

Water Flow in the High Plains Aquifer in Northwestern Oklahoma

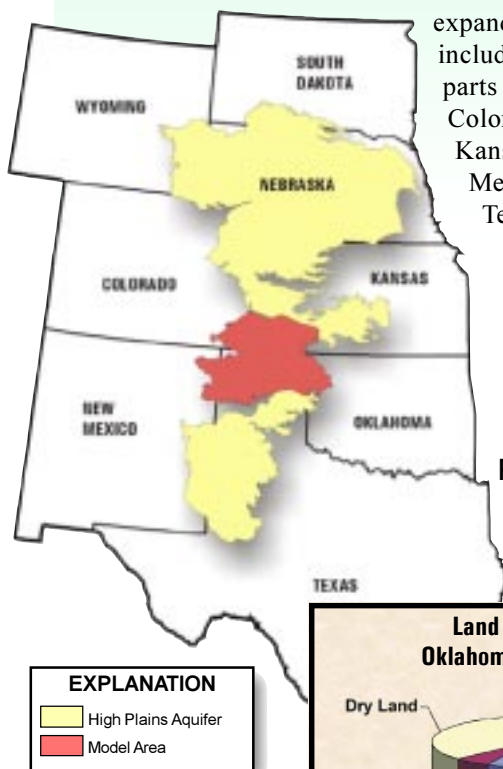
By Richard R. Luckey¹, Noel I. Osborn², Mark F. Becker¹ and William J. Andrews¹

Study Area

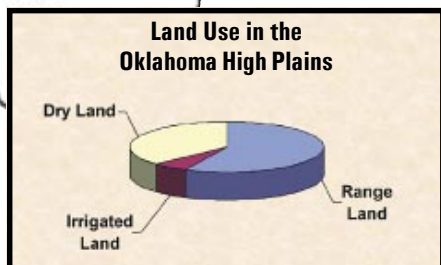
The High Plains is a major agricultural area, supported primarily by water from the High Plains aquifer, which is used to irrigate wheat and corn and to raise cattle and swine.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the Oklahoma Water Resources Board (OWRB) began a study of the High Plains aquifer in 1996. One purpose of the study was to develop a ground-water flow model that the OWRB could use to allocate the amount of water withdrawn from the aquifer.

The study area in Oklahoma covers all or parts of Beaver, Cimarron, Dewey, Ellis, Harper, Texas, and Woodward Counties. To provide appropriate hydrologic boundaries for the ground-water flow model, the study area was expanded to include parts of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, and Texas.

