
Resource Policy

Liberals escalate regional water issue: are America's wells really running dry?

by Sylvia Barkley

The Eastern press has mounted a growing attack on the use of water in agriculture. In part, this attack is an attempt to counter a move to re-open the debate on a national water policy geared to abundance rather than scarcity, which has recently emerged.

The essential thesis of the articles, including a five-part, front-page series in the *New York Times* Aug. 8-12, is that water must be diverted from "uneconomical" uses, in particular irrigation, and conserved for municipal and industrial needs that would otherwise be unmet. The articles defend the High Plains Study, a five-year, \$6 million analysis conducted principally by Arthur D. Little, of the future of the great Ogallala aquifer, which now supplies water for 11 million acres or 20 percent of the irrigated land in the United States. Contrary to the intent of Congress in commissioning the study, it has become a vehicle for spreading the "doom and gloom"

message that there are no economically feasible methods to continue irrigated farming in the Southwest.

U.S. News and World Report, in a June 24 cover story, maintained that irrigation is "overtaking Mother Nature" and the only solution is conservation.

In opposition to this passivity, scientists and various political forces are beginning to revive the thinking that built the Erie Canal and the Hoover Dam. In an article in *Scientific American* this July, Dr. Arthur Pillsbury, former head of the Department of Agriculture and Soil Science at UCLA, called for large-scale water-transfer programs as the only realistic long-term solution to the problem of salt buildup in irrigated soils and in the aquifers beneath them.

Moves are now afoot in Congress to set up the coordinating mechanisms necessary for carrying out nationwide irrigation plans, such as that introduced by Sen.

Ogallala aquifer: a case study

The Ogallala aquifer is one of the largest water-bearing formations in America, and one of those that has been most fully utilized. It underlies 117,000 square miles of the Western Great Plains from South Dakota to Texas, and contains at present more than 3 billion acre-feet of good-quality water. Since the 1940s use of the Ogallala has been intense, with a present usage at 30 million acre-feet a year, irrigating more than 16 million acres. On this level, sunny land grow crops worth an estimated \$8.6 billion.

The problem is that the Ogallala is being drained more rapidly than it is recharged. In many areas, the depth to which wells must be sunk is increasing, and in certain areas, there is no more water to be obtained. This depletion threatens the entire structure

of irrigated agriculture in the area—the huge sprinkler systems, the network of suppliers of agricultural equipment, the distributors of the corn and other farm products, and in particular the feed lots, where 40 percent of the nation's beef is nourished.

The concerns of the farmers, water planners, and public officials are well founded. But the outlook for the Ogallala is by no means hopeless. The prosperity fueled by the relatively accessible Ogallala water aquifer has provided a sound economic base for undertaking even larger projects to maintain and expand productive agriculture in the High Plains. In Texas, for example, voters are being given the opportunity to allocate half of the state's budget surplus to backing for local water-supply bond issues. In Wyoming, major diversion projects are being planned from the water-rich western part of the state to the east. On a long-term basis, however, the draining of the Ogallala will only be solved by massive projects for importation of water that is now unused, projects that are made economically viable by the extraordinary productivity of the irrigated High Plains agriculture that will be created by such projects.