

AMARILLO GLOBE-NEWS

Thursday, December 3, 2009

Irrigation's economic impact

16,000 jobs at stake

Water supports more than merely the crops

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There are several reasons to keep the irrigation pumps running on the High Plains — about 16,000 jobs and more than \$1 billion of economic benefit.

That's what a Texas Tech University report released Wednesday says.

"While \$1.6 billion of economic impact is directly attributable to the production of crops from irrigation, we can conservatively estimate that as that money moves through the local economy, it generates an additional \$2.5 billion per year of indirect economic activity," according to the report.

Water: Estimates don't include other effects

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All those jobs and money only come from what it takes to get a crop to market and sold, said Darren Hudson, who led the study from which the report is based. He is director of the Cotton Economic Research Institute and holds the Larry Combest Chair in Agricultural Competitiveness at Texas Tech.

The estimates don't account for effects such as the enhanced tax bases of schools and towns, boosts to rural population, and rural residents spending disposable income in Amarillo.

Farming that requires added water accounts for 4.5 percent to 8.5 percent of the economic activity of the

area, Hudson said Wednesday at the Amarillo Farm and Ranch Show at the Amarillo Civic Center, during a panel discussion about water.

Irrigation uses about 90 percent of groundwater pumped in the region, while towns and cities use 4 percent to 6 percent, according to regional water plan data.

The city of Amarillo's situation illustrates its interest in keeping irrigated crops going and conserving the water in the Ogallala Aquifer that's used on farmland.

Some of the city's goals include preserving the regional economy and cooperation with ag industry initiatives, Deputy City Manager Jarrett Atkinson said at the panel discussion.

On one hand, the city has

invested in businesses like Hilmar Cheese and Pacific Cheese, which process the end products coming from cows that eat a lot of feed grown in irrigated fields — reason to hope irrigation remains viable.

On the other hand, the city owns 253,000 acres of water rights and is a 40 percent partner in the Canadian River Municipal Water Authority that owns 267,000 acres of water rights, plenty of incentive to prevent the watering from getting out of hand.

The study shows the potential impact of turning off the pumps.

"I don't want to be on the High Plains when they shut the (cotton) gins down," said Zach Brady, a Lubbock attorney with water law experience.