

It ain't easy being Kansas – but it's better than the alternative

It ain't easy being Kansas. Those swell-headed bicoastal types call us "fly-over country," a place to look down on as they pass by on their way to someplace more important. We haven't got enough electoral votes to get even the most obscure presidential candidate to visit us. And while many of those denizens of LA and the Valley and the Big Apple actually hail from Kansas – or Nebraska or South Dakota or Oklahoma – they don't talk about it much.

On top of that, the reality for many of us trying to make a go of it here in the Heartland

of an additive known as MTBE to the nation's gasoline. The goal? Reduce air pollution by encouraging more complete combustion.

Needless to say, the Law of Unintended Consequences kicked in, and MTBE – methyl tertiary-butyl ether – turned out to be hard to contain. And once it got loose into the environment, it was itself terribly polluting. Not only does it move quickly through the groundwater, it doesn't break down as easily as gasoline.

Worst of all, it smells terrible. There's no way of not knowing when MTBE has

Kansas is one of at least 28 states with MTBE contamination.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) has established cleanup plans for eight MTBE-contaminated wells around the state and installed treatment systems at water plants in several affected communities, including LaCrosse, Ellis, Hays, Manhattan, Manter, Park City and Salina.

Costs have ranged from nearly \$500,000 in LaCrosse to \$20,000 in areas where the problem is less severe, said Bill Reetz, chief of KDHE's public water supply protection unit.

The state has a fuel-cleanup fund, made up of a 1-cent tax on fuel sold in Kansas, so there's money to pay for the cleanup. Except that the fund already had plenty to do before MTBE came along (and besides, the Legislature withdrew \$10 million from it to help balance the budget).

"I think it is unfair that the taxpayers of Kansas have to pay for that when the real responsibility lies with the oil companies," said Andrew Hutton, a Wichita attorney who has filed lawsuits on behalf of Park City, Bel Aire, Dodge City and the Chisholm Creek Utility Authority.

Unfortunately for all those towns, if the Bush Administration has its way, the oil companies will soon be exempt from being sued.

The administration's comprehensive energy bill failed in last year's Congressional

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involves fading aquifers, a shrinking industrial base, mad-cow disease and little revenue coming in to do anything about it.

That's the killer. It's not just image. Kansas really does face some serious problems. But like our ancestors trying to survive a harsher than usual winter on the Plains, we'll still be here when the sun comes out.

Herewith are few examples of woe. And what we're doing about it.

MTBE

A few years back, the federal government required the addition

polluted a well or other source of drinking water. MTBE disperses in groundwater faster than gasoline. It's water soluble.

The chemical is listed as a potential human carcinogen, but we know for sure that it causes the dread disease of finger-pointing. Oil companies, which made and distributed the stuff, say the feds made them do it, so taxpayers nationwide should have to pay to clean up their spills. So far, the federal government has mostly gotten away with pointing to the states and making them clean it all up.

session, largely because of the provision that would have protected Big Oil from liability. But administration officials say they'll bring back the bill – including that provision - this year.

Water, water

It's no secret that the Ogallala Aquifer (aka the High Plains Aquifer) is drying up. In some areas of western Kansas, individual wells have already gone dry, as the saturated thickness – the space between the top of the aquifer and the bedrock below – continues to shrink.

