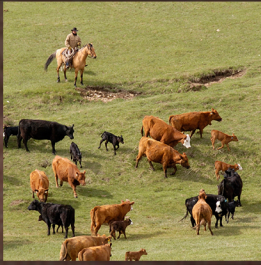


Focus Group Report

Understanding landowner attitudes, opinions and willingness to participate in playa conservation



Produced by D.J. Case & Associates

Understanding landowner attitudes, opinions and willingness to participate in playa conservation

Focus Group Report
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Executive Summary

Playa lakes are critically important features of the landscape across much of the American Great Plains, providing the vast majority of the water recharge of the Ogallala Aquifer, tremendous wildlife benefits, and a host of utilitarian, recreational and aesthetic benefits to landowners and society at large. However, playas and their associated benefits are currently threatened by land use management decisions. It is critical to understand the behavioral drivers for both playa conservation and utilization.

DJ Case and Associates, in cooperation with the Great Plains Landscape Conservation Cooperative, Playa Lakes Joint Venture, Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, and a host of other partners, conducted 13 focus groups with farmers and ranchers in six states throughout the Playa Lakes Region in late summer, 2013. The goal of this research was to better understand landowner attitudes and opinions about playa conservation (with emphasis on impediments to conservation behaviors) to inform agencies' strategies to encourage and enhance conservation of playas on private lands.

Key findings include:

- Most participants were familiar with the term “playa,” although some called them by other names; notably “lagoons” and “buffalo wallows.”
- The most commonly stated positive benefits of having playas on their land included aquifer recharge, wildlife habitat, good cropland/forage (if dry), water for cattle or irrigation, natural flood control, and aesthetic values.
- The most commonly stated negative benefits of having playas on their land included flooding, getting equipment stuck, harboring noxious weeds, poor yields, poor water for cattle, and decrease in property value.
- The large majority of participants who were already using playa conservation programs did so primarily because of economics—they felt they could get higher financial return from the programs than they could from farming/ranching. Others did so for wildlife benefits, to rest the land, or for hunting benefits.
- Landowners who were not currently enrolled in any playa conservation programs said it was because of economics (they thought they could receive higher financial return from farming/grazing playas than they could from the program), it was too much hassle for small pieces of ground, distrust of government programs, or location of playas on the land.
- Landowners considered the following things as they decided whether or not to enroll in playa conservation programs: economics (does the program offer more money than they can make through farming/ranching?), length of contract, cost share for establishment, loss of control/rights, who administers the contract, convenience of sign up, and location of playa on the land.
- If landowners could design a conservation program for playas, it would include fair market value for the foregone income, adjustments for inflation or market

- changes, variable contract lengths, rotational grazing rights, signing bonus, cost share for establishment and weed control, and attributes related to local control.
- Landowners are very concerned about the condition of the aquifer and most are interested in conserving the remaining water. However, there was a wide range of understanding about the connection between playas and the aquifer. A few participants were well informed about the connection, but the majority were unaware of the relationship and/or were skeptical.
 - A large majority of focus group participants said they would be willing to conserve/restore their playas (or at least consider it) *to help recharge the aquifer*. Of course, it depends on *how much* recharge would result and many other factors, but nearly all would be open to it if they were convinced it would help the aquifer. Fewer would be willing to conserve/restore playas for wildlife benefits only, but many said they would consider it.
 - Nearly all participants wanted to pass their farm/ranch operation onto the next generation—often within their families, and they wanted to leave the land in better condition than it was when they got it.
 - Very few participants had heard of the Playa Country radio show, but most that had heard of it liked it and found it credible.

Impediments to Playa Conservation

In general, landowners do not have a good understanding of playa functions and benefits, nor of the connection between playas and the aquifer; they are skeptical that playa conservation could do much to recharge the aquifer; many do not know about the conservation programs that could assist with playa restoration/conservation; farmers/ranchers seek higher compensation for enrolling their land in conservation programs (it must be the best economic option); and some landowners have many years of ingrained practices to overcome.

