

Meeting looks at depletion of water supply in Kansas

Water. It's essential to life, yet often not treated as the precious commodity it is.

More than 500 farmers, land-owners and experts came to the Governor's Conference on the Future of Water in Kansas on Oct. 30 and 31 in Manhattan, put on by Kansas State University and the Kansas Water Office.

Growing populations in some areas, combined with climate change, fixed water supplies and a declining Ogallala Aquifer mean the state needs to determine the economic value of water, said Frank Ward, professor of agricultural economics at New Mexico State University.

Several presentations focused on the Ogallala Aquifer, the vast,

shallow underground pool that lies underneath much of the High Plains in eight states – Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma. Many farmers and ranchers use water from the Ogallala.

"For agriculture, we combine 'crop production function' developed by agricultural engineers and agronomists with crop budgets developed by agricultural economists to generate 'crop revenue functions,'" said Bill Golden, an agricultural economist with K-State Research and Extension. "The first inches of applied groundwater are much more valuable than the last inches applied.

"The implication is, if we save

the last inches today and use them in the future as first inches, we might have gains in value and groundwater conservation policy can yield significant future benefits to the producer and rural economies."

Golden, who led a recent study on water use in southwest Kansas, said that over the period 1975-1999, the value of water increased about .4 percent a year. However, because of a combination of drought and high commodity prices, the value has jumped 9.7 percent per year since then.

The study also estimated that the average value of groundwater to producer net revenue ranged from \$129 per acre foot to \$182. The estimated average value of

groundwater to a rural community, however, as measured by total industry output, ranged from \$645 per acre foot to \$921. The values varied depending on crop mix, soil type, precipitation, well capacity and economic modeling scenarios.

"The implication is that groundwater is as important to the regional economy as it is to the producer," Golden said.

Another study he cited estimated the value of water in irrigated agriculture ranged from \$12 per acre foot to \$2,467, with an average value of \$345. The value of water for domestic use ranged from \$10 to \$3,552, with an average of \$715. And the value of water in industrial use ranged from

\$12 per acre foot to \$8,560, with an average of \$1,061.

A study on water use suggested that, accounting for only direct use, dairies are a relatively high-value user of water, generating more than \$93,000 per acre foot.

Overall, Golden said, agriculture is the high-volume, low-value water user.

"I'm not usually in favor of more regulation, but something more drastic needs to be done about the diminishing water supply in the Ogallala," said Kansas farmer Jay Garetson, who attended the conference, and a member of the state Board of Agriculture.

Garetson credited Gov. Sam Brownback for signing two bills into law this year designed to con-

serve the state's water supply and extend the life of the Ogallala, but said he believes more action is needed.

"This is one situation where voluntary conservation is akin to unilateral disarmament for farmers who irrigate," Garetson said. "What we need is a common requirement where everyone contributes to the long-term reduction. The way it is now, whoever slows down first loses."

The Ogallala is out of sight, he said, but if water was being depleted this fast from a lake, something would have been done by now.

For more on the conference, go to www.kwo.org/Ogallala/Governors_Conference_2012/Governors_Conference_2012.htm.

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