



OKLAHOMA

water news

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE OKLAHOMA
WATER RESOURCES BOARD

Gerald E. Borelli, Chairman

Earl Walker • L.L. Males • John B. Jarboe • Ralph G. McPherson • Gary W. Smith • Ernest R. Tucker • Robert S. Kerr, Jr. • R.G. Johnson

Rural Water Systems Pushed to Crisis by Funding Shortages

"High interest rates and funding decimated by federal budget cuts have made the plight of rural water districts more desperate now than ever," says Oklahoma Rural Water Association Director Gene Whatley, sounding a note epidemic across the nation. Lack of funds is a problem touching nearly every rural water system in Oklahoma, Whatley says, and failure to provide loan money may leave systems ill equipped to rise to the growing demands.

Like missionaries, rural water districts go where no one else will. Rather than the forgotten reaches of developing nations, the districts lay pipe and carry water to the families of rural Oklahoma's farms and suburbs. Currently, there are 475 rural water districts serving over one-half million Oklahomans, growing at an annual rate of 12 percent.

"Rural water districts have accomplished what they set out to do by distributing good water to people living in rural areas. It's worked well, but still more needs to be done," Whatley says.

Getting it done requires money. With the "easy systems" already built, RWDs across the state face financial crises in trying to upgrade systems by providing additional lines and expansions to serve existing or expected customers.

"We've still got people out there hauling water. More and more people are moving to the country, and housing developments are going up in rural areas. Some districts have tripled their number of customers since they were built. Every way you look at it, our needs are growing," Whatley says.

Money to pay for improvements is seldom available to rural water districts. The average district has just 400 meters and depends solely on water sales for revenues. Without a tax base or other revenues in reserve, investment bankers aren't as likely to give RWDs loans as they are cities and towns.

Small water systems historically haven't been able to go to the marketplace for funds, so they've turned to government. For nearly two decades, the success of rural water systems has been tied to the financial assistance

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STAFF PHOTO BY GARY GLOVER

Oklahoma's new law which is expected to double the number of drillers subject to licensing requirements will also assure consumers who purchase drilling services high standards in products and procedures.

All Commercial Well Drillers to be Licensed by New Law

For the first time in state history, all commercial water well drillers will be required to pass an examination and be licensed by the OWRB in order to operate within the law.

Until passage of the bill authored by Sen. Cal Hobson and Sen. Lee Cate in mid-April, approximately half the drillers engaged in drilling wells for pay in the state had been excused from licensing laws that had regulated the rest of the drillers since 1973. The new law exempts only non-commercial drillers such as a farmer drilling his or a neighbor's wells at no charge.

The OWRB had long advocated such legislation because by exempting half of the state's drillers from meeting standards for well construction and the sealing and plugging of abandoned wells, the state had exposed its most valuable natural resource to potential pollution.

Paul Wilson, OWRB Ground Water Division chief, points out that poorly constructed wells lacking adequate sanitary protection and uncapped abandoned wells can serve as uncontrolled recharge sites, allowing

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contaminants in surface runoff to penetrate underground water supplies.

"Such contamination poses a serious threat to the state's aquifers, source of 61 percent of total water used in Oklahoma and providing drinking water to approximately 300 cities and towns," said Wilson. "We simply can't afford to allow a straight shot through an open hole to our ground water resources."

Wilson emphasizes that ground water pollution is longer lasting and more significant than surface water pollution in that cleanup is often virtually impossible.

The new licensing law has the added benefit of providing OWRB with valuable information concerning the state's ground water basins. With the licensing of many more drillers who are required to submit their logs to OWRB, more extensive data concerning pollution, depth to water, availability of water, aquifer yields and pumping and drawdown will be available.

Wilson pointed out that the costs of drilling the number of test wells throughout the state required to yield reliable hydrologic information have in the past been beyond the means of the Board.

"The new law has advantages for the consumer as well," said Wilson. "By upgrading the water well drilling industry and raising standards to those of surrounding states, consumers will be assured of responsible operators using acceptable products and procedures. "Every adjoining state except Missouri requires the licensing of commercial drillers," Wilson concluded.

The Ninth and Newest Board Member

Interest in Oklahoma's Water Runs in the Family, Says Kerr

If heritage, experience and knowledge are of worth, then the state has acquired a substantial asset in the appointment of Robert S. Kerr, Jr. to the Oklahoma Water Resources Board. Kerr was appointed by Gov. Nigh to complete the unexpired term of James Norick.

The Kerr name has been linked with water since his father's inauguration as Governor of Oklahoma in 1943. Service in the Senate from 1947 to 1963 saw creation of a seaway to Oklahoma, the 440-mile McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System.

