

Water, Water Everywhere—or Maybe Not

Duggan Flanakin Jul 04, 2026

OPINION

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being drained faster than it can recharge. As with many above-ground lakes, that means it could one day run dry.

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The USGS has reported that groundwater levels in some areas of the Ogallala – which runs from Texas to South Dakota – have dropped 200 feet since large-scale irrigation began. [NASA's Earthdata analysis](#) found that overuse has led to significant declines in Ogallala groundwater levels that threaten its sustainability.

Water management is becoming a [critical issue](#) for farmers and ranchers. Even in [Texas](#), people are too familiar with electricity brownouts and blackouts that sometimes last for days. But when a reservoir or an aquifer runs dry, the wait can be far longer.

Former Texas State Geologist Scott Tinker says the life of the Ogallala Aquifer can be extended with a better system for managing and reusing produced water associated with oil and gas operations in the Permian Basin.

A decade ago, Tinker helped create T  at the Bureau of Economic Geology,

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tied to oil and gas production.

Tinker proposes a similar program for produced water. If industry utilizes water desalination technologies to clean up about half of the volume, it would generate hundreds of millions of gallons of fresh water every day, while the remaining salt water would help mitigate earthquakes.

Desalinated water could then be used to irrigate hundreds of thousands of acres of cotton grown in nine Texas Panhandle counties. Cotton farmers today rely on irrigation from the Ogallala for about half their water needs (with rainfall supplying the other half). Because the Ogallala's recharge rates are so low – far lower than current rates of withdrawal – without better water management, Texas cotton farmers could no longer operate.

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During the growing season, daily cotton irrigation volumes exceed the amount of produced oilfield water – but by storing desalinated produced water in lined surface reservoirs, cotton farmers might even have enough for a second

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More importantly, farmers could extend the life of their fields by decades. While desalination today is two to three times more expensive than deep-well disposal, the increased risk of oilfield- related earthquakes and related increases in produced water disposal (along with profits from water sales) make this an attractive solution for the not-too-distant future.

Andrew Coppin was so concerned about declining water levels in the Ogallala he left his native Australia, where he grew up on a 5-million-acre ranch, to relocate his water monitoring business Ranchbot to Fort Worth. Coppin's systems and counsel serve hundreds of thousands of ranchers and their water needs on multiple continents.

The man who developed a remote monitoring and control system to protect elephants in Botswana says that maximizing the benefits of the Ogallala's water while extending its useful life will be quite challenging – but he is ready for the challenge.

Ranchbot has only been headquartered in Texas for two years, and Coppin has a staff of 40 professionals working with farmers and ranchers to ensure they have the water they need to maintain their operations.

Ranchbot's AI-enhanced water monitoring systems enable farmers and ranchers to use water more efficiently and more effectively – saving costs, maximizing outputs, and increasing long- term security of their operations.

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Across the board, however, the biggest challenge is convincing a civilization that has always believed **water was free and unlimited** that exceeding withdrawal limits can have severe consequences. The second toughest challenge is convincing those with unlimited water rights that may be hundreds of years old that the times are changing.

The Gulf Coast city of Corpus Christi has for years been facing potential mandatory water restrictions of up to 25 percent. Multiple proposals have come and gone for building desalination plants that could vastly augment local water supplies, but at a cost some locals believe is too steep (notably the \$200,000 application fee).

On June 30, the city council **voted** 5-4 against applying for a Bureau of Reclamation WaterSMART Desalination Construction Projects grant that could have provided up to \$120 million for the proposed billion-dollar **Inner Harbor seawater desalination plant**.

This latest setback for proponents of a desalination solution for Corpus Christi may have cost city officials their last shot at a WaterSMART grant — and add to years of delay, cost overruns, and political controversy. If Corpus Christi fails to build what would be the nation's largest desalination plant, a prolonged drought



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Most of the world's [data centers](#) are heavy users of cooling water, and the demand by industry for these [giant information-processing complexes](#) is increasing even as cities — like San Marcos, Texas — pass ordinances to keep them away from their precious, threatened water supplies.

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Flash floods — frequent in Texas — are dangerous for citizens and may help fill up lakes but do little to recharge underlying aquifers, says Coppin.

Yet despite competing demands for water and the intransigence of decision-makers, merely debating how in-migration (huge in Texas) and other growing demands for finite water supplies do little to solve the long-term problem that many still refuse to admit is on the horizon.

Coppin argues that in the short run, additional monitoring, reporting, and regulating water quantities will provide the data necessary for designing a long-term strategy that may require regulatory teeth to carry out.

Like Tinker, Coppin urges an all-out blitz on wasted water — merging water recycling with better data and usage and new technology that can limit water



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