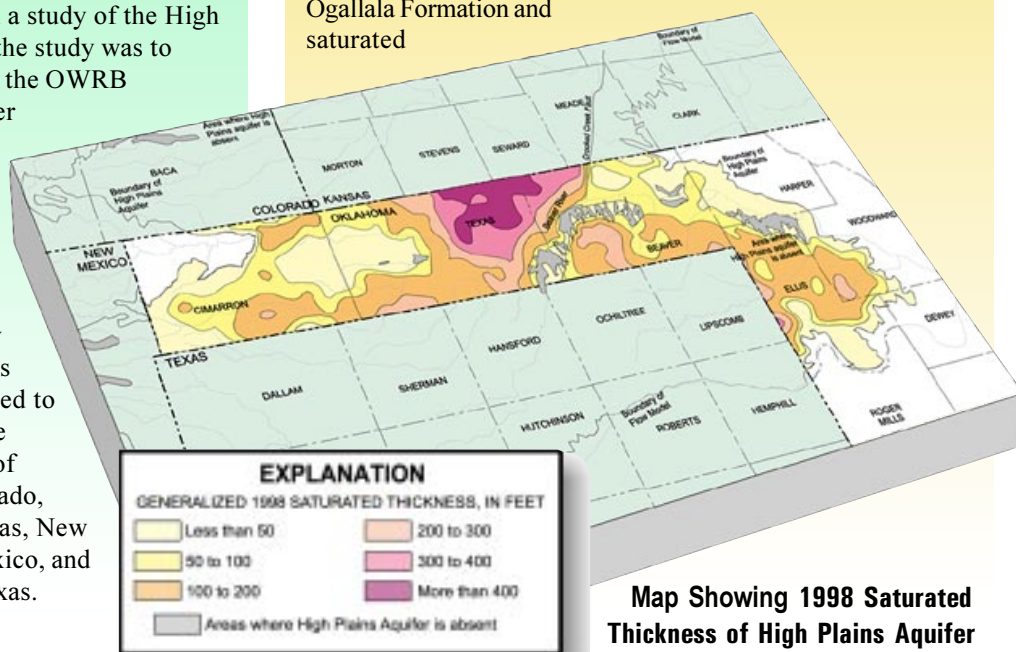


Map Showing Areal Extent of the High Plains Aquifer and Model Area



Water Resources

The High Plains aquifer underlies about 174,000 square miles in parts of eight states, including about 7,100 square miles in northwestern Oklahoma. Within Oklahoma, this aquifer consists of the saturated part of the Ogallala Formation and saturated



Map Showing 1998 Saturated Thickness of High Plains Aquifer in Oklahoma

material of Quaternary Age in hydraulic connection with the Ogallala Formation. The High Plains aquifer is commonly referred to as the Ogallala aquifer.

The High Plains aquifer is similar to a rigid sponge, partially saturated with water. The aquifer is composed of clay, silt, sand, and gravel; with the sand and gravel layers contributing most of the water to wells. Depth to water in the High Plains of Oklahoma ranges from less than 10 feet to more than 300 feet below the land surface. In 1998, the saturated thickness (the vertical thickness of an aquifer that is filled with water) ranged from nearly zero to almost 430 feet, with the greatest saturated thicknesses occurring in eastern Texas County and northwestern Beaver County.

Precipitation is the primary source of recharge to the aquifer. Other sources include seepage from streams and irrigation return flows. Ground water discharges from the aquifer to springs and streams, to adjoining formations and to the atmosphere by evapotranspiration where the water table is shallow. Water is artificially discharged from the aquifer by wells.

¹ U.S. Geological Survey

² Oklahoma Water Resources Board

Water Use

Most of the water pumped from the Oklahoma High Plains is used to irrigate crops. The remainder is used for livestock, municipal, and domestic needs. More than half of the water withdrawals from the aquifer occurs in Texas County. Livestock use increased from about 2 percent in 1992 to 5 percent in 1997, due to a large increase in the number of swine (from 20,000 to 1,400,000).

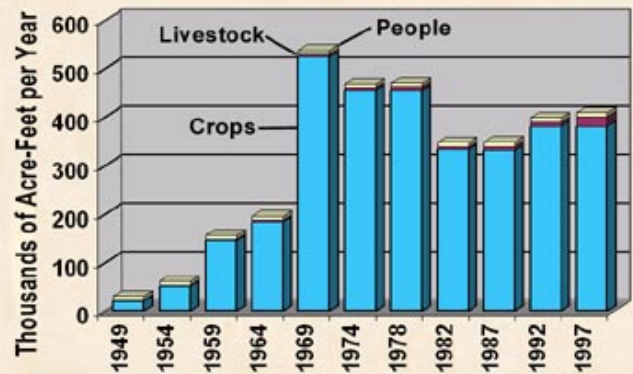
Use of ground water for crop irrigation expanded rapidly after 1946, due largely to the development of center pivots, leading to declines in ground-water levels and stream flows over much of the Oklahoma High Plains. By 1998, water levels had declined more than 100 feet in small areas of Texas County and more than 50 feet in areas of Cimarron County.

Only a small area of Beaver County had declines of more than 10 feet. In Ellis County, ground-water levels rose more than 10 feet during the period.