Priority recommendations

- Focus conservation resources in small, prioritized “focal areas.”
- Conduct intensive, not extensive communication efforts.
- Create Landowner Advisory Groups to guide local efforts.
- Address and assuage landowner fears of “government entanglement” that might occur if they enroll in conservation programs.
- Work with partners to deliver information about playas to landowners.
- Maximize and promote economic incentives for playa conservation.
- Work with agencies and partners to adjust existing conservation programs
- Engage as many partners as possible and encourage supplemental programs.
- Use local terminology to best communicate with local landowners.
- Focus communications on aquifer recharge; then wildlife benefits.
- Use pride of ownership as a supporting message.
- Reconsider the scope and role of the *Playa Country* radio show.
- Expand/upgrade Web presence to focus on landowner needs.

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Background

Playa lakes are critically important features of the landscape across much of the western Great Plains. Playa lakes are essentially round, relatively small hollows, ponds, or lakes that usually collect water only at certain times of the year and for short duration.

Although ephemeral—only present at certain times of the year—they provide:

- the vast majority of the recharge of the Ogallala Aquifer,
- invaluable wildlife and plant benefits year-round, whether wet or dry, and
- a wide variety of utilitarian, recreational and aesthetic benefits to landowners and society at large.

Every day, landowners in the playa lakes region—most of them commodity farmers and ranchers—make decisions about how they will manage their lands, including playas. Some landowners understand the ecosystem services and benefits that playas provide, and take actions to conserve, enhance, and even restore playas on their lands. However, many have little or limited understanding of these functions and benefits, and for a variety of reasons, often unintentionally manage playas toward a degraded state. This management problem is exacerbated with increasing commodity prices putting additional pressure on landowners to farm and graze playas.

Conservation agencies and organizations are continually trying to work with landowners to achieve playa conservation, and because 97 percent of the land in the Great Plains is privately owned, understanding landowners' beliefs and attitudes about playas is an indispensable element in achieving meaningful conservation efforts. In 2005, the Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV) contracted with DJ Case & Associates (DJ Case) to conduct a survey of landowners in the Playa Lakes Region of the Great Plains. This was the first systematic effort to learn what landowners think and believe about playas on their lands. Survey results surfaced a wide range of landowner experiences with playa lakes, and helped guide PLJV communication and conservation efforts throughout the region.

To build on these early insights to the gamut of landowner sentiments toward playa lakes, PLJV partnered with the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture (RWBJV) and DJ Case in 2013 to win a grant from the Great Plains Landscape Conservation Cooperative to conduct focus groups with landowners in the Playa Lakes and Rainwater Basin Regions to enhance understanding landowners' beliefs and attitudes about playas.

By conducting focus groups with landowners in target areas, researchers were able to focus on issues and topics that emerged in the 2006 survey results, probing key socioeconomic impediments that discourage landowners from enrolling in conservation programs or restoring playas, and then recommending strategies for overcoming these reservations.

Goal

The ultimate goal of this research was to better understand landowner attitudes and motivations to inform agencies' strategies to encourage and enhance conservation of playas on private lands.

Objectives

Primary objectives:

- 1) Understand what functions and values landowners seek from their lands.
- 2) Identify what motivates landowners' management behavior on the landscape.
- 3) Understand what landowners in target areas think, feel, and believe regarding playas and playa conservation.
- 4) Pinpoint what incentives/disincentives are effective for landowners.

Additional objectives:

- 1) Assess the effectiveness of ongoing conservation messages and current media placements.
- 2) Provide assistance to the entire conservation community in working with landowners to achieve playa conservation.
- 3) Strengthen landowners' confidence in conservation organizations and programs.

Target Audiences

The primary target audience for this project was landowners living/farming/ranching in areas with large playa clusters as identified by PLJV's Playa Decision Support System (see *Methods* section) and who had at least one functioning playa on their land. Wherever possible, we also tried to find landowners who were seen as opinion leaders in their local social circles.

Conducting focus groups in areas of high playa density not only directs attention to areas with the most playas, but also to areas most important for habitat connectivity. Focus groups were designed to elicit valuable information about landowners' perceptions of and experiences with partners and partner programs, and to identify the most effective ways partners can communicate with landowners about playas and playa conservation in the future. The focus groups also were designed to encourage participants to carry the conservation message to other landowners.

