

Calendar of Events

Things to do today

Things to do Tomorrow

stage9

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Auditions set for 'Nonsense' show

Stage 9 in Hutchinson, a theater that proves big things come in small packages, will hold auditions for "Nonsense: The Musical" from 1 to 5 p.m. today and Saturday.

Jake Gill concert to be for all ages

A Jake Gill community concert featuring local artist Clay McEachern begins at 7 p.m. today at the Celebration Centre Bar K Bar Arena, 1145 E. Highway 56, Lyons. All ages are welcome. The cost: \$5 per person. (Children 10 and under get in for free.) A concession stand will be available.

Art and Handmade Craft Fair, Celebration Centre, 1145 E. Highway 56, Lyons

1 p.m.

Film: "The Meddler," Fox Theatre, 18 E. First.

2 p.m.

Film: "Lost in Yonkers," Great Plains Theatre, 401 Cottage, Abilene.

4 p.m.

Film: "Captain America: Civil War," Fox Theatre, 18 E. First.

For more events, visit hutchnews.com/calendar.

7 a.m.

Abilene Farmer's Market, Union Pacific Depot, 201 NW Second, Abilene.

7:30 a.m.

Reno County Farmer's Market at Pavilion, Second and Washington.

9 a.m.

Christmas in July Antique,

1 p.m.

Film: "The Meddler," Fox Theatre, 18 E. First.

2 p.m.

Film: "Lost in Yonkers," Great Plains Theatre, 401 Cottage, Abilene.

4 p.m.

Film: "Captain America: Civil War," Fox Theatre, 18 E. First.

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Water

• From Page A1

mine the aquifer, they agreed to reduce their water use over five years by an average 20 percent, fearing that if they don't, they might be the final generation to grow crops on this parcel of the High Plains.

Now, three years into the plan, Meier and others are proving naysayers wrong. The Local Enhanced Management Area, or LEMA, the first measure of its kind in Kansas, is working. State officials report that the water table, which had been dropping rapidly each year for decades, is now showing a slight increase.

"I'd rather irrigate 10 inches a year for 30 years than put on 30 inches for 10 years," Meier said. "I want it for my grandkids."

Ogallala

The economy of western Kansas is easily seen from the air:

Green circles. Thousands of them.

Explorers called the semi-arid region the Great American Desert. However, 60 to 70 years ago, farmers began poking holes across the region, transforming it into an oasis of sorts. An economy grew because of the Ogallala, the nation's large freshwater aquifer. Stretching across eight states, it stores almost as much water as Lake Erie and Lake Huron combined.

Farmers could now plant corn, which attracted cattle feedlots, then meatpacking, ethanol plants and dairies. The profits for irrigation were so great that some bought irrigated farmland in the 1960s and paid for it within a couple of years, Meier said.

At first, people didn't think the water would run out.

Seven decades later, the damage has been done. Too many wells have been drilled. In Sheridan County, farmer Mitchell Baalman began to notice the changes underneath his family's farmland. His father, Harold, said at one time the wells pumped more than 1,000 gallons a minute. But in the early 1980s, Harold began to question the number of wells going in – wells drilled every quarter-section in some places.

His father knew it wasn't sustainable back then, said Baalman, 42. Now the family's wells are pumping 300 to 400 gallons a minute.

"Everything was 'Develop, develop, go, go, go,'" said Baalman, who is on northwest Kansas' Groundwater Management District No. 4 board. "Now it is coming around the circle on horses: Now it is the next generation cleaning up a state mess and our own mess."

Agreeing to limits

A state study 15 years ago suggested GMDs look at areas of similarity across their districts, then categorize them by priority, said Scott Ross, who was the water commissioner for the state's Division of Water Resources Stockton office



Travis Morisse/The Hutchinson News

Sheridan County farmer Roch Meier, right, along with Mitchell Baalman, left, and Harold Baalman talks about being in the state's first LEMA during an interview in his shop near Menlo on April 19.

for 25 years, until he retired in 2013.

Led by then-GMD 4 Manager Wayne Bossert, northwest Kansas took to heart the state's directive, said Ross. Six areas of GMD 4 were targeted due to high decline rates, including the spot in Sheridan County and a sliver of Thomas County.

Sheridan 6, at times, was seeing drops in the water table of 2 to 3 feet a year, said Brownie Wilson, the Kansas Geological Survey's water data manager.

Other areas had similar declines, with irrigators discussing plans, said Ross. Sheridan 6 was the only group to emerge with solutions.