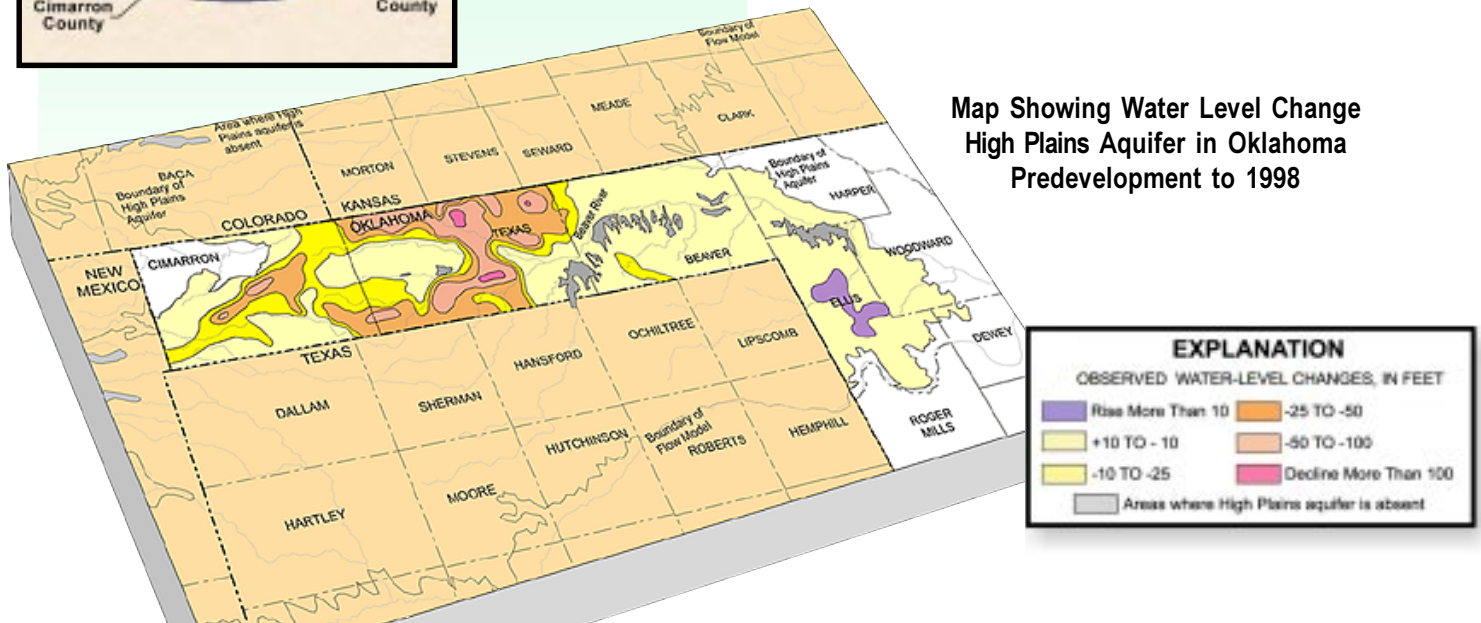
Water Use by County in the Oklahoma High Plains



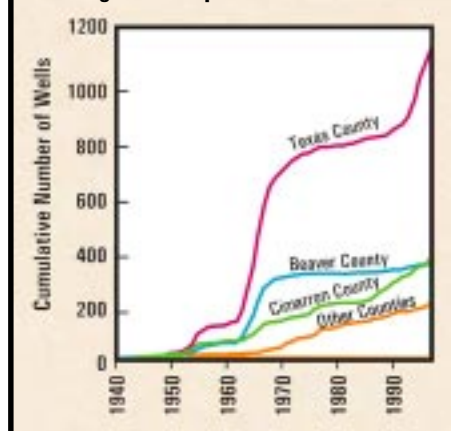
Water Use by Category from the High Plains Aquifer in Oklahoma



Map Showing Water Level Change High Plains Aquifer in Oklahoma Predevelopment to 1998



Number of Large-Capacity Wells Tapping the High Plains Aquifer in Oklahoma



Ground-Water Flow Model

The High Plains aquifer model extends from the Arkansas River in Kansas to the Canadian River in Texas. One layer, consisting of 21,073 active cells, was used to represent the aquifer. Model cells are 6,000 feet on a side in the horizontal dimension, giving each cell an area of about 1.3 square miles. The bottom of the model is the base of the High Plains aquifer and the top of the model is the water table.

Calibration is a process of systematically adjusting selected model inputs within reasonable limits while comparing simulated versus observed conditions. The model was calibrated using two time periods. The predevelopment period represented conditions before about 1946, when substantial development of the aquifer started, and the

development period from 1946 to the beginning of 1998.