Methods

Focus group interviews are well established and commonly used *qualitative* social science tools for gaining insights to why people think (or behave) as they do. A properly designed focus group draws out the motivational factors critical to understanding what is driving opinion or behavior.

In addition to collecting in-depth information from participants, focus groups also serve as powerful communication tools in their own right. By asking questions and facilitating discussion, researchers share large amounts of critical information in a non-threatening and communicative way.

Note: Focus groups are not *quantitative* research. Participants are not randomly selected, nor are they statistically representative of entire populations. In fact, sometimes particular participants are selected precisely *because* of a particular viewpoint or situation they represent that may not be “usual” in the broader population. Focus groups do not generate “statistics” the way surveys do, though “tallies” or polls on questions posed during focus groups often are techniques to enliven and invigorate focus group proceedings, revealing useful insights. But most importantly, focus groups allow participants to express their concerns, fears, and hopes in ways that survey methodology cannot, and generate information and insights regarding local audiences and issues that otherwise might be overlooked.

To prepare for the focus groups, staff from the PLJV and Rainwater Basin Joint Venture (RWBJV) conducted meetings and phone calls to solicit input from key partners, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, state wildlife agencies, water conservation districts, and landowner-led conservation groups to inform the development of discussion topics and a list of key landowners to invite to the focus groups. The target timeframe was July - September, 2013, to avoid the busiest times (farming/ranching activities) for landowners and increase participation.

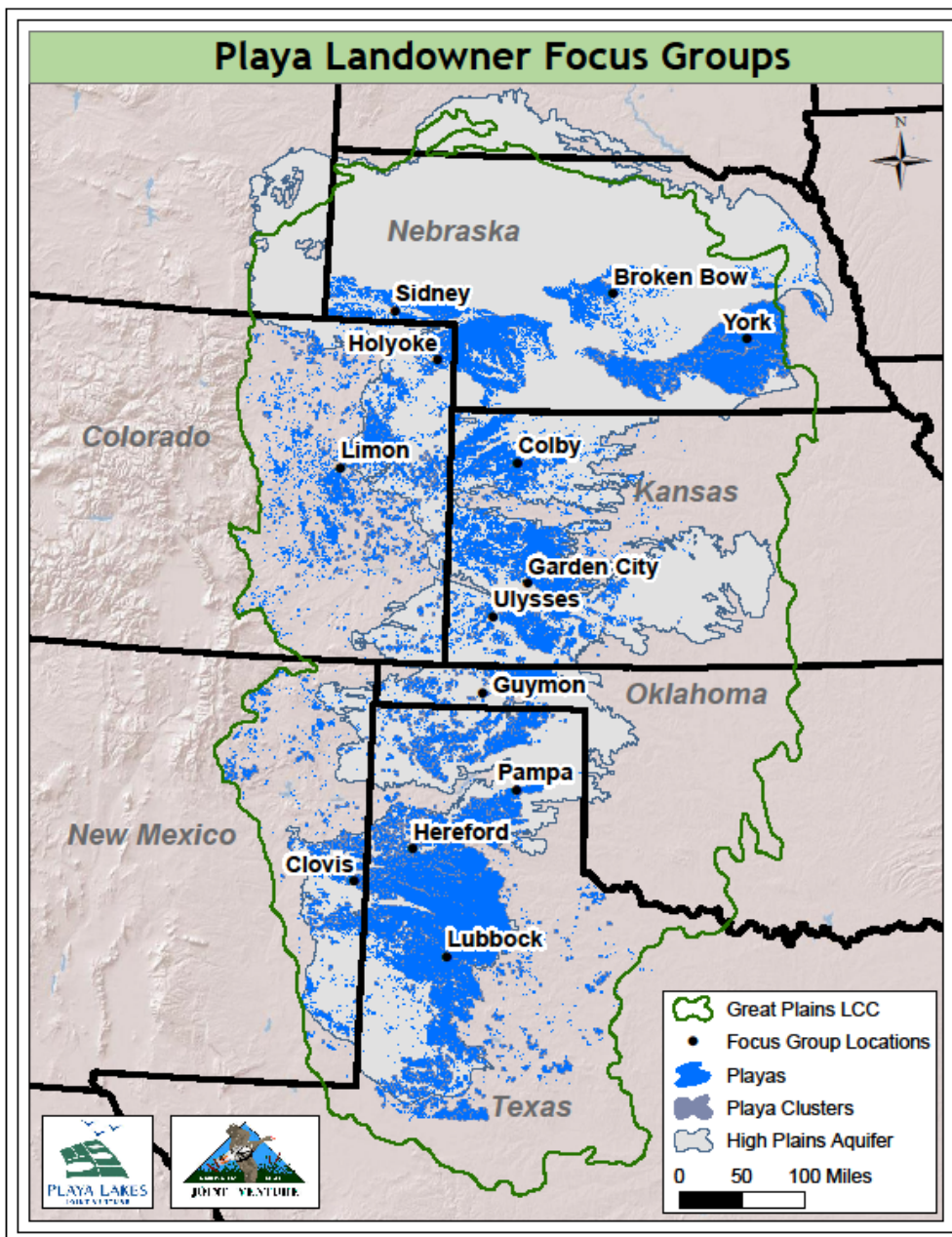
Based on information gathered from the initial meetings and discussions, DJ Case worked with PLJV and RWBJV staff to develop a topic guide/script (Appendix A) to elicit landowner attitudes and opinions about land use, current participation in landowner programs, barriers to conservation, information they use for decision making, and sources of information they trust. The topic guide gave sideboards and direction to the focus group conversations. Similar issues were discussed at each focus group, but the questions asked and topics covered were customized from group to group.

