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No shortage of concerns over water supply

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Seeing a major source of water dwindle to a trickle can be alarming, said Martha Tasker, Salina's director of utilities, especially when you're responsible for supplying a city.

She was among the officials who told of the dry and hot conditions in 2006, when the Smoky Hill River flows dropped, along with levels in Kanopolis Reservoir.

"We're talking about 10 gallons of water per second going down the river," she told the Kansas Water Authority board Thursday during a meeting at the Friendship Center.

Water shortages are among the topics of the meeting of the water authority, which concludes today.

The water authority's role is to advise the Kansas governor and Legislature on statutory or budgetary changes that need to be made related to water issues, said Earl Lewis, assistant director of the Kansas Water Office, Topeka.

Exploring ways to better manage the resource, increasing storage in reservoirs and urging compliance of compacts with neighboring states were among the topics Thursday.

The Kanopolis Reservoir inlet feeding the Post Rock Rural Water District was at times just two feet from the surface of Kanopolis Reservoir in 2006, said David Bailey, the Post Rock district general manager and a member of the Lower Smoky Hill River Basin Advisory Committee. "Better management ... could really help that situation out," he told the authority board.

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The Smoky Hill River is tied to virtually every source of water for Salina. Tasker said, whether it be from surface water directly from the river or wells drilled into the shallow alluvial aquifer under the river.

"Whenever levels drop in the river our well levels drop," Tasker said.

Luckily for Salina, irrigators, Post Rock and folks who use Kanopolis for recreation, the rains returned, and conditions improved. "It bought us some time," Tasker said.

They began working with the Kansas Water Office on solutions, such as increasing storage and releasing water when it's needed most, said Lewis, to keep the water in storage longer and send less of it downstream.

"Right now, the release schedule is based on the science of the '40s and '50s. We want to move to a schedule that meets needs," he said.

Management is on the minds of irrigators along the lower Republican River, where a battle with Colorado and Nebraska is ongoing. Kansas sued those states in 1998, claiming they were overusing flows in the Republican River. Nebraska, for example, slurped up 80,000 acre feet more than its allocation in 2007, said David Barfield, chief engineer for the Kansas Division of Water Resources. An acre foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre of land one foot deep, or 325,851 gallons.

Kansas is a long way from winning any damages as the state asks the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the case. Barfield has asked for \$72 million from Nebraska alone. A federal arbitrator mentioned \$10,000, but Barfield predicted the damages will be "in the millions" of dollars.

He has yet to determine a figure for damages from Colorado and figures arbitration is next for that case. It could take years to collect from either state.

"The big issue is future compliance," Barfield said.

Meanwhile, a number of farmers in the area are affected. Many who have water rights junior to minimum desired streamflow requirements often cannot divert water to irrigate crops, said Susan Stover, a manager and an environmental scientist at the Kansas Water Office.

Options include increasing storage at Lovewell Reservoir, making the delivery of water more efficient in the Kansas Bostwick Irrigation District, such as lining canals to reduce seepage - an estimated 2,000 acre feet is lost to seepage every year in the district, she said - increasing storage in the Jamestown Wildlife Area, and upgrading irrigation

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Raising the Lovewell dike two feet could gain 16,000 acre feet, Stover said. "That would be pretty significant, and it might be at a relatively low cost," she said.

A fortune could be spent on improving the system, including building your own personal storage, but first on the list is enforcement, said Mike Brzon, Republic County farmer.

"If we don't have flows coming to those facilities, we've spent a lot of money for nothing," he said.

The water authority also heard recommendations for changes to all reservoirs in Kansas to preserve water for many uses, including humans, animals, crops and recreation.

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