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Lubbock's Water Crisis: Supply At Hand

Just a couple years ago, no one would have believed it if you said Lubbock's water supply will run out within a decade. But today city leaders are trying to solve a very real threat. How bad is the problem? This is what City Councilman Tom Martin said it would take to solve a crisis at Lake Meredith back in 2003: "Quite frankly it's going to take four hurricanes parking over the Texas Panhandle to be able to fill up Lake Meredith." That comment set the stage over the next two and a half years for what is now the most critical issue facing Lubbock since the turn of the century.



In the early 1900's the windmill made life possible on the arid, sun drenched deserts of the South Plains. Settlers relied on them to add to the area's measly 18 to 20 inches of rainfall each year. Then in 1911, everything changed. The invention of the first irrigation well allowed farmers to tap into the massive Ogallala Aquifer and life would never be the same. Kent Satterwhite, General Manager and Canadian River Municipal Water Authority (CRMWA) says, "I know it has been pumped pretty heavily for decades. There's just not a lot of water left."




The Ogallala stretches eight states and 174,000 square miles making it one of the largest in the world. The irrigation boom began in 1930's and Lubbock turned from desert to farmland. People here thought the water would never run out because it was replenished from the peaks of the great Rocky Mountains. Jim Conkwright, General Manager of the High Plains Underground Water Conservation District says, "The best scientific data we can establish indicates that probably 50% of the aquifer still remains."



The Ogallala in fact is only recharged by rain water, mainly through playa lakes and that takes a long time. Enter the High Plains Underground Water Conservation District. Established in 1949, they guard a precious resource. Conkwright says, "We feel like we have been a force in conservation."



Water Conservation Tips For Around the House



Saving water is just a few tips away for homeowners. Find out all you need to know to conserve this precious resource here.

Sadly no amount of conservation can make the Ogallala last forever. With that in mind, Lubbock started planning long term. In 1960, Lubbock joined 11 West Texas cities to finance and build the Canadian River Municipal Water Authority. That helped slow down use of Ogallala water. CRMWA gets its water from two sources.



#1: Lake Meredith. A manmade lake created by the Sanford Dam.

#2: Roberts County well fields; located about an hour Northeast of Lake Meredith.

Satterwhite says, "Every drop of water we supply to this is less groundwater they have to pump. We consider Lake Meredith a renewable resource and we really consider the Ogallala non-renewable."

70% to 80% of Lubbock's water flows down a massive pipeline from CRMWA and into the city's water treatment plant. The other 20% to 30% comes from well fields in Bailey County near Muleshoe - and it's a good thing! City Chief Water Planning Engineer, Ches Carthel explains, "About two years ago, the council noticed and brought to our attention that the Lake Meredith level was beginning to drop dangerously low. Satterwhite adds, "We didn't realize it could happen that fast. As the lake water drops, the quality also drops. Seemed like overnight almost we had major problems on our hands."

Now, without any major storms over Lake Meredith's watershed in years, CRMWA cut back water supplied from the lake to member cities like Amarillo, Plainview, and Lubbock. With lake levels still 30 feet below normal, Lubbock city leaders went shopping for water rights. Pointing to a map, Satterwhite explains, "We went from about 42,500 to over 200,000 acres of water."

The green on Satterwhite's map represents Amarillo's water rights, and the pink belongs to oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens. Pickens lives and works in Dallas, but he owns a ranch in the Northern Panhandle. His ideas to sell Panhandle water to large cities downstate have not made him popular. Satterwhite says, "He hasn't been successful at all because it's just so expensive by the time you build a pipeline that far and they have better sources."

If it weren't for what some Lubbock officials call a "missed opportunity" Pickens wouldn't even be part of the equation. "When we first got into the groundwater business, we bought water rights up fairly close to his ranch. It was probably 5 to 10 miles away and then he came to us and said he wanted to sell his too, but we were out of money at the time and cities just didn't want to come up with anymore money at that time," says Satterwhite. Councilman Gary Boren adds, "We could have had some great opportunities for our citizens that were just missed opportunities."

Now Councilman Boren and his colleagues are digging Lubbock out of a hole, trying to secure water for the future. Boren says, "It doesn't have necessarily all the little zing and the political glamour and the glitter that you might want to see, but I tell you it's critical. Our life depends on it, our homes, our investments, our development of our city, our growing our community in this part of the state. We depend on water. Without it, we all perish."

In our next report find out what options and obstacles are facing the city and how much it could cost Lubbock citizens.

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