In the predevelopment period, recharge from precipitation and hydraulic conductivity (the ability of the aquifer to transmit water) were varied to achieve the best fit between observed and simulated water levels and stream discharges. In the development period, specific yield (the ability of the aquifer to store and release water), recharge from irrigation return flows, and recharge from dryland cultivation were varied to achieve the best fit between observed and simulated changes in water levels and stream discharges.

RESULTS

Hydraulic conductivities and specific yields of the aquifer were determined by the calibrated model to be much less than originally estimated. In Oklahoma, hydraulic conductivities ranged from 10 to 122 feet per day, averaging 33 feet per day. Specific yields ranged from 4 percent to 27 percent, averaging 16 percent.

For the Oklahoma portion of the study area, recharge from precipitation ranged from 0.06 inch per year to 0.90 inch per year, averaging 0.18 inch per year. Recharge was greater (4.0 percent of precipitation) in areas having sand dunes or very sandy soil than in the remainder of the area (0.37 percent of precipitation).

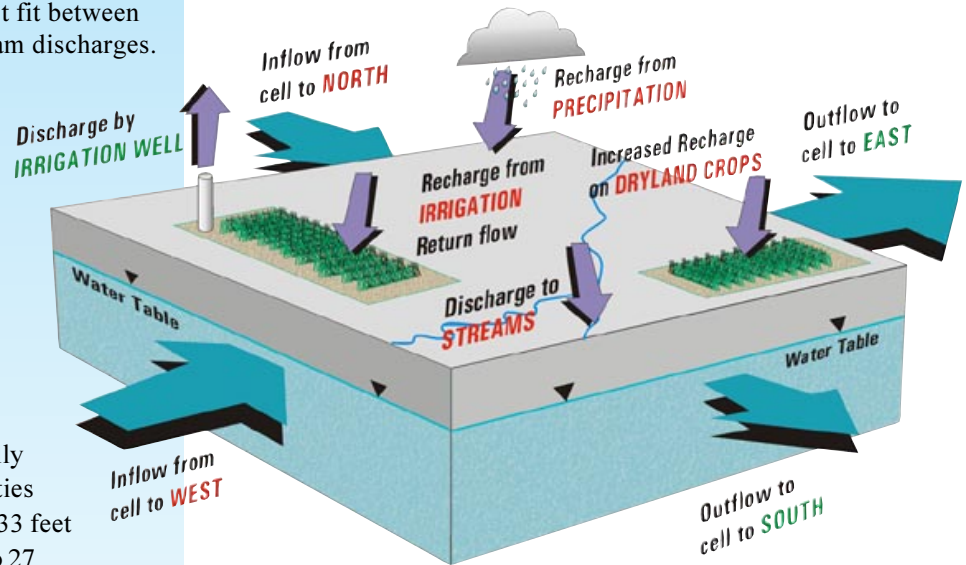
Recharge from precipitation also was enhanced in areas cultivated for dry-land crops.

About 25 observation wells in the Oklahoma High Plains had rising water levels, which were attributed to enhanced recharge caused by dry-land cultivation.

Recharge to the aquifer due to irrigation return flow decreased from 24 percent of pumpage during the 1940s and 1950s, to 2 percent for the 1990s. This decrease was due to higher fuel costs and more efficient irrigation practices with center pivots, low-pressure pivots, and LEPA (low energy, precision application) systems.

Ground water is pumped out of the aquifer at a greater rate than it is replenished by recharge. In the Oklahoma portion of the study area, 389 thousand acre-feet of water were pumped in 1996-97, whereas only 175 thousand acre-feet were replenished by recharge.

Typical Model Cell



WHAT IS A MODEL?

A ground-water flow model is a generalized simulation of water flow in an aquifer, which can be used to estimate water levels, ground-water flow directions, and stream discharges, both spatially and over time. A model is based on equations that describe flow through porous media, such as sand and gravel, which accounts for the conservation of mass and energy in the system. A model is subdivided into cells, accounting for flows between the cells.

Hydrograph of a Well in Oklahoma High Plains Showing a Rise in Water Level due to Dry-land Cultivation



Map Showing Mean Precipitation and Recharge Areas in Model Area

