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Arkansas Rice Farmers Run Dry, and U.S. Remedy Sets Off Debate

By DOUGLAS JEHL

ULM, Ark., Nov. 5 — Rice farmers like John Kerksieck are on the brink of draining one of Arkansas' biggest aquifers dry.

That alone is troublesome, in a state that gets almost 50 inches of rain a year. But even more confounding — since these Southern farmers will not be the last to find themselves in such a pickle — is the question of what to do about it.

Most of the farmers want the government to send them replacement water from the White River. The Army Corps of Engineers and the state support a plan to spend more than \$200 million in federal money on the project, or about \$300,000 a farmer. It is time, they say, for the government to do in other states what has long been done in the West — provide irrigation water to farmers who have no other resort.

But others are concerned about the precedent such a project would set. If the government rewards farmers who use up their water here, they say, what is to stop others from doing the same?

The debate touches on issues of water rights and responsibilities, and spills over into farm policy, because one issue is whether taxpayers should have to spend more to help grow rice, which is already heavily subsidized. It also involves wrangling about whether the corps, which has been limited to navigation and flood control, has any business wading into irrigation.

One interest group, Taxpayers for Common Sense, contends the plan is a boondoggle of the first order.

Farmers here in Arkansas' Grand Prairie, one of the country's richest rice-growing areas, see it differently. "We really don't have a water problem," said Mr. Kerksieck, 42, in hunting garb in anticipation of the duck season, which rivals rice farming as the Grand Prairie's main preoccupation. Like many here, he traces his lineage to the farmers who arrived in the early 1900's, starting a century of pumping from the aquifer at rates that could not be sustained.

"There's plenty of water in the river," Mr. Kerksieck said. "They've just got to let us divert it."

Another farmer, Lynn Sickel, 51, said: "I'm a conservative person. But if this is what it's going to take for highly productive farmland to continue to provide food nationally and internationally, well, that's the taxpayer's burden."

David Carruth, a local lawyer who had led opposition to the plan, posed the question a different way. "Why shouldn't we say to these farmers in the Grand Prairie: 'You've known since 1940 that you had a problem with your aquifer, and you went ahead and overpumped it anyway,'" he said. "Why should we go ahead and grant you another resource?"

Neither Congress nor the Bush administration has made a final decision about the plan, with total cost estimated at \$319 million, with the federal government paying 65 percent. But nearly all sides agree that time for a decision is running short. Water levels in the shallow aquifer, known as the Alluvial, are declining at rates so fast that by 2015 there will not be enough left underground to sustain the area's 1,000 farms, which cover about 250,000 acres and represent about 5 percent of country's rice production.

The economic impact of such a collapse could surpass \$46 million a year, the corps has estimated.

The Grand Prairie is not the only area in trouble because of declining groundwater. Underground water accounts for 22 percent of American water use, and in many areas, including much of the Great Plains, coastal Florida and North Carolina and parts of the Mississippi Delta, it is being depleted. Even in eastern Arkansas, whose aquifers are fed by the Mississippi River, overuse has prompted state officials to designate a second area as critical because of scarce groundwater.

But the Grand Prairie area is the first whose aquifer problems have prompted the Corps of Engineers to propose stepping in, a move that many see as an important test case as water shortages, even in the East, have become common.

"One could take the position that, hey, the farmers are the ones who created this mess, so why don't we just let their wells go dry and let everybody go broke, and then the problem will fix itself," G. Alan Perkins, a Little Rock lawyer and an authority on water law, said. "But the critical problem is that right now, we're facing an imminent aquifer failure."

Like many states, Arkansas has essentially never limited the amount of water that farmers can pump from their land. In the last 50 years in the Grand Prairie, farmers have relied increasingly on irrigation, over and above ample rains, to increase the yields of their crops. The farmers have increased by nearly tenfold the amount of water pumped from the Alluvial Aquifer, even as its level was declining by more than a foot a year, the state Soil and Water Commission said.

"By allowing limitless access to such a resource, we encourage overexploitation," said Robert Glennon, a law professor at the University of Arizona and the author of "Water Follies," a new book on groundwater depletion.

Even now, under the critical area designation, state law permits limits on pumping only if an alternative source of water is made available to the current users at equal or lower cost. Arkansas hopes that alternative can be the White River, but it says it cannot carry out the project without significant federal help.

"We see groundwater depletion in Arkansas being a major problem, and one that involves the national interest, and really the only federal agency with the expertise and ability to deal with it is the corps," Earl T. Smith, chief of the Arkansas commission's water resources management division, said.

Under the corps' current plan, about 2 percent of water from the White River would be diverted for farm use, a project that would include pumping stations, canals and reservoirs. The plan, which the corps said would save the aquifer by reducing pumping to sustainable levels, has passed an environmental review, but faces opposition from outdoor and environmental groups like the Arkansas Wildlife Federation. The groups contend that lower river flows could alter the habitats of certain fish and migratory birds, including ducks, and thus hurt fishing and hunting.

Congress has allocated \$45 million for the project, and farmers and the State of Arkansas have spent an additional \$11 million. The Bush administration has not included the plan in its budgets. Although withholding a final decision, the Office of Management and Budget has limited how the corps can spend money already allocated for the plan, restricting it to conservation purposes.

Mr. Carruth, the critic of the plan, said a better approach would be to retire some farmland and to spend federal money on technology to enable farmers to use water more efficiently. That approach, he says, eases overpumping of the aquifer without the costly river diversion.

"Why should we subsidize a pump that will sell subsidized water to grow a subsidized crop?" he asked, noting that federal price guarantees mean that rice farmers receive \$3.10 a bushel for their crop, more than twice the current \$1.40 market price.

An analysis by the corps said that without White River water, there was no way to save enough underground water to continue irrigation at anything but a tiny fraction of current levels.

The farmers say the goal of maintaining a domestic food and fiber industry, and avoiding further reliance on foreign suppliers, is well worth the federal cost, even if it means guaranteeing water and crop payments for their rice.

"There is a long and established history of the federal government being involved in water resources development and protection" John C. Edwards, the executive director of the White River Irrigation District, which represents the 1,000 Grand Prairie farmers, said. "There has been a federal interest in irrigation in 17 Western states. Now that water problems are coming to the East, we can learn from the past to make this a better project for the future."