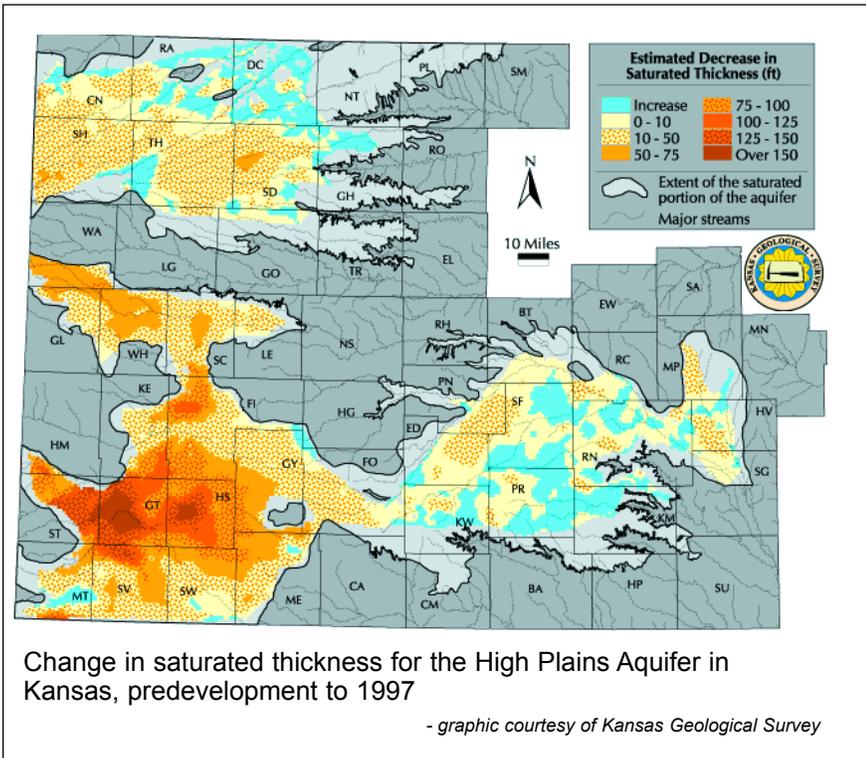
Just how bad is it? Good question. To determine the answer, the Kansas Geological Survey (KGS) is in the midst of a massive analysis of groundwater in western Kansas. They've already published An Atlas of the Kansas High Plains Aquifer, available in print and on the Web at www.kgs.ku.edu. (The Atlas can be found under Hydrology/Water Resources).

There were a number of maps of the groundwater available before this project started, not to mention scads of data about its depletion, but the new study is much more thorough. Any surprises? we asked project manager Donald Whittemore.

"We don't call them surprises," he replied. "We would call them discoveries."

"Probably a good discovery to look at would be what we call the Usable Lifetime Maps. What came out as very important was the variation across the aquifer.

"In some areas, we found the aquifer to be already depleted," he said. "In other areas, you could still use it for a couple of hundred years. We also have determined such things as how important the



pumping rate would be in predicting what the thickness would be before depletion under various assumptions."

Ultimately, it will be possible to run simulations of groundwater depletion for any area you choose, plugging in

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different scenarios for water use, groundwater recharge, interaction between groundwater and surface water, degree of pollution and the like. Unfortunately, the simulations are too complex to be run easily, by anyone using a computer from Dell or Gateway and some spreadsheet software. But if KGS gets the budget, it could run them for any part of the state.

"We've done some computer modeling of Groundwater Management District No. 4," Whittemore said. "We're working on improving the data for the bedrock surface, because you need the bedrock surface to determine the thickness."

For the most part, all that KGS could find when it started its study was a map showing the top of the aquifer.

Whittemore said that while the U.S. Geological Survey has a regional bedrock-surface map, USGS couldn't find the original data. So KGS began supplementing the USGS data points with new information, mostly from well drillers.

Drillers are required to file what they learn when they're out in the field to KDHE, which forwards the data to KGS. If you're a farmer or rancher or water planner, all the detailed data, going back to 1975, are also available on the KGS Web site.

KGS is also looking at areas near the Colorado and Nebraska lines to see whether recently settled federal lawsuits are actually delivering additional water to Kansans. And the data on stream-aquifer interaction can be used to determine, for

instance, whether acquisition of the Circle-K Ranch will actually increase the availability of water for other users, and by how much.

Interestingly, upstream along the Ark River in Colorado, some farmers are indeed giving up their water rights – but not for us Kansans. Instead they've sold them to growing cities like Aurora, in the Denver suburbs, or to Colorado Springs. The farmers give up farming, and the cities go on growing.

Fully three-quarters of Aurora's water now comes from rights acquired from farmers.

Neither moves like that nor the KGS study, even when it's completed in a couple of years, won't make more water available. We've known for a long time that the aquifer is drying out, and it's continued to dry out while Whittemore and his people have been gathering their data.

We'll know more when the study is done in a couple of years, but there's already a lot of useful new information available for water systems to use in planning for the future.

Demographics

To some people, the solution to the problem of declining aquifers is obvious: Run away.

