Ogallala Aquifer Summit set for March 18-19 in Liberal

Event will draw participants from eight states to discuss water management issues

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension

LIBERAL, Kan. – A proverbial Who’s Who of water management in the High Plains region is expected for the 2024 Ogallala Aquifer Summit, set for March 18-19 at the Seward County Fairgrounds in Liberal, Kansas.

The conference marks the third time that an inter-disciplinary group of water specialists, users, regulators and others from eight states will gather to discuss the condition of the mighty Ogallala, a vast underground reservoir that covers 174,000 square miles and touches parts of South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas.

“One of the key values that I see to the Ogallala Aquifer Summit is the opportunity to hear from other states on the condition of the aquifer in their region, discuss shared challenges and learn ideas that may be adapted to Kansas in order to improve our water management,” said Susan Metzger, director of the Kansas Center for Agricultural Resources and the Environment, and the Kansas Water Institute at Kansas State University.

Registration is available online at www.irrigationinnovation.org/2024-ogallala-summit. The cost is $150, which includes meals and all conference sessions.

Metzger said this is the third time that the Summit has been held, each three years apart beginning in 2018. It is organized by the Irrigation Innovation Consortium, a group of water researchers and management specialists mostly working at universities throughout the eight-state region.

The Ogallala Aquifer is critical to the economies of the regions it touches. It is estimated that 95% of groundwater pumped from the aquifer each year is for irrigated agriculture, though it also supports livestock and municipal needs. The aquifer supports approximately $35 billion in crop production.

In Kansas, the Ogallala covers a majority of the western one-third of the state, which is one of the most productive irrigated agricultural regions in the entire country.
But the Ogallala Aquifer is rapidly depleting; some estimates indicate that in 50 years, 70% of the aquifer will be depleted. Diminished availability of water will also impact municipal water supplies; and in 2022 K-State agricultural economists reported that if current water depletion rates continue, Kansas land values may drop as much as $34 million in the next 40 years.

All of that makes get-togethers like the March 18–19 Summit even more important, according to Metzger.

“In the short term,” she said, “I hope the Summit inspires new partnerships and strengthens existing collaborations. But in the long-term, I hope we can identify practices and policies that collectively can extend the useful lifetime of the aquifer.”

Some topics on this year’s agenda include:

- New opportunities with conservation-related legislation.
- Understanding water risk as part of climate risk and economic risk.
- Advances in science and data application.
- The power of peer networks.
- Workforce and leadership development.

The full agenda is available online.

In addition, Metzger said researchers and water specialists from each state in the Ogallala Aquifer region have prepared updates on their water management progress and challenges. The topics – which will be featured in facilitated roundtable discussions -- include water management technology and outreach; sustainable feed and forage; local enhanced management areas (known as LEMAs); reusing water in a municipal setting; a Kansas partnership with NASA’s Earth Sciences division; and more.

Metzger said the Summit’s attendee list is “intentionally diverse,” including farmers and ranchers, non-profit organizations, city and state government, universities, federal agencies and representatives of groundwater management districts.

The Summit is open to all interested. More information and registration is available at www.irrigationinnovation.org/2024-ogallala-summit.

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
2024 Ogallala Aquifer Summit (Irrigation Innovation Consortium), www.irrigationinnovation.org/2024-ogallala-summit

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