



## Ogallala Aquifer posts steepest dip since 2000

By Elliott Blackburn | AVALANCHE-JOURNAL

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Water levels in the aquifer supplying the region's agribusiness and small towns dropped at their steepest rate in a decade last year, regional water managers said Wednesday.

Data collected by the High Plains Underground Water Conservation District No. 1 showed an average drop of 1.5 feet in the portion of the Ogallala Aquifer buried beneath the district's 6.8 million-acre coverage area.

That was the biggest drop since at least 2000, based on district numbers, surpassing a 1.34-foot plunge in 2003.

"It's a reminder that we need to be good stewards of the resource," said Steve Verett, executive vice president of the 41-county farming organization Plains Cotton Growers.

Water levels fell by more than 2 feet in Castro, Lynn and Parmer counties, according to the data.

An increase in surviving cotton acreage in Lynn County, where storms crushed crops in 2008, could have also attributed to declines in that county, Verett said.

Castro and Parmer have traditionally planted more corn, a thirstier crop, than southern counties. The area has also seen an influx of dairies.

Andrews County saw an increase of six-tenths of an inch, though it also had among the fewest number of wells monitored by the district.

Portions of Randall and Potter counties monitored by the district showed the slightest declines.

Dry conditions last spring and summer may have forced farmers to lean harder on irrigation wells drilled into the Ogallala.

"It didn't surprise me to see the declines that we saw," Verett said.

Dry weather forced heavier irrigation earlier in the year. Farmers irrigated early in planting season to prepare their fields for the crops and had to continue into the summer under hot, clear skies.

The drought conditions, more than any other cause, drained down the aquifer, said Bill Mullican, a district groundwater consultant.

"They didn't get a lot of help from Mother Nature," Mullican said of the growers. "This is just further evidence that it's going to be very important for the groundwater districts on the South Plains to work with growers to move toward a more sustainable approach."

[elliott.blackburn@lubbockonline.com](mailto:elliott.blackburn@lubbockonline.com) | 766-8722

[james.ricketts@lubbockonline.com](mailto:james.ricketts@lubbockonline.com) | 766-8706



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