

Kansas Playas

Unique Wetlands on the High Plains

What is a Playa?

Playas are naturally occurring, shallow, depressional wetlands that are generally round in nature. They have clay-lined basins and naturally fill with water periodically from rainfall and its associated runoff.

Of the more than 50,000 playas found throughout the western Great Plains, Kansas is home to approximately 10,250 of these unique wetlands. They are found primarily in the western half of the state and are more commonly known as lagoons or buffalo wallows.

Benefits of Playas

Despite this unique land feature right in our own “backyard,” most Kansans are not aware of the important role playas play in providing wildlife habitat and aquifer recharge.

Wildlife habitat - Playas provide essential resting, breeding, and nesting areas for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. The natural wet and dry cycles of playas provides a diverse community of plants and invertebrate animals that, in turn, provide the necessary cover and food to support a variety of birds and other wildlife. Playas support over 350 animal species and 340 plant species.

Aquifer recharge - Studies have found that water in playas percolates underground from basin edges into the Ogallala Aquifer – a 174,000 square-mile formation spanning sections of eight



Photos by Tim Christian

states, including Kansas. The Ogallala has long been a major source of water for municipalities, industries, and most notably agricultural development since the turn of the century. The primary use of the aquifer is pumping for irrigation, and consequently, the aquifer’s water supply has declined steadily since the 1940s and recent measurements show a 1.35-ft. drop per year from 1992 to 1997. Scientists have gathered substantial evidence pointing to playa wetlands as the primary, and some say the exclusive, source of recharge for the Ogallala Aquifer. Many studies indicate that recharge into the Ogallala under playas exceeds three inches per year, while recharge in inter-playa uplands occurs at 0.004 inches to 0.03 inches per year.

Playa Facts

Of the 50,000 plus playas stretched across the western Great Plains, over 99 percent are privately owned and Kansas is no exception. Most playas are surrounded by productive farm ground and have been altered in some way due to agriculture. In fact, it is estimated that more



than 70 percent of playas have been altered from their natural state by tilling, pitting, intentional filling or filling through sedimentation. Of these, sedimentation is the most critical threat to playa function, especially in regard to groundwater recharge. Sediment build up reduces the volume of water playas can hold and increases the rate of water loss through evaporation, thus limiting recharge. Unfortunately, the numbers that are observed on the front page in regard to aquifer recharge were obtained from an unaltered playa. Playas are difficult to farm due to their natural wet and dry cycles. In most years a crop may need to be replanted two or three times and even if a crop is raised it may not be harvested due to flooding. Some producers have indicated they only receive a crop from these areas one out of every 10 years.

Who Can Help - Assistance for Landowners/Producers

Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP)

CP23A – Wetland Restoration on Non-Floodplains is designed to restore wetland complexes and playa lakes devoted to agricultural use that are located outside the recognized 100-year floodplain. It is administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency and its purpose is to enhance and provide vital habitat for wildlife. The land offered must be suitable and adapted to restoration of wetland functions and values, and does not require a certified wetland determination. To be eligible, CP23A wetlands require a buffer of adjacent uplands up to a 4:1 ratio. There is a one-time incentive payment for needed wetland restoration and 50 percent cost-share for cover establishment on the buffer. The producer, in consultation with the Natural Resources Conservation

Service, shall determine the extent of the restoration. Contracts provide annual rental payments for 10 to 15 years. Contact your local Farm Service Agency office for more details.

Other CCRP wetland practices for playas

CP27 – Farmable Wetland (on wetlands 10 acres or less in size)

CP28 – Farmable Wetland Associated Buffer

Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks Playa Lake Signup Incentive Payment (PLSIP)

- offers a one-time signup incentive payment to those landowners who establish a CP23A contract through USDA's CCRP. This incentive payment pays \$15 for each acre of playa and buffer contracted through CP23A. Landowners who participate in PLSIP retain all recreational rights to their land. For more information on PLSIP, contact one of the KDWP numbers listed below.

Other Programs - A number of other programs, both federal and state, exist that can assist landowners and producers with playa lakes. To find out more about potential financial and technical assistance contact:

Playa Lakes Joint Venture

www.pljv.org (303)926-0777

Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks

www.kdwp.state.ks.us

(785)462-3367 or (620) 227-8609

Natural Resources Conservation Service

www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov (785)823-4500

USDA Farm Service Agency

www.fsa.usda.gov/ks (785) 539-3531

USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife

<http://kansaspartners.fws.gov> (785)539-3474

Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams

www.kaws.org (620)241-3636

Information for this fact sheet was obtained from the Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV), USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), and the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) and produced by the Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS).

