

Getting Serious About Water Woes on the High Plains

Kansas Public Radio | By [Rex Buchanan](#)

Published December 16, 2023 at 8:37 AM CST

Parts of western Kansas are running out of water. This has been true for a long time. But Kansas is finally taking steps to address the problem. Commentator Rex Buchanan wonders whether those steps will be enough.

(Transcript)

Don't look now, but Kansas water is having a moment. In the past few weeks, the state's water issues were featured in long stories in the New York Times and the Kansas City Star. In state government, the legislature appropriated significant new water funding. The governor re-established a water subcabinet, that are regular get-togethers of the cabinet level agencies that deal with water. And the governor appointed a special advisor on water.

All this attention resulted in nearly palpable excitement in recent meetings held by water-related folks.

After going to a couple of those meetings, I had two take-home lessons - one good, one not so good - that sometimes get lost in the shuffle.

First, the good news. We used to think that stopping declines in the Ogallala aquifer out west would require draconian cutbacks in irrigation - maybe as much as 75%. When people heard numbers that drastic, their response was, I think, understandable. Cuts that big would be so severe, so daunting, their economic impact so great... why even try? The obvious response: throw your hands up and keep on pumping.

But work by my colleagues at the Kansas Geological Survey shows that such huge cutbacks may not be necessary to slow or even stop declines. In parts of the aquifer, reductions of 20 or 25% can extend the life of the aquifer significantly.

In places, irrigators have come together to voluntarily cut back 20% on water, through more precise irrigation scheduling and raising different crops. They've saved water and made just as much money.

But here's the other thing.

Improved water efficiency doesn't necessarily result in less water used. I know that doesn't sound right so I'll say it again. Conserving water - via improved irrigation efficiency - doesn't always result in using less water. Here's why: When irrigators save water, through new efficiencies, they often use the water they saved to irrigate more acres or switch to more water-thirsty, more profitable crops. In other words, they use the water they save.

One of my colleagues says that the allure of improved efficiency is a "zombie idea," a concept that isn't true, but just won't die.

I'm not saying that efficiency is bad. Obviously, nobody should be wasting water. But efficiency alone won't solve this. To truly slow water-level declines, cuts in water use have to actually save water.

Bottom line: we can stem declines in the Ogallala, but not with improved efficiency alone. We have to tie those efficiency measures to some sort of binding agreement to actually reduce the amount of water being pumped.

In a few weeks, I'll be headed west to measure water levels, part of the annual program by the Survey and the state's division of water resources. I expect that we'll see less-than-usual declines in places, mostly because summer rains in southwestern Kansas meant less irrigation.

If that's what we find, don't get idea that all the recent attention has solved our water woes. It'll take more than newspaper stories and meetings. We know what we need to do. Now we have to do it.

####

Commentator Rex Buchanan is a writer, author and director emeritus at the [Kansas Geological Survey](#). He lives in Lawrence.