

Financial decisions today key to future Water Plan success

As regular readers of *The Kansas Lifeline* know, I've been privileged to be involved in rural water issues at the local, state and national level. What many of you perhaps don't know is that I am once again a member of the Kansas Water Authority. I was reappointed to the Authority last spring and represent small municipal water users.

The 24-member Water Authority provides advice to the Governor and Kansas Legislature on water issues from border to border and from ground water to surface water. Twelve of my fellow Authority members represent a variety of other state water interests from irrigation to municipal water supplies. The others are ex-officio members who represent the state's water agencies.

Little did I know that I would be immersed in one of the most ambitious policy and project periods since the drive in 1989 to create the State Water Plan Fund.

It's called the Water Plan Projects Initiative (WPPI).

Projects fit into four broad categories that will offer region-specific solutions to unfinished water business that will collectively benefit all Kansans. The categories are: facilitating regional public water supply systems; extending and conserving the life of the High Plains/Ogallala aquifer; developing effective watershed protection and restoration strategies; and financing long-term water storage debt and

recreational river access.

Successful completion of the projects depends on support from the public and action by the Governor and Legislature to fully restore funding for the State Water Plan Fund, a dedicated funding source for water projects.

Regional public water supply strategies are of particular interest to me. As the manager of Shawnee County Rural Water District No. 8, I'm well aware of the pressures associated with a rapidly urbanizing area, expanding communities and public water suppliers competing for customers and water supplies. I won't say that the road has been bump free, but for the most part, RWD No. 8 and our neighbors have found mutually beneficial solutions to our regional challenges through the creation of the Tri-District Water Facility.

taps won't be sympathetic to talk of petty differences that prevented formation of mutually developed water supply agreements. While independence has its place, it shouldn't be when it comes to providing vital drinking water to our customers.

The regional water strategy initiative is an opportunity for us to look at Kansans' drinking water needs as broadly as

possible. It may mean adjusting boundaries, system interconnections, shared treatment facilities, shared accounting, or even merging. We need to approach regional strategies with the attitude of "How can we do it?" not, "It won't work! Here's why."

Lining out the regional strategies will take an investment, an investment that can be enhanced by the re-direction of the Clean Drinking Water fee to



Dennis Schwartz
Member, Kansas
Water Authority



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Additionally we are now involved with six other area water systems in an effort to determine the feasibility of another possible regional Public Wholesale Water System.

Let's face it. Public water supply systems will continue to be expected to meet stricter drinking water standards. Infrastructure will need on-going repair. Customers faced with dry

the State Water Plan Fund. The fee is one that more than 800 water suppliers pay in lieu of sales tax on their purchases. It amounts to some \$2.7 million. For that to happen, however, the Kansas Legislature first will have to redirect the money from the State General Fund to the State Water Plan Fund.

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work diligently to see that it is earmarked for public water supply issues. Keep in mind that all fees collected for the State Water Plan Fund, regardless of source, now are placed in one pot. They are distributed based on current and long-term priorities.

Extending the life of the Ogallala/High Plains aquifer is another long-term priority that involves multiple approaches. The state already is working



Wheat irrigation near Scott City, Kansas.

with the aquifers' water users, most of whom are irrigators. The Groundwater Management Districts also have taken stock of their territories and are working to develop effective management plans for smaller, similar areas in the districts, called subunits. Meanwhile, the state is negotiating the purchase of the Circle K Ranch in Edwards County with the intention of retiring the land's water rights and decreasing the withdrawal pressure on the aquifer.

To help prevent unnecessary competition for potential aquifer

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recharge water, methods to control deep-rooted, water hungry trees (Russian olives and salt cedar) growing in and near the stream are being tried.

Concerns about water quality caused by salt-laden water flowing in the Arkansas River from Colorado are being addressed through state-to-state negotiations.

Protecting and restoring watersheds today is critical. We all can play a part, whether we live in town or on a farm. Without

action now, the downstream reservoirs will become contaminated from runoff from city streets and farm fields and silt in from field erosion or stream bank sloughing.

Many of the watersheds we're trying to protect carry the water that fills the federal reservoirs, many of which serve as a source of public drinking water. Savvy state leaders in the 1980s contracted to buy water storage space in the reservoirs from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at construction era prices and interest rates. That

storage space holds the water that, depending on reservoir, may be used for the state's Water Marketing Program or Water Assurance Program.

While customers of these programs are paying the tab for



The total costs of the reservoir storage will be more if we don't act now.

Actions might include:

1. Setting up some type of reserve account along the way that annually taps the State Water Plan Fund and/or;
2. Cutting a deal with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers so the state receives credit in proportion to money it spends on watershed protection that will extend the useful life of the public water supply reservoirs.



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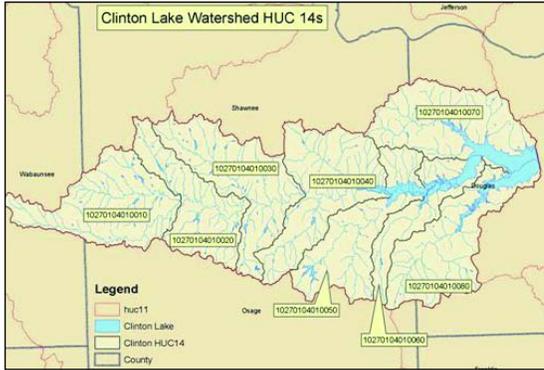
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water that's being used, there are not customers for much of it. The clock is ticking and the interest is accruing. As early as 2029, a balloon payment of \$4.4 million is due on Big Hill Reservoir. What to do? Of the



Map of Clinton Lake watershed in Wabaunsee, Shawnee and Douglas counties.

possibilities, the best potential solution identified in the Initiative is setting up a dedicated state-federal reserve fund. Money from the State Water Plan Fund could be deposited between now and the time the balloon payment is due.

Deposited funds would accrue interest.

The stepchild of water resource planning long has been water-based recreation. Boating and fishing have been the byproduct of reservoirs built for flood control. Of our rivers, only three in Kansas may be used without permission from adjacent landowners. The Kansas River is the focal point in the Initiative for increased access. If it's approved, \$110,000 will be committed to an access ramp between Wamego and Topeka. The state's action will complement private initiatives to make the Kansas River a user-friendly recreational outlet.

As I wrote at the beginning, the Water Plan Project Initiative, originating from the issues in the State Water Plan is a major undertaking. To fund it, the state

is seeking restoration of the State Water Plan Fund to the tune of \$3.7 million this year and an additional \$4 million the next. That's a multi-part effort that includes a return to paying the tab for projects once funded from the State General Fund to the State General Fund. It also calls for restoring State General Fund transfers to the State Water Plan Fund to statutorily authorized levels.

I encourage you to learn more. The Kansas Water Office has all of the details on its web site, www.kwo.org. If you have questions, you can call me or other members of the Kansas Water Authority. Once you're as convinced as I am of the need for these measures, talk to your state legislator and senator. Together, we can make this happen.



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