The farmers, including Baalman, pushed for a program they could have a say in, something with teeth that required regulations but not something commanded by the state.

Approved by the GMD 4 board, the state's first LEMA took effect in January 2013, after the locally controlled concept was approved by the Kansas Legislature. Irrigators began cutting back their water usage that spring, said Ross, one of many to testify in support of the LEMA in 2012. He still works with area farmers, as well as those across the state, as general manager of the Water Rights Investigative Service.

There has been controversy, but Baalman and other supporters are looking at the big picture. He has four children who might farm someday. Crops and cattle are what bring money into the county-seat town of Hoxie. Nearby Hoxie Feedyard is an economic driver for the area.

Without water, industry would decline, population would decline. Opportunities for young people would be limited. Yet, as Baalman pointed out, there is still water there to save.

"We forced our hand, and we made ourselves change, and we all came together and did it, and the rest is history," he said.

No irrigation during rains

Rain hit the window at Mitchell Baalman's farm shop where he and Meier were chatting about the future recently. In these parts, they get about 17 inches a

year. For the past few years, rain has been more plentiful, although sometimes it seems like it all comes at once.

But the mentality is already different in Sheridan County. When it rains, the irrigation pivots stop.

It's just one of the changes inside the LEMA. Farmers are finding ways to make irrigating with an average 11 inches a year work.

"We are seeing a lot more diversification of crops," said GMD 4 Manager Ray Luhman. "Instead of a full circle of corn, maybe a half-circle of corn and a half-circle of wheat or soybeans. Or maybe it is a new crop."

Meier said he used to just plant corn and put 18 inches of water on it in a good year. The family still plants corn, but a son, Michael, has transitioned acreage to different crops that use less water, including triticale, teff grass and oats. They also are planting cover crops to help conserve water.

Farmers are also planting more water-efficient crops like sorghum, along with drought-tolerant corn varieties.

"We are raising that acre of corn, but we are doing it more efficiently than what we did before," Baalman said.

Many farmers implemented soil probes to help determine the moisture in the field and whether the ground needs to be watered or if it could wait, Baalman added.

"There is a lot of technology out there; it is just how to adapt to it," he said. "I can see why some don't want to adapt, but we made ourselves change in this microcosm of an area."

Nearly a foot increase

Even after just a few years, the groundwater table is no longer declining in Sheridan 6. Albeit small, officials recorded more than a half-foot to nearly a foot increase during the annual water-well survey last winter, said KGS's Wilson.

It shows even a small area can make a difference.

"Farmers get the benefit of their own conservation," Wilson said.

Wet springs the past two years have helped farmers pump less, said Luhman.

Still, Sheridan 6 irrigators have been averaging well below the targeted 11 inches a year – pumping an average 8.4 inches in 2015. For three years combined, they have used, on average, less than 30 inches of the 55 inches allotted over the LEMA's five years.

"We found out we were pumping way more water than we needed to," he said.

By saving on the front end of the program, Meier said he has about 26 inches of water left for the next two years, enough water that he could raise a bumper crop of corn. Moreover, he is still making money on limited irrigation and fewer bushels, thanks to a change in management and thinking.

"Bushels per acre isn't as good, but profit per acre is better," he said.

Just one LEMA

With two years left, the outcome is still being written. Baalman, however, is hopeful that after five years of cutbacks, those in Sheridan 6 will want to continue their efforts. The LEMA sunsets in 2017.

Luhman said he will prepare a detailed report for the state this fall, with an eventual vote by the board to renew the LEMA.

However, said Baalman, some producers question why they have to use less water when those on the other side of the road, outside the LEMA, aren't doing anything different.

It's a valid point, he said. He and the board are now looking beyond the LEMA's current boundaries.

Luhman said he and his staff are working out the details of a GMD 4-wide LEMA. There already have been some public meetings, but meetings on a more formal plan could happen as early as August. He didn't expect anything to be implemented until at least 2018.

Yet, statewide, LEMAs are slow to catch on. Gov. Sam Brownback has touted the tool in his 50-year water plan, and, thanks to legislation, LEMAs are easier to form.

But after three years, Sheridan 6 remains the only one. Two years ago, farmers in west-central Kansas' GMD 1 voted down a similar concept.

Still, said Lane

KANSAS AGLAND

The success of Sheridan County farmers' groundwater conservation efforts is this quarter's cover story of Kansas Agland.

The free, quarterly publication is a product of The Hutchinson News, the Salina Journal, The Hays Daily News and The Garden City Telegram.

