

Testimony for the Kansas House Water Committee

Today's groundwater crisis is a generational test of our values and our commitments to future generations of Kansans. HB 2686 is an important opportunity to respond to this test. I want to thank this Committee, and each of you, for the work you have done to make this historic moment possible.

The issue is personal to me. I am a scholar and writer who grew up in southwest Kansas. Generations of my family farmed there since the 1920s; my father still ranches on the Cimarron River in Grant County. My family stuck through the Dust Bowl and other hard times. They did what they had to do. Some years they prospered, others they did not. Groundwater helped them survive.

Our aquifer is what allowed folks like them to build flourishing communities, to fund hospitals and schools, to raise kids like me and send us out into the world. Without groundwater, my life would not have been possible. So, I was concerned to find that parts of southwest Kansas have some of the highest rates of aquifer depletion in the world. To learn more, I spent months traveling with my father, talking to people in southwest Kansas, visiting archives and conducting in-depth, independent social scientific research on this topic. I shared this research in a recent book (*Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains*, Princeton University Press, 2021).

Of the many lessons I learned about the issue, one major point stood out. Most people in southwest Kansas – including family, friends and nearly everyone I met – would prefer to save some of this vital resource for future generations, to give our children the same kind of opportunities that our parents gave us. But under current statutes, the vast majority of western Kansas residents have no voice in the decisions being made about the aquifer.

If participation in the GMDs continues to be restricted to large landowners and water rights holders, then the only people allowed to vote on the future of the aquifer include those that reap the most benefits from draining it. Moreover, in some districts, many landowners are absentee, corporate or live out-of-state. Those who are not invested in local communities pump our water like there is no tomorrow. When one area runs out, they just move to another. Much of the profits are exported far away. But residents are stuck with the growing debts.

HB 2686 helps to solve this part of the problem. There are several reasons why I strongly support making the Groundwater Management Districts more inclusive, open, transparent, and accountable. First, this bill allows citizens to have a voice in the groundwater decisions that will determine their destiny and puts power where it belongs: in the hands of those most committed to healthy, sustainable futures for all Kansans. Second, this bill aligns policy more closely with actually existing publics and the real ways that groundwater works and impacts western Kansas society. Third, this bill streamlines bureaucracy and encourages more substantive dialogues between stakeholders, including authorities, experts, district boards, municipalities, industry, producers and residents. And finally, this bill reaffirms our commitments to each other and to the Kansas values of justice, freedom, decency and local democracy.

As the work of this Committee has shown, the issue is much bigger than partisan politics or short-term profits or the slogans used to divide us. The bedrock truth is that we are all in this together. More than anything else, the aquifer belongs to the generations of Kansans to come. They will need it even more than we do now. Time is running out to protect, value and sustain our aquifer. This is one of our best chances to do so. Thank you for your important and courageous work towards that urgent end.

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