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For Immediate Release  
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## Concerned about the Ogallala? Conserve Playa Wetlands

Society is quick to point the finger of blame as to what is causing or will cause the demise of the Ogallala Aquifer. Agriculture, ethanol, expanding urban populations, global warming – you name it. There's no doubt any and all of these are impacting the aquifer now and into the future. But we are unwittingly ignoring the most important issue – how to protect the sole sources of recharge for the Ogallala – playa wetlands.

Playas are shallow, seasonal wetlands found in abundance in the Southern Great Plains. There are more than 60,000 playas perched above the Ogallala Aquifer formation in eastern Colorado and New Mexico, western Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle. Playas are the primary source of recharge for the Ogallala, and are the most important wetland habitat for wildlife in the region, supporting millions of ducks, shorebirds and other migratory and resident birds and other wildlife year-round.

You may have never heard of, nor seen, a playa. That's not surprising. More than 90 percent of all playas are located on private farm and ranchland, so rarely does the general public have access to them. Playas are also seasonal in nature. Whether they are wet or dry depends on the local weather. Playas can be wet year-round, or stay dry for months and sometimes years on end. This cycle can make it difficult for the untrained eye to detect them.

Yet it is this natural, wet/dry cycle of playas that helps them recharge the Ogallala. Playa basins are lined with clay soils, so when they dry out, deep cracks form in the basin and along the perimeter of the playa. When water comes into the playa from rainfall or other runoff event, it runs through these cracks and edges and into the underlying water table.

Research has shown that playas contribute between 85 and 95% of the total water returned to the aquifer in the Southern High Plains. This amounts to about 1 to 3 inches per year, depending on their location and depth to the groundwater formation. The Southern High Plains encompasses eastern New Mexico, western Texas, the Panhandle of Oklahoma, southeastern Colorado and southwestern Kansas.

"Data may be less empirical for areas north of the Southern High Plains, but we think it is the same process," said Playa Lakes Joint Venture Coordinator Mike Carter.

Although research on playas and recharge has been going on for decades, only recently has it become known and appreciated.

Playas are in critical need of conservation. More than 70 percent have been altered from their natural state due to pitting, filling, cropping and road construction, among other threats. The biggest threat to playas is sedimentation. Sedimentation occurs on all playas in cropland when rain or irrigation water carries loose soils into the playa, gradually filling it. Playas filled with sediment can no longer hold as much water for the same amount of time, significantly reducing their value for recharge and wildlife. Researchers estimate more than half of all playas are filled with sediment and are effectively 'fossilized' and have lost most wetland functions.

Sedimentation isn't necessarily an intentional alteration of playas. Many farmers don't even realize they have a playa, and are unknowingly clogging up one of their best sources of economic

return. Others are unaware that playas recharge the Ogallala, or are unsure of ways to work around the wetlands.

“Once the connection is made that playas recharge the Ogallala, almost any farmer will express an interest in protecting it,” Carter said. “In fact, in a recent survey of playa landowners, we found that more than 70% are willing to conserve their playas.”

That is where the Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV) comes in. The PLJV is a partnership of wildlife and natural resource agencies, conservation groups, corporations and landowners dedicated to the conservation of playas and other wildlife habitats in the Southern Great Plains. The PLJV works at the local, state and national level to increase incentives and options for private landowners to conserve playas.

The most effective way to conserve playas is to maintain or restore the native prairie grasses around it. Grass buffers filter out sediments and contaminants before they get into the playa. Some of the incentive programs available to landowners to maintain or plant buffers around playas include the Farm Bill’s Wetlands Reserve Program and Wetlands Restoration Non Floodplain Initiative (CP23a) and Farmable Wetlands Initiative (CP27) under the Conservation Reserve Program, as well as other federal, state and private programs.

The PLJV is currently working with Farm Bill program managers to increase incentives and ease the process for farmers to enroll their playas into the Conservation Reserve Program. Landowners are encouraged to do what they can to show their support for this effort.

For more information about playas, the PLJV or our efforts to help landowners conserve playas, visit the PLJV web site ([www.pljv.org](http://www.pljv.org)) or contact either PLJV Coordinator Mike Carter or Communications Team Leader Debbie Slobe at (303) 926-0777 or email us at: [mike.carter@pljv.org](mailto:mike.carter@pljv.org) and [debbie.slobe@pljv.org](mailto:debbie.slobe@pljv.org).

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*Note to editors: Photos and maps available upon request. See [PLJV media kit](#) for examples.*