Daily agriculture news, farm blogs and markets can be found at www.kansasagland.com.

To subscribe to the free publication, call Elizabeth Garwood at (800) 766-3311, ext. 115, or email her at egarwood@hutchnews.com.

WHAT THEY PUMPED

Those in the LEMA get 55 inches a year of irrigation water, which is an average 11 inches a year. However, for the past three years, they have pumped well below the targeted average.

Rain the past few years has helped, along with changes in cropping patterns.

2013 – 10.1 inches
2014 – 9.9 inches
2015 – 8.4 inches

Letourneau, the Division of Water Resources water appropriation program manager, Sheridan 6 has set a precedent in western Kansas. Offshoots of the LEMA, called Water Conservation Areas, are being formed, which have similar cutbacks but don't involve the groundwater management district.

Instead, the local effort requires 100 percent consent between stakeholders and the DWR's chief engineer.

A handful already have been formed, including one near Goodland, Letourneau said. Others are in the exploratory stage.

"The more tools in the toolbox, the better off we are," he said.

Less talk, more action

There were some folks across the Ogallala who wanted to see Sheridan 6 fail, said Baalman. Now he sees the suck-it-dry mindset changing.

He gestured down the road to a rural Catholic church. Farmers sitting in the pews aren't afraid to start a conversation about water, even sharing ideas on crops and technology.

"We have a lot of progressive farmers willing to step outside the box," Baalman said. "That has been the whole beauty of this: We put a line in the sand, and we are all adapting."

They aren't anyone special, Meier added.

"We are just a bunch of farmers who knew we needed to do something, and we did it," he said. "In 55 years, when my little grandson is my age, there will be water out here for him."

LOTTERIES

Friday's numbers:
Daily Pick 3: Midday: 1-2-9 Evening: 7-8-9
2by2: Red: 6-8 White: 13-15
Mega Millions: 8-19-20-55-73 Megaball: 5 Megaplay: 2

CORRECTION POLICY

The News takes care with its reporting and editing, but sometimes errors occur. Corrections will be published here promptly. If you spot an error, please notify Ron Sylvester, managing editor, at (620) 694-5700, ext. 300, or email rsylvester@hutchnews.com.

A LOOK AT LAW ENFORCEMENT

•Watch video and listen to 911 call from the rescue of three teenagers from the rain-swelled Arkansas River Thursday. See it at <http://hutchnews/cxr10e>.

•The Reno County man accused of forcing a contracted Westar employee off the road after the worker changed out his electric meter was placed on a year's probation Friday. See full story at <http://hutchnews/4k7x1v>.

•A Hutchinson man accused of severely beating another inmate in the Reno County jail last fall was sentenced Friday to serve almost 2½ years for the attack. See full story at <http://hutchnews/et8rxg>.

•A judge Friday sentenced a woman convicted of slicing her boyfriend's hand with a knife during a November 2014 domestic argument to serve a year in prison. See full story at <http://hutchnews/axopp6>.

•GREAT BEND – A Great Bend man convicted last August for rape and burglary was finally sentenced on Friday and ordered to serve more than 50 years in prison. See full story at <http://hutchnews/phvprt>.

ALSO ON THE WEB

•The brown, churning Arkansas River snaking through Hutchinson has the Hutchinson Fire Department on their A-game as they anticipate potential water rescues. See full story at <http://hutchnews/m9eunc>.

•Numerous Reno County roads remained closed or had water across them Friday afternoon. Reno County Emergency Management identified 25 roads or intersections that were closed or had water across them as of 2:45 p.m. Friday. See full story at <http://hutchnews/7cr5oy>.

•Harper County once more became the center of regional earthquake activity, with five quakes in the county and another just north of the county line over the past week. See full story at <http://hutchnews/xhmkay>.

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No injuries, but damage after two tornadoes in Eureka

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

EUREKA – The National Weather Service says two tornadoes ripped through southeast Kansas late Thursday, causing widespread damage in a small town. No injuries have been reported.

The National Weather Service said Friday

preliminary information shows that an EF2 tornado hit Eureka, a town of roughly 2,600 residents east of Wichita. The tornado damaged about 50 homes and businesses, including the Eureka Nursing Center.

The weather service also said the early data shows that another EF3 tornado

hit northwest of Eureka late Thursday.

Levi Vinson, the Greenwood County emergency management director, said everyone has been accounted for, but crews were still checking on some people.

Gov. Sam Brownback issued a state of emergency.