PLJV and RWBJV staff selected locations for fourteen focus groups in key areas in six states. Locations were selected in areas with large playa clusters as identified by PLJV’s Playa Decision Support System (see Figure 1). Conducting focus groups in areas of high

playa density not only directed attention to areas with the most playas, but also to areas most important for habitat connectivity.

Since formal focus group facilities are not available in these rural areas, meetings were usually held in hotel and restaurant meeting rooms. Participants were asked to arrive at 5:30p for a free dinner courtesy of the joint venture, with the formal focus group running from 6:30 to 8:30p.

Figure 1: Locations of playa landowner focus groups in relation to playa clusters, as determined by the [PLJV Playa Decision Support System](#), and the High Plains Aquifer.



Identifying and Inviting Participants – PLJV

PLJV staff asked local partners—ranging from NRCS and FSA to various conservation non-profit organizations such as Pheasants Forever and producer organizations like Farm Bureau—to provide names of landowners they could invite to focus groups. Staff then began making the invitation calls, but quickly discovered that the majority of landowners didn't answer the calls or respond to messages, and those that did were wary of accepting the invitation from someone they didn't know. To provide a personal connection, PLJV staff asked their partners to make the contacts directly.

The agreeable partners contacted landowners they knew, either by phone, email or in person, and asked them if they would be interested in sharing their opinions on playas, the Ogallala Aquifer and conservation programs. Callers explained that PLJV was trying to better understand what landowners think about when deciding whether to participate in conservation programs. Callers also advised landowners of the date, time, and location of the event, and explained that there was a complimentary dinner for all who attended. After the first two focus groups, all landowners who agreed to attend received a follow-up reminder call, text, or email on the day of the meeting.

Identifying and Inviting Participants – RWBJV

For the focus groups in Nebraska, RWBJV staff used a Geographical Information System (GIS) to cross-reference playa wetlands with a landowner dataset. By screening for properties with large playas (greater than 20 acres), the program generated over 100 potential landowners. A combination of RWBJV staff, Pheasants Forever biologists, Natural Resources Conservation Service staff, and Nebraska Game and Parks biologists used the list to recruit participants. If a landowner indicated that he/she would attend, he/she was sent a letter with the appropriate details. Two to four days before the focus group, staff made follow-up phone calls. If a landowner cancelled his/her participation at any time, staff worked with the partners to identify replacement participants.

