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A Special Report
Fourth of Four

KANSAS LIFE

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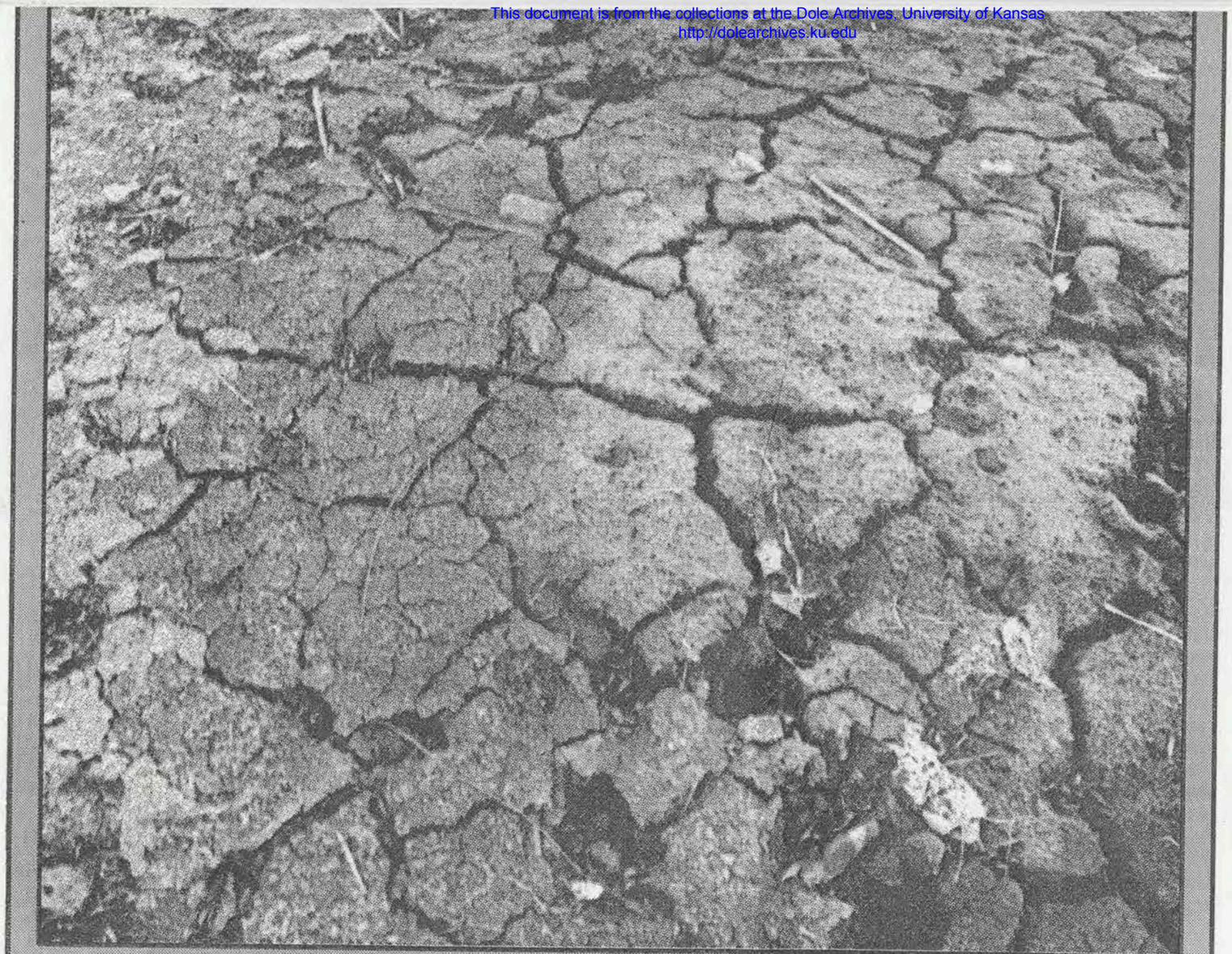

WATER

"We're Running Out" was the somber message of a special report on water three years ago. Kansas was facing a very real crisis — running out of water.

Today, that threat still exists. But the news isn't all gloomy. Since our last report, steps have been taken to alleviate the problem. Studies have been made and committees formed to look at Kansas and its water problems.

In this final Kansas Life special section, Eagle-Beacon reporters look at the accomplishments and the problems still facing the state. It is a story of hope.

An index to the section and some thoughts on the Kansas Life series are on Page 2H.

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WATER

Trying to Cope in a Land of Extremes

By TERRY WOOTEN
Staff Writer

From the days when dust-choked settlers bumped over trails in search of a promised land, water has been one of the major characters on the stage of Kansas history.

Like a summer re-run, the water problems crop up again and again, and today Kansas is faced with an increasing scarcity and with crucial decisions on how to deal with it.

