

## Other Viewpoints

# Money needed for Kansas schools

Good for Gov. Sam Brownback for recognizing that the state may lose its lawsuit over school funding and need more tax revenue. But where is this reflected in his budget? And hasn't he already pledged increased sales-tax revenue for other purposes, including further reducing the state's income taxes?

In arguing that the state should make its temporary sales-tax increase permanent, Brownback said in April that the state may need this revenue in case the Kansas Supreme Court rules against it on school funding. He noted that the state already has lost in the lower court, which ordered it to increase spending by at least \$440 million. Brownback said lawmakers should consider the impact a final ruling against the state could have on the state's budget.

"You could get yourself where you'd be in a crisis position, and I don't think that's prudent," Brownback said.

He's absolutely correct. But he's also late in acknowledging this.

This editorial board and many citizens across the state raised this same concern before Brownback signed massive income-tax cuts last year. How could the state afford to lose that much tax revenue, especially when it likely would lose the school-funding lawsuit?

Keeping the statewide sales-tax rate at 6.3 percent, as Brownback proposes, rather than letting it drop to 5.7 percent on July 1, would provide about \$262 million in additional state revenue a year. That's about 60 percent of the school funding increase that the lower court ordered.

But Brownback also has been saying that the additional sales-tax revenue is needed to prevent funding cuts to higher education. And he wants the extra revenue to help further phase down state income taxes.

The higher sales tax isn't like the biblical account of Jesus and the loaves and fishes – it can't feed a multitude of state budget needs.

Still, Brownback and the Legislature had been acting as if it won't matter how the court rules. They cut base state school aid to a level lower than it was before the state lost the last funding lawsuit. Then when the economy improved, they chose to cut income taxes rather than restore this funding.

So it was good to hear Brownback admit that the state could lose the lawsuit and need to significantly increase school funding. That should have been obvious, but it's progress.

– *The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press*



# New garden needs well-constructed soil

As my husband tilled up grass to make room for my first Kansas garden this spring, I compared my yard's dirt to the pictures in my gardening books with a bit of disappointment. It wasn't quite the rich, black, well-constructed soil I was hoping for.

But, it's obviously capable of growing things since that area also grew our best grass. I searched my books again for some help on what to do and landed on a solution: compost.

According to my research, compost can solve problems from poor soil structure to insufficient nutrients, but where can an aspiring gardener go to find this miracle substance?

One option is to make your own. This takes time, so it isn't a quick fix, though starting now should produce good compost for next year's growing season. You can make a quick compost bin using pallets assembled in a cube. It's handy to leave the top open so you can easily add more clippings or turn your pile for circulation. Also keep in mind that you'll need a way to open the cube when it's time to get the



**Heather Alwin**

• Frankly Frugal

compost out, so put hinges on one side.

Once your bin is assembled, add your grass clippings, weeds and kitchen scraps to the pile until the bin is full. Periodically "stir" your compost with a pitch fork, turning the outside bits inside, and make sure you keep it moist during dry weather.

Another option, especially if you don't have time to wait for your own pile to cook, is to buy compost from somewhere else. Several area stores sell bagged compost, ranging in price from \$1.89 to over \$4 a bag, depending on the type. While the size of my garden makes this an unrealistic option for me, gar-

deners with less ground to cover may find that purchasing a few bags each year is a lot less trouble than making their own.

The least expensive and easiest option is to pick up compost from the county landfill. The Thomas County Landfill offers compost at no charge, but they are out right now. Since it takes a few months for compost to develop, you may have to wait until later this summer to grab some there.

Since none of these options will work well for me this year, my garden will go without compost, so I'll just keep my fingers crossed that I get some kind of crop. But with a little planning, next year's harvest will be bigger and healthier.

*Heather Alwin is the society editor for the Colby Free Press and blogs at kansaslifewordpress.com. Before moving to Kansas, she was a lawyer with the U.S. Air Force. Alwin lives in Brewster with her husband and son.*

## Write us

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Before an election, letters will not be published after the Thursday before the polls open.

# Freeze worsens wheat woes

Just when Kansas wheat growers thought this year couldn't get any worse, Mother Nature dealt them a cruel blow with a record freeze. April 23 may have driven the final nail in the coffin for some wheat fields in southwest Kansas.

Temperatures were plenty cold in Ford County, where Rick Konecny recorded 18 degrees for an overnight low. East of his farm, Dodge City reported a 23-degree night and north in Garden City, the mercury dipped to 19.

"I'm not sure if our wheat crop can survive this freeze," Konecny says. "This is a pretty severe freeze for this time of the year."

But while he's worried about the wheat, the veteran Ford County farmer hasn't given up hope.

"Who knows what may happen," he says. "We'll have to wait until it warms up. You can never count a wheat crop out. When you do, it'll prove you wrong."

Compounding the late April freeze was an earlier freeze when temperatures dropped as low as 13 degrees on April 10. After this killer freeze, Finney County farmer Gary Millershaski said his wheat looked like someone sprayed a defoliant on it.

When you couple these two hard freezes in April with the continuation of a three-year drought – some label as the worst since the 1930s – you have a recipe for disaster.

That's been the case on Konecny's three farms within a 22 mile radius west of Dodge City. During a two and one-half year period, his land has fallen behind by 34 inches in



**John Schlageck**

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

moisture. That's in a region of Kansas where the annual rainfall is 16-17 inches per year.

With no subsoil moisture and no rainfall, the winter wheat on Konecny's farms looks bleak.

"We see some clouds once in a while," the dry-land wheat farmer says. "A front occasionally moves through and the forecast is for moisture, but all we receive is a couple points of precipitation."

Wheat in Konecny's fields 22 miles southwest of Dodge City is "virtually gone." Brown spots started to show up in early April.

"This wheat crumples in your fingers," he says. "This year's crop never got going."

Freezes are a funny thing, Konecny added. When a freeze hits a dry plant that is already stressed for moisture, it disrupts the cellular structure, and even though the plant may still look green, it kills it.

"It's kind of like when you take a flower or leaf and press it in a book," the Ford County farmer says. "It may maintain the same color, but there's nothing there. It's not a live plant anymore."

While many believe a wheat crop has nine lives, Konecny thinks it may have used them all up this year. Couple that with his last three

wheat crops that averaged 25, 5 and 3 bushels per acre, the prospect of another wheat failure would hit him square in the heart and deep in the pocket.

"It's very hard right now," he says. "As a farmer, I'm used to producing. You want to produce a wheat crop. It's your livelihood. It's how I grew up. Harvesting a good wheat crop helps define me and my self-worth. There's a real weight that comes on you when you deal with three years of drought and raising very little grain."

Continuing to farm represents a legacy of several generations, Konecny said. He feels not only responsible for his immediate family but the future of his children and the rich tradition of family farming established by his parents and grandparents.

"Late at night, you sometimes wonder, 'Am I done? Can I continue to farm? How long do I go on with 50 years and the better part of my life devoted to farming?'"

In spite of the dire circumstances and the prospect for another drought and crop failure, Konecny says he'll keep the faith and pray to his God to help him weather this drought.

"We simply go through the effort as farmers," he says. "I just always try to uphold my end of the bargain and pray. He's always seen us through."

*John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.*

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