



For the week of Jan. 20, 2014

Water vision

By John Schlageck, Kansas Farm Bureau

You never miss the water till the well runs dry.

No truer words have been spoken about Kansas water needs. Mired in the midst of a four-year drought, the Ogallala Aquifer continues to decline. Reservoirs –critical water storage structures for much of the state – fill with sediment.

At the current pace throughout the next 50 years, the Ogallala Aquifer could be 70 percent depleted while Kansas reservoirs may be 40 percent filled with sediment.

What does this bode for the future of the Sunflower State? How do we sustain the lifestyle we enjoy? How do we grow the economy? How do we ensure life in Kansas will continue to be desirable?

These questions are relevant to all Kansans. And while the Ogallala Aquifer is often viewed through the nozzle of a center pivot system, this topic is far more than that.

Irrigation stimulates higher land values, greater crop production and increased production inputs that result in enhanced county, regional and state prosperity. It has supported the world's largest animal industry whose feed yards and packing plants grow and sustain Kansas communities and the people who live there.

Water usage in Kansas is not just an irrigation issue. It affects citizens whether they live in western or eastern Kansas.

Nearly two thirds of this state's population depends upon water stored in our reservoirs. Each and every day this water supply dwindles as sediment slowly creeps downstream settling in and diminishing valuable reservoir storage space.

To address these issues, Gov. Brownback recently called for the development of a 50-year vision for the future of water in Kansas. The Ogallala Aquifer and Kansas reservoirs will receive top priority in this plan.

Key players include the Kansas Water Office, Kansas Department of Agriculture and the Kansas Water Authority. Throughout a one-year period, this team will seek input from water users, compile data, conduct research and chart a path for future water use.

All Kansans have a stake in this issue. Every citizen of our state will be impacted by the decline of the Ogallala Aquifer and sedimentation of our reservoirs.

It does not matter if you are rural or urban, young or old, a student or working, everyone needs water in their lives.

As farmers, ranchers and landowners of Farm Bureau in Kansas, each and every member will have an opportunity to provide grass root's input in creating this water plan for the Sunflower State. Through educational materials and district issue surfacing meetings, farmer and rancher members will have the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions on the future of water in Kansas.

Plan to attend these meetings and voice your opinions and concerns.

"This is a defining moment in our state's history and with each member's input, we intend to help establish a water legacy that is good for agriculture and generations to come," says Steve Baccus, an Ottawa County farmer and Kansas Farm Bureau president. "We must engage in this process and help define the vision for these precious water supplies, or others will do so for us."

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.