Much of the West – not just western Kansas – has never received enough rainfall to sustain the same mix of human activities as the East. Many pundits have urged that folks simply stop living atop the High Plains Aquifer. Some have even urged that Los Angeles be depopulated.

In the face of these proposals and despite all the problems (including plenty we haven't talked about), the folks who live in rural areas and small towns have long remained optimistic about the future. Now, though, the annual University of

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Nebraska poll of rural attitudes has found that more than ever, people feel powerless to control their lives and pessimistic about the future.

"Will this be the last generation to inhabit the rural Great Plains?" asked Jon Bailey of the Center for Rural Affairs, a nonprofit research group in Walthill, Neb., in a recent New York Times article.

For the past three-quarters of a century, since the 1920s, the great middle of the country has been losing population. Not Denver or Wichita or Kansas City (or Andover or Overland Park), but the areas that aren't near a big city or an Interstate highway. That expanse includes fully a sixth of the land mass of the United States.

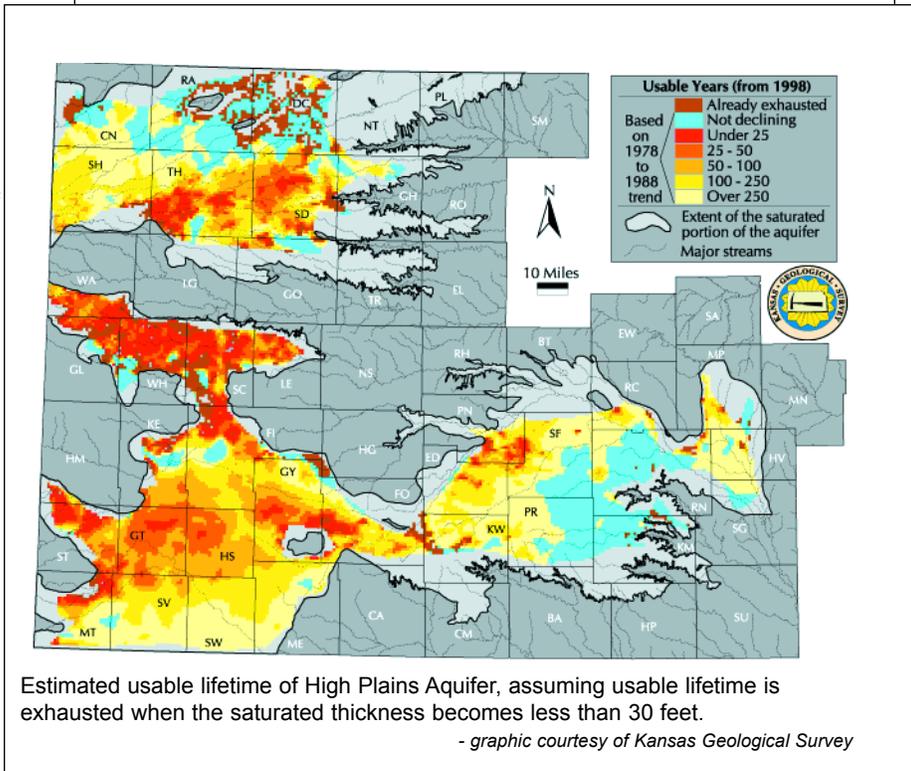
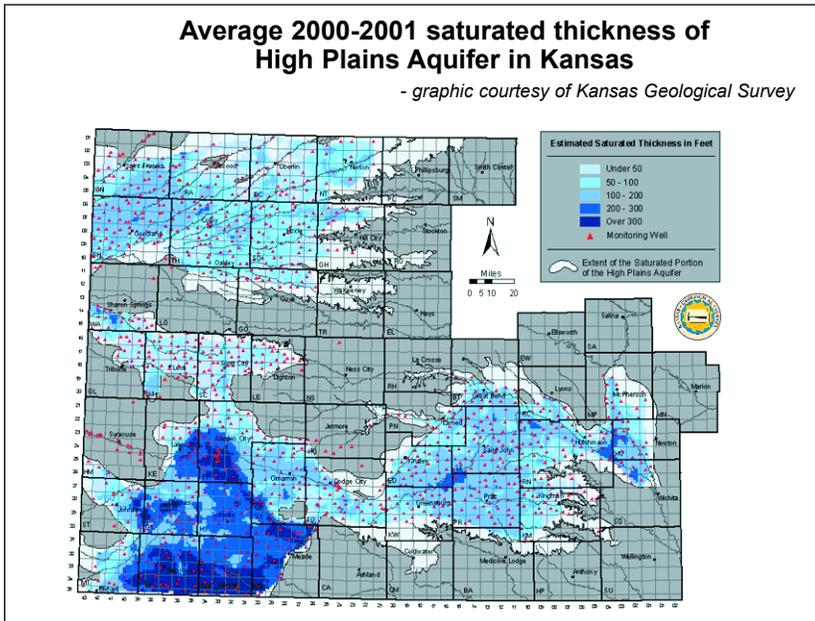
We're not just talking about the Dust Bowl era. The trend has continued in recent decades. In nearly 70% of the counties on the Great Plains, there are fewer people today than there were in 1950, with declines continuing during the '80s and '90s.

