



## High Plains Landowner Survey 2006: Farmers, Ranchers, and Conservation Executive Summary October 2006

In March through May, 2006, the Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV) conducted a survey of 1,800 landowners in a 6-state region comprising the majority of its administrative boundary (inside red line on map below) which includes parts of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. As of the end of May, final response was 26% (429 respondents). Error tolerances for this sample are +/-2 to 5 percentage points (95% confidence level).



PLJV Administrative Boundary (red line)  
Blue = Bird Conservation Region 18 (short grass prairie)  
Green = Bird Conservation Region 19 (mixed grass prairie)

Objectives of the study were to assess:

- A baseline of landowner awareness and appreciation of playas, wildlife and conservation;
- Motives underlying landowners' management practices/decisions;
- Landowners' willingness to accept incentives for playa/wetland management;
- Current conservation practices of landowners, and willingness to consider conservation practices;
- Landowner perceptions of the need for additional conservation of wildlife, land, and aquatic resources in the region;
- Landowner preferences for sources of conservation information;
- Landowners' current participation in agricultural/conservation programs;
- Selected characteristics of landowners and the lands for which they were responsible.

## Key findings revealed:

- About 50% of farmers/ranchers in the PLJV region had heard of the term “playa” or “playa lake” which translates to about 115,000 individual farmers/ranchers in the PLJV region. Across BCRs, landowner awareness (heard of “playa”) ranged from a low of 24% in BCR18CO to a high of 90% in BCR18TX.
- More revealing was the key question inquiring if respondents *had* playas on the lands they managed. Playa presence ranged from a low of about 8%—that is, 8% of properties had at least one playa lake—in BCR18CO, BCR19KS, and BCR19OK, to a high of 48% in BCR18TX. These survey data yielded an estimate of playa numbers in the PLJV region within the range of 41,000 to 127,000 playas, which easily encompasses playa numbers promoted by the JV of about 60,000.
- When asked about certain playa functions, about 50% of landowners did not know whether or not playas recharged groundwater. This indicates there is a need to continue to communicate about the link between playas and recharge of the Ogallala Aquifer.
- Of 13 possible resources that might warrant additional conservation effort, farmers/ranchers said they supported “more conservation than now” for only one—the Ogallala Aquifer. Their second-ranking conservation concern was the Conservation Reserve Program (“same support as now”).
- When asked how willing they would be to implement certain conservation practices if given incentive, 28% of all playa landowners were “highly willing” and 46% were “moderately willing” to plant native grass buffers around playas/wetlands, indicating a significant landowner demand for playa conservation programs.
- A number of different incentives would be well received by landowners to help improve their management of playas and wetlands. Most popular among landowners—those who have playas, those that do not, and those that don’t know—would be if “playa/wetland management helped my bottom line.” In fact, the most popular incentive for all types of landowners would be some form of financial remuneration, augmented by knowledge that their actions were helping the land/water resources.
- Predictably, landowners in BCRs in which playas were more common were better able to identify playas as a type of wetland. Moreover, landowners who said they actually had playas on their properties were much more knowledgeable about playa lakes than those who did not have playas on their lands.
- Looking at farmers/ranchers across the PLJV region, those who said they had playas on their lands said playas and wetlands constituted an *overall positive* feature (68%), while 25% said playa lakes/wetlands were an overall negative feature. A majority of respondents who indicated they did *not* have playas on their properties still were prone to characterize playas and wetlands as a positive feature (53%), though a large group (39%) said “don’t know.”
- For landowners who said they had playas on their properties—and thought playas were an overall *positive* presence—the highest-ranking benefit was “attracts wildlife.” Ranking second was “recharges groundwater,” third was “improves groundwater quality,” and fourth was “source of water for livestock.”

- For landowners who thought playas/wetlands represented an overall *negative* presence—and said they had playas on their properties—the perceived negative consequences were, ranking first, “reduces land available for production,” then “crop-/ranch-land flooding,” “unpredictable production in and around playas/wetlands,” and “possible state or federal regulation.” Even landowners who thought playas/wetlands represented an overall *positive* presence on the land said the most negative potentiality associated with playas was “possible state or federal regulation.”
- Landowners would most prefer to receive word of conservation programs from federal and county agricultural sources. Somewhat surprising, however, is that ranking near the bottom of the list of preferred information sources was “Farm Bureau,” only slightly more favored than “non-government group.”
- Row-crops constituted the highest income source for farmers/ranchers in the PLJV region, followed by livestock production, then farm commodity assistance, and conservation assistance. Poultry production played virtually no role as an income source for these landowners. Income from fee recreation appeared similarly unimportant, except for landowners in Bird Conservation Region (BCR) 19OK and BCR19TX. The relative importance of agricultural income sources varied among BCRs within the PLJV region.
- On average, land “as a source of income” was “highly important” to landowners in the management of their farms and ranches. “Moderately important” to landowners was land management “in terms of the pleasure of farming/ranching,” land “as a means of passing the rural life on to the next generation,” and land “as a source of land/water resources.” “Slightly important” was land “as a source of non-hunted wildlife species,” land “as a source of hunted wildlife species,” and land “as a source of outdoor recreation.”

The PLJV extends its thanks to the more than 400 individual landowners who took the time to participate in this survey, and for educating us on their opinions on resource conservation in the High Plains. The final survey report is available on the PLJV web site: [www.pljv.org](http://www.pljv.org).



The Playa Lakes Joint Venture is a non-profit partnership of conservation groups, state and federal wildlife and agriculture agencies, corporations and landowners dedicated to the conservation of playas, other wetlands and prairies for the benefit of wildlife and people in the Southern High Plains. The PLJV was formed in 1989, and since then, has raised nearly \$50 million to conduct more than 350 outreach and education, habitat conservation and research projects throughout its six-state region.