"My father's central interest in all the years of his public service was water resources, so I was born into it," Kerr said. "But I like to think I came to this area of my own convictions, too."

Kerr's history of involvement with Oklahoma's water is long and impressive. Since the early 1960's, he has served as president of Oklahoma Water, Inc.; president of the Water Development Foundation of Oklahoma; chairman of the Arkansas River Basin Interstate Commission; vice-president of the Arkansas Basin Development Association; and vice-chairman of the Board of the National Waterways Conference. Kerr also served at the request of Lyndon Johnson from 1968 to 1971 on the President's Air Quality Advisory Board, helping to devise and promulgate the original air quality standards employed by the EPA.

"Next to air, water is the most vital element in our environment. We simply cannot live without it. And we need it not only in the survival sense, but as an essential ingredient in providing so much else. It's basic to our lives and lifestyles," Kerr said.

Adequate supplies of water are just as essential in the future well-being of Oklahoma, Kerr pointed out. Until supplanted by oil and gas in 1974, agriculture was the largest industry in the state. Because petroleum is a "depletable resource", Kerr believes it's only a matter of time until agriculture, with its strong reliance on water, resumes its leading role in shaping Oklahoma's economy.

According to Kerr, the key to meeting water needs is providing the means for cities, towns and rural water districts to finance distribution improvements.

"It's ironic that in the eastern part of the state where supply is not a problem, they have significant distribution problems which inflict the same result as lack of water supply in western Oklahoma. A water development fund would go a long ways toward solving their problems."

The proposal before the legislature to create a water development fund is "the most positive step we could take" in assuring a healthy future for Oklahoma, Kerr believes.

East-west rivalries do not preoccupy Kerr, as he sees eastern Oklahoma justifiably being the first beneficiaries of such a fund. In the meanwhile, western Oklahoma will have to work with alternatives which Kerr said are being developed to augment their supplies. Transfer of water may eventually be needed to sustain the economy in that part of the state, Kerr asserted.

A practicing attorney, Kerr sees his new duties clearly spelled out in state laws.



Robert S. Kerr, Jr.

"Oklahoma statutes make us an appropriate state. Our laws are well designed to bring together supply and demand in an equitable way," Kerr said. "As I see it, the basic responsibility of the Board is to appropriate equitably the water that is available so that everybody gets his fair share and uses his fair share."

APRIL CROP AND WEATHER SUMMARY

Scattered thunderstorms near the end of the month brought much needed moisture to many areas of the state, helping replenish critically short topsoil moisture. Prior to the rains, topsoil moisture supplies were short over 85 percent of the state.

Unseasonably cool weather was the rule across the state, with temperatures averaging from 7 degrees below normal in the Panhandle to 10 degrees below normal in the southeast as the month ended.

Shortage of rain earlier in the month left wheat evidencing moisture stress in all of the state's major wheat producing areas, and the crop was rated in only good to fair condition. Dryland wheat was showing the most severe effects of insufficient moisture in the form of blue and brown spots in fields.

The state's alfalfa crop, in fair condition, continued to show signs of drought stress last week with several fields being cut early to salvage as much as possible of the first cutting. Pastures and ranges continued to grow at a slow rate due to low temperatures.

Oklahoma Crop and Livestock Reporting Service



Hoyt Shadid Named to Compact Commission

Appointed by Gov. Nigh in late April to represent Oklahoma on the Red River Compact Commission is Hoyt Shadid, former mayor of Altus. He is currently manager of the Mountain Park Master Conservancy District.

Shadid fills the vacancy created by the death of Orville B. Saunders earlier this year. He attended his first meeting of the Commission in Little Rock on April 27. Shadid is a civic leader and businessman and has been invited several times to appear before congressional committees as an expert on weather modification.

Surface Owner Must Consent to Water Use

In a case filed in Oklahoma County District Court in March by Ricks Exploration Company, the court ruled that oil and gas drilling, exploration or production companies with leases to mineral rights must also obtain

