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Gary Harshberger, Chair

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Joint Committee on Energy and Environmental Policy

Gary Harshberger

Chair, Kansas Water Authority

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Chairman Holmes and members of the committee, I am Gary Harshberger, Chairman of the Kansas Water Authority. I am pleased to appear before you this morning to discuss what arguably could be the most important issue facing this state in the short and long-term – water availability.

I reside in Dodge City, operate an irrigated and dryland farming operation, am involved in the ethanol industry and serve on the board of directors of Farm Credit of Southwest Kansas. I was appointed Chairman of the KWA on May 30, 2011.

2011 will be remembered in many areas of Kansas for widespread drought. As these insidious drought conditions continue to expand across the state and now affect a total of 80 counties, the drought has existed in extreme southwest Kansas since 2010.

According to the National Weather Service in Dodge City, the summer of 2011 (June – August) is the hottest and driest on record. The average high temperature was 99.4 degrees, nearly three degrees hotter than previous high in 1934. Dodge City experienced 54 days of 100-degree temperatures, breaking the old record of 42, also in 1934. As for precipitation, a total of 1.38 inches of rain fell in June, July and August, breaking the old record of 2.23 inches in 1976. Normal precipitation for Dodge City is 9.07 inches for these months.

The obvious impacts of drought have been the effects on dryland crops. However, with virtually no precipitation and long-term days and weeks of 100-degree heat, many irrigation systems were unable to keep up with the crop demand, many irrigated fields suffered significant losses and all will experience yield reductions. Declines to the Ogallala Aquifer are expected to be significant, especially in southwest Kansas. Another major concern is the loss of pasture and hay. On July 27, Winter Livestock in Dodge City sold 5,500 head. Last year, 6,000 head were sold during the entire month of July.

In spite of these historic weather conditions, we are fortunate that blowing soil has been minimal; a tribute to our soil and water conservation practices, adoption of crop residue management and no-till farming. That said, we are in need of precipitation in the very near future in order to germinate our winter wheat and produce next year's crop residues.

Since being appointed to chair the Water Authority by Governor Brownback, much of my efforts have focused on the Ogallala Aquifer. Prior to my appointment, the KWA took action recommending the Chairman and Director of the Water Authority to assemble a committee to identify barriers to conserving and extending the life of the Aquifer. Soon after my appointment, the Governor hosted the Ogallala Aquifer Summit in Colby. Over 400 persons attended the Summit expressing concern over the continued decline and the various methods of extending the life of the Aquifer.

The Ogallala Aquifer Advisory Committee, or OAAC, consists of 21 stakeholders including representatives of city and county government, agri-business, banking, cattle feeding, dairies, groundwater management districts and irrigators. The OAAC has met twice and has made two preliminary recommendations to the Kansas Water Authority; the first is to recommend the Legislature repeal the water right abandonment provisions from the Kansas Water Appropriations Act in areas closed to new appropriations, and the second is to establish a modified procedure for the establishment of locally initiated Intensive Groundwater Use Control Areas (IGUCA). The OAAC will meet on September 21 in Colby to take final action on these recommendations and to identify future strategies for consideration by the Committee in 2012.

The Kansas Water Authority has worked hard in the past; I assure you that the current Authority is poised to address our future water availability concerns. The potential solutions are not easy nor are they inexpensive. We will continue to provide you with recommendations on critical water issues and seek your counsel and advice on these issues as well.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before the committee. I will respond to questions at the appropriate time.