



News Release

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For Immediate Release

OK Playa Festival Teaches Kids about the Water Cycle

For 37 students who attended the Playa Lakes Festival in Goodwell, Oklahoma last week, life changed rather quickly. On the first day of the Festival, these students knew very little about playa lakes, wastewater reuse, the Beaver River, and the Ogallala Aquifer. By the fourth day, the same students knew more about the local water cycle than most adults.

Festival director Darryl Birkenfeld, summarized the transformation that occurred with the students, who in August will enter Grades 4-7. "These kids and their adult sponsors received a crash course on water issues with some of the region's best teachers--this Festival would rival any water class taught in a university."

"Our High Plains water isn't always easy to see, but it is hard at work in thousands of playa lakes, small springs, large draws and creeks that turn into some big rivers further east, and, of course, the mighty Ogallala Aquifer."

Students came from the towns

After lunch, the presenters and small groups of students boarded a large bus provided by Guymon Public Schools, and toured a large playa lake basin on the Neil Hyer farm south of Guymon. Out on the playa, students gathered interesting plants and specimens in their scavenger bags. When the contents of the bags were sifted through back in the classroom, the faculty helped the students identify over a dozen plants and grasses, many of which grow only in the playa basins.

The second and third days of the Playa Lakes Festival featured four learning modules, held at the OSU Extension Center and the OPSU campus. Landscape artist Amy Winton of Canadian, TX, and Dr. Rick Dingus of Texas Tech taught an art module where students used sketching, painting, and photography as tools for learning about the water cycle. A second module conducted by Laura Marbury and Dr. Nick Parker of Lubbock, studied state, national, and global water situations. In addition, the group learned about water reuse, and got a tour of the Goodwell wastewater lagoons to observe how these systems actually work. A third module offered by Rhonda Artho from the North Plains Groundwater

The final day of the Festival included a tour and a sack lunch picnic at Optima Lake National Wildlife Refuge near Hardesty.

"This Festival would not have been successful without the help of many dedicated volunteers and sponsors from all the participating towns," Birkenfeld added. "Also, hats off to Stratford ISD, Oklahoma Panhandle State University, and Guymon Public Schools for providing vans and a bus to transport students during the Festival, and to the Goodwell Booster Club for providing hot lunches each day."

The Playa Lakes Festival was organized by Ogallala Commons, an education resource network active in eight states of the Ogallala Aquifer region. Sponsors for the Festival were Oklahoma Farmers Union, High Plains RC&D (Buffalo, OK), Oklahoma Panhandle State University, The Southwest Collection / Special Collections Library at Texas Tech, North Plains Groundwater Conservation District. Other sponsors lending support were Texas County Conservation District, Sherman County Soil & Water Conservation District, Cimarron County Conservation District, Environmental Defense, Ogallala Aquifer Institute, Playa

of Boise City, Texhoma, Stratford, Griggs, Sunray, Guymon, Straight, and Goodwell to attend the Playa Lakes Festival held at the Oklahoma Panhandle Research & Extension Center and Oklahoma Panhandle State University July 20 - 23. Each day, they gained a better understanding of surface water hydrology, how Ogallala groundwater is being steadily depleted, and what they can do to preserve water and promote a healthy water cycle.

On the first day, students heard about playa lakes: their origins, their flora and fauna, their impact on wildlife, and their ability to recharge the Ogallala Aquifer. The presentations were given by Debbie Slobe of the Playa Lakes Joint Venture and Jim Steiert of Hereford, author of the book, Playas: Jewels of the Plains. Laura Marbury of Environmental Defense also provided an introduction to the water cycle to orient the group.

Conservation District in Dumas oriented students to the history and current status of the Ogallala Aquifer, and issues surrounding its use and conservation. The group also toured the Beaver River north of Goodwell to learn how land management affects streambed ecosystems. To further deepen student awareness, Andy Wilkinson and Amanda Shires of Lubbock taught students how to create poems and use writing as a creative tool to learn about playa lakes and water situations.

Ogallala Commons, with the help of the Southwest Collection / Special Collections Library at Texas Tech, will create a traveling exhibit from the photography, art, and creative writing that students compiled at the Playa Lakes Festival. The exhibit will be displayed in the local towns and schools on the second weekend of October, thereby bringing education about precious High Plains water resources to even more students and adults.

Lakes Joint Venture, Oklahoma Panhandle Research & Extension Center, and Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

For more information or to obtain photos of the event, contact Darryl Birkenfeld at (806) 938-2529.