Some of the problems and decisions to be made:

- Whether restrictions will be needed on the use of the Ogallala Aquifer in western Kansas where irrigation has drastically reduced groundwater levels.
- Whether state aid should be provided farmers and rural business firms affected by the changing economy caused by reduced irrigated farming.
- How to use, sell and price water in federal reservoirs where the state has municipal and industrial storage.
- Whether Kansas water laws are sufficient to cope with increasing competition by users of decreasing supplies.
- How best to aid municipalities and rural water districts in long-range planning for water supplies and distribution systems.

The water story began last century when some early settlers took one look at the dry, wind-swept plains and turned away, perhaps remembering some of the observations of Lt. Zebulon Pike and Maj. Stephen Long, who led separate explorations of the Kansas land in the early 1800s.

Pike wrote that "these vast plains . . . may become in time as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa." Long called it "almost wholly unfit for cultivation" and predicted "the scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformily prevalent, will prove an insufferable obstacle in the way of settling the country."

Both Pike and Long underestimated the hearty American pioneer. Many who came, however, fell victim to the drought of 1859-68, joining more than 40,000 in an exodus from the eastern part of the state. Another drought in 1881 was even more severe, causing the settlement boom to collapse.

Others, of more hearty stock, adjusted to the vagaries of Kansas weather, coping with the flood and drought syndrome.

"Kansas is a land of extremes," said Allyn O. Lockner, director of the Kansas Water Office, in discussing the water problems that face the state. "If we could avoid the extremes of flood and the extremes of drought, we would have a much easier time in formulating water policy."

But the extremes of flood and drought seem to be with Kansas forever and do contribute to the difficulties of water supply. In many small towns where water supply problems seem to crop up over and over again, the drought-flood syndrome is partially responsible.

Many of the communities affected "tend to forget about the problems that occur when a drought arises . . . when it starts to rain again," said Lockner.

But the problems remain and they are extensive, ranging from the cities of southeast and south central Kansas, where groundwater is scarce and rivers and reservoirs the prime source of future supply, to the west, where the reserves of the Ogallala Aquifer are being depleted to irrigate crops.

Forty-three cities and rural water districts in the southeast continue to face severe supply problems because of poor planning and scant groundwater supplies. Many of the federal reservoirs in which the state owns storage for municipal and industrial use have been "sold out," or are close to being oversubscribed.

In western Kansas, where intensive irrigation has been going on for two to three decades, water levels have dropped drastically throughout much of the area. Parts of Grant County have sustained water level declines of 100 to 150 feet in the last 25 to 30 years, according to U.S. Geological Survey figures up to 1980. Wide areas of western Kansas have recorded 50 to 100 feet water level changes, the survey charts indicate.

Reduced flows on the Smoky Hill and Solomon rivers in northwest and north central Kansas have left four irrigation reservoirs only a fraction of their former size.

Irrigators using the Kirwin Reservoir haven't been able to draw water from it since August 1980, yet are still stuck with their share of maintenance and operating costs. Similar situations exist at Webster, Cedar Bluffs and Sebelius reservoirs.

There are long-term economic consequences that will result in the management of water in Kansas. In the western part of the state, a shift has already begun from irrigated to dryland farming as the water from the Ogallala becomes more expensive to pump and commodity prices stay low. Economic studies indicate that irrigation-related industries will be affected.

Although the increase in the amount of dryland grain sorghum produced in western Kansas will alleviate some of the impact on the cattle feeding industry, near-term growth is likely to only moderate, according to a study by Kansas State University economists.

After 1985, the study projects that feed grain production, mainly corn and grain sorghum, will decline until after the year 2000. The study said this raises "difficult questions about the viability of the feeder livestock economy."

The decline of irrigated corn production in the western Kansas area is significant because corn has a greater economic impact on the economy than other grains. For each $1 change in irrigated corn production, the total output impact on High Plain industries is $2.42, the study by Drs. Orlan Buller and Jarvin Emerson of Kansas State noted.

With irrigated corn output projections declining from $185.2 million in 1977 to $67.5 million by 2000, as the study projects, more than $283.7 million would be lost to the area's economy.

In addition to the economic problems that may result from the scarcity of water, more legal problems loom on the horizon. Many Kansas water laws are nearly 40 years old and some water officials question whether they can meet the challenges of the next two decades as users compete with other users for the water that remains.

Most water management officials expect litigation to increase during the next few years until some of the developing issues are settled through changing laws or establishing court precedents.

Faced with all these problems, Kansas officials have launched perhaps the most intensive effort in the state's history to solve the water dilemma.

Some consider the benchmark of this new effort to be the Governor's Task Force on Water Resources, set up by former Gov. Robert Bennett in 1976 and chaired by Shelby Smith of Wichita, who was lieutenant governor at the time.

Smith, who headed a group of water experts and users in the study, also thinks the study, which focused widespread attention on Kansas water problems and needs, helped usher in a third stage of Kansas water history.

(See EFFORTS, 2H, Col. 1)

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