

Water Quantity; Rules, Laws, and Rights

Session Summary

Eric Wilkinson, Northern Water General Manager, Colorado

Wilkinson started by explaining the precarious position many Western states are in when it comes to water, especially those that rely upon the Colorado River for their water. Colorado has been taking steps to plan for the future and recognize that water is a finite resource. In 2005 the legislature passed the “Colorado Water for the 21st Century Act.” The Act established the Interbasin Compact Committee. The 27 member committee was tasked with developing a plan for dealing with potential changes in water use or water transfers.

Colorado also implemented the Statewide Water Supply Initiative (SWSI). The SWSI was intended to develop a picture of Colorado’s long term water needs to provide policy makers with a better understanding of how much and how water is being used in Colorado. One of the main points of the study was that there is going to be a lack of water in the future and appropriate planning needs to be done. They have recognized the need for conservation, determining the availability of compact water, how to develop any remaining compact water and that any changes to water use must meet the “No Injury” standard if water rights are changed.

Gary Harshberger, Chief, Kansas Water Authority

Gary talked about a shift that he has seen over the last few years that has led to irrigators becoming more in tune with water issues. One of the biggest issues for them is that the Ogallala Aquifer is dropping. Kansas has responded by forming a local advisory committee of 21 members to develop a local response. They have already developed some plans to address the lowering aquifer level including installing well water meters and soil moisture monitoring.

The state has also begun working with the Army Corps of Engineers to address sedimentation buildup in the John Redmond Reservoir. They are working with the Corps on a plan to remove the sedimentation in the reservoir as well as find ways to prevent future soil in-flow.

Dr. Drew Kershen, University of Oklahoma School of Law

Oklahoma has set a number of water goals, among them is to allow for growth but to keep total water use the same in 2060. This has many implications for Oklahoma. The largest user of water in Oklahoma is Agriculture consisting of 45% of total water use followed by municipal use at 32%. This will lead to a lot of pressure on AG to conserve water through improved techniques, improved information sharing. But the question is how do you finance this? Agriculture is not going to benefit from reducing their water usage that benefit will be going to other sectors. For this there will need to be some form of conservation incentives for farmers.

These efforts will also lead to other agronomic changes. We are likely to see new technologies being deployed, more no till farming, higher precision application methods for application of seeds, water and pesticides, and “Old school” water conservation techniques being reemphasized. Changes in crops will also be part of this transition, looking for water conscious plants that are also profitable for farmers. Lastly, crop genetics will play a big role in conserving water. They will allow for more “sustainable intensive agriculture.”