ACTIVE CONSERVATION STORAGE IN SELECTED OKLAHOMA LAKES AND RESERVOIRS AS OF APRIL 16, 1982

PLANNING REGION LAKE/RESERVOIR	CONSERVATION STORAGE (AF)	PERCENT OF CAPACITY
SOUTHEAST		
Atoka	122,900	99.1
Broken Bow	869,381	94.7
Pine Creek	77,700	100.0
Hugo	157,600	100.0
CENTRAL		
Thunderbird	85,377	80.6
Hefner	72,000	95.5
Overholser	15,169	100.0
Draper	85,400	85.4
SOUTH CENTRAL		
Arbuckle	62,571	100.0
Texoma	2,561,989	97.1
Waurika	152,474	75.0 ¹
SOUTHWEST		
Altus	25,673	19.3
Fort Cobb	67,052	85.5
Foss	128,678	52.7 ²
Tom Steed	62,477	70.2
EAST CENTRAL		
Eufaula	2,089,251	89.7
Tenkiller	611,726	97.5
Wister	27,100	100.0
NORTHEAST		
Eucha	79,567	100.0
Grand	1,352,500	90.6
Oologah	544,240	100.0
Hulah	30,594	100.0
Fort Gibson	350,053	95.8
Heyburn	4,460	67.6
Birch	18,879	98.3
Hudson	200,300	100.0
Spavinaw	30,000	100.0
NORTH CENTRAL		
Kaw	428,600	100.0
Keystone	586,892	95.3
NORTHWEST		
Canton	44,041	45.2
Optima	4,379	— ¹
Fort Supply	13,900	100.0
Great Salt Plains	31,400	100.0

STATE TOTALS 10,994,536 91.8³

- 1. In initial filling stage
- 2. Temporarily lowered for maintenance
- 3. Conservation storage for Lake Optima not included in state total

Data courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, Oklahoma City Water Resources Dept., City of Tulsa Water Superintendent's Office.

specific written permission of the landowner to drill a well or withdraw ground water from an existing well.

As a result of the ruling, companies which may have previously relied on the standard oil and gas lease as permission for water use will be required to attach a copy of the surface owner's consent to any application submitted to the OWRB for the use of ground water.

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Mainstream, continued from page 3

Bureau Names Webber Southwest Director

Commissioner of Reclamation Robert N. Broadbent recently announced the appointment of Darrell W. Webber to regional director of the Bureau's Southwest Regional headquarters in Amarillo.

A civil engineering graduate of the University of Kansas, Webber first joined the Bureau in 1957. He has served most recently as assistant regional director in Denver. The Southwest Region includes Texas and Oklahoma, most of New Mexico and parts of Colorado and Kansas.

OWRB Boosts Water Conservation Activities

By proclamation of Gov. Nigh, Water Awareness Day was observed in the state on May 4. A dozen exhibitors displayed water conservation products and educational materials on the fourth floor of the State Capitol.

Gov. Nigh visited the exhibits and commended the Board for its sponsorship of the conservation event.

"Rapid growth in industry and population have sharply increased competition for available water," Nigh pointed out. "It forces more people to share the same water resources, so conservation must be an integral part of our management strategy."

Conservation as a lifestyle will be emphasized year-round by the OWRB, and speakers, films, educational programs, printed materials and conservation devices will be available throughout the year. For further information, contact Rick A. Smith, chief, Planning and Development Division, P.O. Box 53585, Oklahoma City, 73152, or call Board offices at (405) 271-2555.

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programs of the Farmers Home Administration. According to Whatley, all but a few of Oklahoma's rural water districts began with loans from the FmHA.

In fiscal year 1982, however, FmHA funds available to Oklahoma were cut from \$14.3 million to \$8.5 million. The 1983 budget may bear more bad news with an allocation predicted in the \$6 million range. With requests from cities, towns and RWDs totaling over \$125 million, the FmHA has approximately 20 times as many applications as can be filled.

"It looks like they're getting out of the funding business," Whatley sighs.

It's not only the amount of funds that counts. Whatley points out the current interest rates make it hard for a water district to afford improvements, and with such high interest rates, we'll be pricing people right out of water."

With the money crunch on, Whatley encourages RWDs to build reserves of cash to cover costs of minor improvements and maintenance.

"We suggest a move away from declining rates to increasing rates, where the price per unit of water increases as the quantity of water used increases. This brings in more revenue and emphasizes conservation, which we think is important."

The FmHA, which already requires a rate structure sufficient to repay the loan and establish a reserve fund equal to a one-year payment, also encourages such a reserve. It is also lobbying to persuade private sources to get involved in funding water projects, perhaps on a joint basis.

It's action, not encouragement, that will provide the services necessary to sustain the growth in rural living. Whatley looks to the state to provide funds.

"It depends on the legislature because there's no one else who can provide enough low-interest money.

This monthly newsletter, printed by the Central Printing Division of the State Board of Public Affairs, Oklahoma City, Okla., is published by the Oklahoma Water Resources Board as authorized by James R. Barnett, executive director. 10,000 copies are printed and distributed monthly at an approximate cost of 20 cents each, defrayed in part by funds provided by the U.S. Water Resources Council.

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OKLAHOMA WATER NEWS
Oklahoma Water Resources Board
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