

Thirsty area serves as backdrop for extensive farm, water study

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Early Texas pioneers once relied on windmills to furnish water around the homestead.

Perhaps, then, Texas Tech's National Ranching Heritage Center served as a fitting location for Friday's announcement of a massive partnership to probe farming technology and its possible applications in water conservation.

The eight-year, \$6.2 million study will use as many as 20 farms located on 15 square miles between Plainview and Lockney to conduct demonstrations aimed at extending the life of the Ogallala Aquifer.

Marvin Cepica, dean of Tech's College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, said the project has "no precedent" in terms of its scope and potential impact.

"I don't know of any other comprehensive program like this," said state Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, author of the legislation that funded the Texas Water Development Board grant.

Water has become a popular topic across the parched South Plains and the rest of Texas as growing urban areas seek new sources to allay their thirst, threatening underground water stores and pitting cities against farming interests.

Agriculture is the primary user of the Ogallala Aquifer, an ancient formation of sand, gravel, clay and silt deposits that stretches from the Permian Basin to Nebraska across eight states and supplies a significant portion of U.S. irrigation water.

The grant will fund research into new technology, cropping patterns, irrigation methods and stress-tolerant plants.

Eddie Teeter, chairman of the producer board charged with picking demonstration locations, noted that the 15-square-mile-area in Hale and Floyd counties features a variety of crops and irrigation methods.

"We have a unique area here," he said.

The study is the result of a partnership between Tech, Texas Cooperative Extension, the High Plains Underground Water Conservation District No. 1, the Texas Agricultural Experimentation Station, The USDA Plant Stress and Water Conservation Laboratory and others.

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