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Farm irrigation blamed for water woes

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STOCKTON, Kan. --

When Robin Bailey wanted to escape the Denver suburbs, she bought a 160-acre alfalfa farm in northwest Kansas and fell in love with a pair of creeks that raced through the property. Two ponds she added later were just another bonus.

But nine years later, the creeks are dry, the ponds puddle up a bit but are mostly empty, and a nearby section of the Solomon River doesn't run much at all.

And it's not because of drought, Bailey says.

"It's because of irrigators. Once they turn that spigot on down the road, that's the minute you see the water move from the pond."

Irrigation, the cornerstone of modern agriculture that helped the United States become a world food supplier, has become a source of contention for farmers, environmental groups and governments.

Irrigation accounts for the largest demand on freshwater supplies in the United States, and is second only to thermoelectric power in its use of U.S. fresh and saltwater supplies combined, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that while about 16 percent of all cropland is irrigated, largely in the western states, that acreage generates about $60 billion - or about half the value of U.S. crops.

Some farm groups contend water is plentiful and irrigation is necessary to sustain crops and the livelihoods of the people and businesses that rely on a solid farm economy. They also point to low rainfall and conservation measures that trap water on fields as contributing to water shortages.

But environmental groups are among those who claim irrigation - particularly west of the Mississippi - has helped dry up streams and lower reservoirs, and has threatened the land's long-term viability.

Sandra Postel, director of the Global Water Policy Project in Amherst, Mass., estimates that 10 percent of the food supply is produced by growers who overpump groundwater and calls irrigation a "hidden subsidy" for farmers.

"If you're pumping more water than is being recharged, you're in a deficit situation in regards to water," Postel says. "You're producing food today in a manner that's not sustainable, so you're using some of tomorrow's water to meet today's food demand."

Several states have taken steps to curtail irrigation. Colorado shut down about 400 wells last summer. Farm states such as Kansas and Nebraska have also been developing new plans to stem overpumping.

Kansas is paying farmers to stop irrigating and retire the water rights to wells that draw on underground sources like the massive Ogallala Aquifer, which has been showing signs of depletion in some sections for years.

But Gerry and Linda Franklin, who farm in western Kansas, irrigate one-third of their land with water from the Ogallala. Without it, they'd be out of business.

"The last seven years have been extremely dry. It's been a tough seven years. One year, even with irrigating, the crops burned with the hot wind," Gerry Franklin said. "Being able to irrigate is what's kept us in business."

Franklin pointed out that farmers like he and his wife try to conserve water. He has taken a variety of measures, including shorter growing seasons that require less irrigation and replacing spray irrigation systems with drip systems that are less wasteful.

"Everybody's concerned about the aquifer," he said. "It's our lifeblood, just like it's everybody else's."

Tightly restricting irrigation in an agriculture state like Kansas is a difficult proposition because it would affect other areas of the economy, from seed and fertilizer companies to banks that own much of the rural land.

The challenges are "very large," agrees David Pope, chief engineer for the Kansas Division of Water Resources.

"As much as our state relies on irrigation, as that decreases over time, that will affect the economic viability and social consequences of some areas," he said.

Steve Smith, director of waterclaim.org, defends irrigation, particularly in the Central Plains states where relying on rain and snow to water crops can be a gamble.

"When the pioneers came here, they called it the Great American Desert, and they did that for a reason," said Smith, who owns about 1,000 acres of cropland outside Imperial, Neb., and whose nonprofit group backs businesses that support irrigation.

However, if some farmers had to stop growing crops like corn, which requires more water, it wouldn't be "the end of the world," Smith said.

"But if you do that across too much of America then you start to affect things. One state in the nation will survive, but if you start shutting down two or three states of irrigation, then you need to start changing your diet."