

South Kansas town fights water woes

By Kathy Hanks
The Hutchinson News

SUBLETTE (AP) – Jerry Bailey says it feels like half a century since he became mayor.

But it was only in April that the retired school teacher won the seat in a write-in election.

Lately he has been feeling like he won the booby prize. Days before he was sworn into office in May, this southwest Kansas town of 1,500 residents began experiencing a strain on the water supply. Still, the problem grew worse. Faced with a deepening drought, and experiencing a string of triple digit days, there was added pressure to the city's wells, which were already showing age.

The Cain Well, the best the city had, completely caved in on a 100-degree day when people had a strong thirst and lawns and gardens begged for water. The Fairgrounds Well also was down, needing a new engine.

"We had four wells and lost two within five days and were in panic mode," said Bailey, who was called out in the early hours of the Fourth of July weekend due to the urgency of the water situation. Bailey, three council men, the city superintendent and other volunteers sprung into action.

"Once we discovered it, we stopped police officers and called 911," Bailey said. Law enforcement went door to door notifying the public to shut off sprinklers and stop other outdoor watering.

It was a stressful weekend that included announcements at all the churches that a voluntary water rationing was going into effect throughout the city.

In addition to dealing with serious water issues, Bailey is quickly learning how to work with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, the Kansas Department of Agriculture, as well as the touchy issue of eminent domain – all part of a crash course in county government 101 the one-time resident has been thrust into.

Since then to handle the emergency, the city has implemented odd/even water usage based on house numbers and new water rates will go into effect Sept.

1. The new rates will only increase for those using more than 25,000 gallons, increasing by 25 cents per 1,000 gallons over 25,000. In the summertime the average households might average 50,000 gallons a month, according to Jeannie Trigg, city clerk.

Those not complying with the water rationing will be charged penalties not less than \$25 or more than \$100 per violation, depending on the severity of violation. Only repeat offenders would be charged. Bailey said they won't go after the person unaware it's not their day to water.

"We're not looking at putting people in jail," Bailey said. "It's to keep people from violating water usage."

In recent days he has even been the enforcer, knocking at doors telling people it's not their day to water. Most people have been glad to comply, he said.

Sublette's incredibly hot July found residents using about 28 million gallons of water out of three wells.

While Sublette has not arrived at the point where they can't draw a bath, the peak hours between noon and 6 p.m. finds water pressure pretty low.

Production is down with all wells in southwest Kansas. Bailey says the aquifer has dropped 3 feet this summer. However, experts say that once the peak water use season is over, and wells are turned off, the aquifer will recover some of that loss.

However Bruce Reichmuth, manager of Hydro Resources, an irrigation and supply company that works on high volume irrigation wells worries this year might be different. This summer consumers have been pumping harder and longer because of the drought. While he says its common to see the seasonal drop of the water table, last winter there wasn't a recovery time

Concern now mounts because the Cain Well is still not in use. Hydro Resources has re-drilled a new well nearby, after receiving approval through the Kansas Division of Water Resources to change the point of diversion of the water. Now the engine must be built over the well, pipes placed to the city line and wa-

ter samples approved by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

This has been a busy summer for drilling wells, including a new well in Meade and an upcoming visit to Moscow regarding a new well.

"Everything is worse this year than I remember in 36 years in the business," Reichmuth said. "It's tough."

For years the city has been using band-aid technology to fix problems, said Stan Rinehart, city superintendent. The attitude toward the city's infrastructure has been out of sight, out of mind.

However, the city leaders had foresight and purchased water rights back in April 2009 from Haskell County landowners Kevin and Becky Morris, preparing for the time when they would need more water. They paid the couple \$125,000 for a well about a half mile outside of town.

The contract stated if the city had to replace the well it would be replaced under Kansas Department of Health and Environment requirements. Those requirements included a pollution easement of about a 100-foot radius around the well. Bailey estimates they need about three more acres of Morris' land to guarantee those farming the land nearby never harm the water supply by using chemicals. The Morris' won't sign the easement contract, citing a personal issue.

Bailey has been assured by the Morris' that in time they will sign the easement. While Bailey knows they could seize the land through eminent domain he

doesn't like the idea of "yanking the land away."

"Once you start doing that you send out a message that you are willing to do it to all the other land owners," Bailey said. "It becomes a real source of contention. We have never done that to my knowledge."

However, two council members made a motion at the Aug. 1 meeting to proceed with eminent domain to acquire the needed pollution easement for the Morris Well. The motion failed 3-2.

Bailey is hoping that the two parties will come together as soon as possible. Their town needs at least four good wells. Even after the Cain Well is back up running and the Morris well is pumping water to the city, Bailey says they will be looking for other wells.

