

## State's playa lakes find refuge in Farm Bill

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A recent reallocation of funds under the federal Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program will allow the preservation of 25,000 acres of Texas playa lakes.

"President Bush directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture to implement the new Wetlands Restoration Initiative" at the pushing of several legislators, according to a news release from the Playa Lakes Joint Venture, a group whose mission is to conserve playa lakes and other wetlands.

Debbie Slope, with the conservation group, said 250,000 acres of playa lakes in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas are eligible for enrollment in the program.

"These playas are really important, not only for wildlife and flood control, but for, you know, protection of the Ogallala Aquifer," said David Haukos, regional migratory bird management specialist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "The connection to the Ogallala Aquifer is through playas. ... When you start messing with them, you start messing with the Ogallala, and that will have long effects."

The Ogallala Aquifer, according to the Red River Authority, stretches 800 miles between South Dakota and Texas, and spans 400 miles from the western states of Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico eastward to Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma.

"Because playa lakes are dry much of the year, many people do not recognize them as wetlands," according to PLJV. "But the wet-dry cycle of playas is a natural function of the wetlands. ... When the playa's clay basin is dry, deep cracks form which are the main channels of recharge through the playa into the Ogallala."

Haukos said the preservation of local playas is also critical in preserving the South Plains' ecosystem. Effects of waning playas, he said, are evident.

"There aren't too many bugs left in Lubbock," he said. "It's hard to find a bug and so the toads don't really have anything to eat. And so that upsets the whole entire ecosystem, especially the food web at the very basic level. And so everyone's always wondering, where are all the birds that used to be here? ... A lot of people don't understand what's being lost right now in the city."

And for these reasons, and because people who have playas on their land will actually be paid to preserve them, Slope sees this new initiative as a win-win situation.



**Robin O'Shaughnessy / A-J Photo**

A tree at the edge of this dry playa lake four miles north of Lubbock marks where the lake stops and normal soil begins. David Haukos, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said trees at playa lakes help stop soil erosion.



**Robin O'Shaughnessy / A-J Photo**

David Haukos, regional migratory bird management specialist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, surveys a playa inside the Texas Tech University Native Rangeland area at Erskine Street and North Quaker Avenue.

"This is an excellent opportunity for the Texas panhandle," she said. "This is the first time Texas playas have been targeted." She said the Farm Service Agency is prepared to pay a total of \$200 million to landowners to preserve their playas. Slope said any naturally-occurring playa in Texas is eligible for the program, and any landowner can enroll until Texas' 25,000-acre limit is filled.

The Playa Lakes Joint Venture said payments will include a wetland restoration incentive payment equal to 25 percent of the cost of restoring hydrology of the site; annual rental payment; and cost-share assistance of up to 50 percent of eligible practice installation costs.

"Basically, you can make more money over the long term doing that than farming cotton," Haukos said.

Slope said preservation efforts will include no longer farming the playa land, removing sediment and planting grass buffers.

Congressman Charlie Stenholm, a District 17 Democrat who is making a bid to be elected as District 19's representative, and incumbent District 19 representative, Republican Randy Neugebauer, both said they have previously pushed to preserve playa lakes and are happy with Bush's administrative action.

"I'm pleased that USDA decided to expand on what Larry Combest and I did in the 2002 Farm Bill," Stenholm said, "which made playa lakes in Texas eligible to be enrolled under the Farmable Wetland Pilot Program. ...

"It is unfortunate that USDA delayed this action if there were farmers wanting to get into the program."

Neugebauer also sees the importance of this initiative.

"We know that playas are an important source of water for the Ogallala Aquifer, and that many of the playas in our region are located on farmland," Neugebauer said in an Aug. 4 press release. "By increasing the size of lands that can be enrolled through this initiative, more playas will be eligible for CRP enrollment and more water recharge will be protected. ... USDA has made a good decision."

Slope said landowners can sign up their playas on Oct. 1, and said more rules will be released later.

(Robin O'Shaughnessy contributed to this report.)

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### **Lake enrollment**

Playa lakes can be enrolled at the following locations beginning Oct. 1:

- Lubbock — George H. Mahon Federal Building, 1205 Texas Ave., Ste. 810 763-1611
- Midland — 1400 North FM 1788, Room 1104, (432) 561-8462
- Big Spring — 1510 Scurry St., Ste. B, (432) 264-7952