



# Ogallala Aquifer – Lifeblood of the High Plains

## Part I: Withdrawals Exceed Recharge

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### Key Points:

- *The Ogallala aquifer has been tapped faster than nature can replenish it. Overall, it has lost an estimated 8 percent of its water, albeit with wide variations. Wells in parts of Texas, for example, have dropped as much as 242 feet while some wells in Nebraska have seen 85-foot increases.*
- *Within the High Plains, the two hardest-hit areas are Western Kansas and the Texas Panhandle, where almost 30 percent of their portions of the Ogallala have been depleted, largely due to widespread irrigation, drought, and low recharge rates.*
- *Technological innovations, pumping cutbacks and restrictions, efficient irrigation systems and other innovations all have helped to slow the decline of the aquifer. But some sections of the Ogallala continue to be at severe risk of depletion.*
- *To date, Kansas’ and Texas’ water laws have proved to be ineffectual in controlling and limiting withdrawals from the Ogallala for irrigation. Kansas is experimenting with some promising new laws involving so-called LEMAs, but they’re still unproven.*
- *As groundwater levels in the Ogallala recede, irrigation becomes more costly. Farmers in turn are adapting their cropping practices to the evolving condition of the Ogallala aquifer.*
- *Farmers in the High Plains will continue to adjust and adapt to the Ogallala’s depletion. Dry land farming will replace irrigated farming; irrigation will become more efficient; soil conservation techniques will grow in use; and improved drought-tolerant seed varieties will continue to be introduced.*
- *Life expectancy predictions for the Ogallala Aquifer vary greatly. In a few places, the water is severely depleted, to the point where pumping is no longer economically viable. But in most areas, with technological help and careful management, the water will last for generations to come.*

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*This report provides an overview of the Ogallala’s depletion and the potential impacts on farming and food production. A companion report will focus on legislative actions, technological innovations, water conservation efforts and other initiatives aimed at extending the life of this vital resource.*