The city has appointed a long term planning committee to begin looking at the issues facing this community down the road 10 years. Water is at the top of the list, including additional wells and repairing and replacing water transmission systems, and additional engines for new wells.

Bailey's focus and dream is to get started on that plan, so they can be a proactive city government not a reactive one.

His hope is that the Cain Well will be back in operation by October or November.

But for the immediate future Bailey is hanging on the hope of a prolonged cool spell sometime in August with lots of rainfall.

Maintaining grass waterways essential for soil and habitat health

Grass waterways are an important part of a farm's overall soil conservation plan, but producers and landowners have to work at maintaining them or they cannot fulfill their function, said DeAnn Presley, K-State Research and Extension soil management specialist.

Grass waterways are permanent strips of grass seeded in areas of cropland where water either concentrates or flows off a field from terraces or diversions.

They have several functions, each of which adds value to a farm, Presley said.

"The overall purpose of the waterway is to carry runoff water from a field. The grass prevents the water from forming a gully and traps some sediment," she said.

"In addition, the vegetation absorbs some of the chemicals and nutrients in the runoff water, and provides habitat for small animals

and birds."

For maintenance of grass waterways, Presley recommends:

- Lift equipment out of the ground and shut off spray equipment when crossing the waterway. Encourage commercial applicators to do the same.
- If bare spots appear, reseed with sod-forming grasses.
- Do not use the waterway as a roadway. Tracks can turn into gullies in single, intense rain events.
- Do not overgraze or allow livestock trails to form. These can quickly turn into gullies.
- If gullies form, fill, reshape, and reseed. Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service field office for recommendations on grass species to plant.
- Fertilize cool-season grasses regularly at a rate of 30 to 40 pounds of nitrogen per acre between November and mid-March. Many producers fertilize grass

waterways when they topdress wheat.

- Mow periodically, but don't mow between April 20 and July 15 when birds are nesting. It's important to mow grass because it encourages the formation of a dense sod.

Also, shorter, thick grass is more effective at trapping sediment than tall grass, which will lay over in an intense rain event.

- Be careful not to till into the edges of the waterway.
- Avoid end rows planted parallel along the waterway. They may allow gullies to form on the waterway edge.

For information, see K-State publication MF-1064, "Maintaining Grass Waterways," available at your local county Research and Extension office or at: www.ksre.ksu.edu/library/crps12/mf1064.pdf/.

Water and Kansas' future topic of September conference

With much of Kansas dealing with drought conditions this summer, a water conference planned in Topeka may be especially important this year.

The "Water and the Future of Kansas Conference" planned for Friday, Sept. 30, at the Capitol Plaza Hotel in Topeka will address a wide range of water quantity and quality issues facing the state, offering both presentations and poster displays.

"Anyone interested in water should attend this conference to learn more about issues affecting our water supply and quality,"

Replanting lawn under trees? Think again

Tall fescue is the best shade grass for Kansas, but that's not saying much.

"Mostly, tall fescue is best because the state's other recommended turfs can't handle any shade. Tall fescue can handle some. It won't survive over the long term, though, under a large tree that produces deep shade," said Ward Upham, K-State Research and Extension horticulturist.

Tall fescue can raise false hopes, he warned. Planted under trees in September, the turf grows through fall and greens up in spring.

"Growing conditions tend to be

said Dan Devlin, director of the Kansas Center for Agricultural Resources and the Environment and the Kansas Water Resource Institute – both based at Kansas State University.

The two entities, along with K-State Research and Extension and the U.S. Geological Survey, are sponsoring the conference.

Topics of the general session include the future of Kansas water resources, sustainable Wichita water plans, trends for water use in the U.S. and dealing with drought and water resources in Texas.

Topics planned for the concur-

rent sessions range from "Ogalala: High Aquifer Sustainability" and "Surface Water Quality" to "Streambank Restoration" and "Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources in Kansas," in addition to several others.

The fee to attend is \$65 if paid by Wednesday, Sept. 14, and \$90 after that date or at the door – \$25 for full-time undergraduate and graduate students.

Information, including registration instructions, is available online at www.dce.k-state.edu/conf/waterfuture or by calling (800) 432-8222.

going with a much lighter seeding rate – 3 to 4 pounds of fescue seed per 1,000 square feet or about half what's recommended," Upham said. "With less competition, the turf will be thinner, healthier and likely to live longer."

Even that won't work in deep shade. In that case, he said, homeowners have three choices:

- If it won't destroy trees' shape, prune up lower branches so early and late sunlight reaches the turf.
- Plant a groundcover adapted to shady sites – e.g., periwinkle or English ivy.
- Mulch under the tree.

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