For those who do remain, the wage gap with the rest of the nation is growing larger too.

"You don't have young people taking over the farms, and you don't have businesses staying," Bailey said. "Even the parents are telling the kids to get out. There is very little to keep many of these towns going."

Then there's the Wal-Mart effect. A recent study found that in 52 rural counties in Nebraska, the local share of retail sales fell by half over the last 20 years.

The optimists always want to tell the success stories – for instance, how McCracken, KS advertised its old high school on



Estimated usable lifetime of High Plains Aquifer, assuming usable lifetime is exhausted when the saturated thickness becomes less than 30 feet.

- graphic courtesy of Kansas Geological Survey

eBay and landed a company from Arizona. Or better yet, about Bartlesville, OK, which successfully tied its survival to Phillips Petroleum.

Many towns have hitched their wagon to a corporate hog farm. But, pollution issues aside, hog farms bring more jobs, sure,

but they're minimum-wage jobs.

Instead of dreaming of a hog confinement facility or of the high-paying jobs that would arrive if some corporation could be persuaded to move its headquarters (or its manufacturing plant) to your part of the country, perhaps your

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dreams should include some small entrepreneur who might be willing to pull up stakes and move to the bucolic lifestyle you specialize in – and then hire a couple of locals to work for him, and then a couple more, and then . . . another idle dream, huh? Actually, studies have shown that attracting one small business can be the salvation for many towns.

"More commonly now, communities are nursing their own indigenous seedlings," said Chuck Fluharty, director of the Rural Policy Research Institute at the University of Missouri-Columbia. If it works, it's a way to retain or lure back the young, bring in high-paying jobs in non-polluting industries and review downtown.

Of course, without high-speed Internet connections, that unhappy New Yorker isn't going to move his Web-design firm to one of your vacant storefronts. Utilities – particularly telecommunications, although water and sewer certainly apply as well – have to be up to snuff to reverse the downward trend.

What's next?

Optimism is good, but optimism can take us only so far. As the New York Times series makes clear, everyone and his uncle is trying to attract new business. Not every small town in the Great Plains is going to succeed at it.

Perhaps the Buffalo Commons – a place where Native Americans will go back

to hunting bison from horseback and tourists will come to watch them do it – is truly part of our future. Those of us who don't aspire to sell gas or lunch to tourists hope not, but hope doesn't put dinner on the table, or water on the crops.

There's some serious thinking going on, even in Washington.

Press reports say that Sen. Sam Brownback has backed legislation in which states would enter 10-year contracts with farmers and pay them to "permanently cease" irrigating

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their crops. Bonds would be issued to pay the farmers, who would have to either retire the land or rely on rainfall alone.

Before you get outraged at the very thought, recall what the KGS study has shown once again: At the present rate of pumping, the aquifer will continue to drop. And in more and more places it will soon drop to zero. If you don't like the bill that Brownback is supporting, come up with your own alternative. Remember: Doing nothing isn't an option.

As a former Kansas senator, Bob Dole, famously said a few years ago, "The future's right in front of us."

Yet knowing the future isn't always enough. We also have to act on it. The only question is how.

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