEMAs can be found on the KWO website as well as on the Division of Water Resources (DWR) website. Irrigators within northwest

Kansas' Sheridan County have voluntarily agreed to institute measures which will permit them to continue to farm, while reducing the amount of water withdrawn from the aquifer. As the results are published on the DWR website, it is hoped that these innovative irrigators will be able to demonstrate that it is possible to maintain a profitable operation while reducing water use.

"OGALLALA ROAD" ADVICE FROM SOMEONE WHO HAS LIVED IN WESTERN KANSAS:

In her book "Ogallala Road: A Memoir of Love and Reckoning," Julene Bair, author and daughter of a Kansas Irrigator, has shown keen insight on what will need to happen to keep agriculture viable in our western communities:

"In place of corn subsidies, the government should provide generous financial incentives for a return to dryland crops and grazing. This is where Kansas agriculture is headed regardless -- the only choice being between a soft landing now and a crash landing later. If both the state and federal governments continue to encourage farmers to pump water until it is gone, the farmers will have no way of supplementing their dryland crops during droughts or increasingly hot summer weather. A water plan that truly comes to grips with this truth could keep thousands of farms from going bankrupt and taking the Kansas economy along with them."

Although each of the conservation groups that met regularly with the Visioning Team members addressed water issues in Kansas from a slightly different perspective, I believe that everyone was in full agreement that the state, communities and individuals must learn to live within their means -- that is you can't use more than what can be replenished in a reasonable timeframe. Only time will tell whether or not the visioning process has ignited better understanding and appreciation for the state's water resources and, if in doing so, Kansans will have adopted more sustainable and responsible practices toward all of our natural resources.