As landowners arrived at focus group locations, they were greeted by the moderator and one or more representatives (at least one but as many as three) from the PLJV or RWBJV and/or their partners. The moderator and JV representatives purposefully steered conversation away from playas, so none of the landowners would be biased in any way prior to the focus group. Dinner was scheduled to begin at 5:30, but the moderator would often wait until 5:45 or so to allow for late arrivals. Dinner was ordered and served between 5:30 and 6:30, and focus groups began promptly at 6:30.

The moderator began each focus group with an explanation of the process and ground rules (see Appendix A). After that, the moderator showed participants six photos (projected on a screen) of playas in various different stages and conditions, to ensure everyone had a similar understanding of what playas are and to create a context for the

discussion (Appendix B). Seven discussion items followed, and the moderator ended each focus group by playing and discussing an audio file of a 4 ½-minute episode of the *Playa Country Radio Show* (see Appendix C for transcript). At 8:30, the moderator thanked everyone for their participation and formally adjourned the session, but offered to stay around and answer questions/continue discussion if anyone was interested.

Results

Focus Group Participants

Representatives from the PLJV, RWBJV, and their partners coordinated recruitment of participants. Seventy-two of the 122 individuals (59%) who we recruited over the telephone actually participated in the focus groups (Table 1). The July 25 meeting planned for Perryton, Texas, was cancelled because partners could not find any landowners willing to participate. The project team added a meeting in Liberal, Kansas to replace the Perryton meeting, but corn harvest began just prior to the meeting date, so that focus group also was cancelled. Partners tried several times to reschedule a final meeting to complete the full complement of 14 focus groups, but could not find a date/location that worked for a reasonable number of landowners.

Table 1. Numbers of individuals who were successfully recruited to participate in thirteen focus groups held in the Great Plains during the summer of 2013, and numbers of individuals who actually participated in each group.

| Location | Date | # Recruited | # Participated |
|-------------------------|-------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Garden City, KS | 7-22-13 | 8 | 4 |
| Ulysses, KS | 7-23-13 | 9 | 6 |
| Guymon, OK | 7-24-13 | 5 | 2 |
| Perryton, TX | 7-25-13 | 1 (cancelled) | Cancelled |
| Pampa, TX | 8-5-13 | 15 | 5 |
| Hereford, TX | 8-6-13 | 7 | 4 |
| Clovis, NM | 8-7-13 | 19 | 6 |
| Lubbock, TX | 8-8-13 | 9 | 5 |
| Holyoke, CO | 8-19-13 | 8 | 6 |
| Sidney, NE | 8-20-13 | 5 | 3 |
| Broken Bow, NE | 8-21-13 | 10 | 10 |
| York, NE | 8-22-13 | 13 | 12 |
| Colby, KS | 9-3-13 | 9 | 6 |
| Limon, CO | 9-4-13 | 5 | 3 |
| Liberal, KS (cancelled) | 9-11-13 | 10 (cancelled) | Cancelled |
| TOTAL | | 122 | 72 |

Despite the best efforts of staff and partners, fewer landowners attended focus groups than we hoped, affirming a known fact among researchers accustomed to working with

landowners—ranchers and farmers constitute an incredibly busy and preoccupied clientele. Landowners cited farming activities, county fairs, other meetings and time of day as their primary reasons for declining the invitation to participate. However the discussions—even in the lightly attended groups—were excellent; indeed, the informal and relaxed atmosphere of these smaller gatherings provided particularly penetrating insights for future communications and conservation efforts.

Key Findings

Following are the key findings based on all focus group results combined. The scope of landowner attitudes and opinions were remarkably similar across all focus groups, and largely corroborated the results of the 2006 landowner survey. Findings are organized by the eight discussion items from the focus group topic guide (Appendix A), and are presented in the order in which they were discussed (i.e., item numbers do not indicate priority; only the order in which they were addressed). In addition, for most discussion items, responses have been grouped by “primary reasons” and “secondary reasons.” It is important to remember that this “coarse-scale prioritization” is a subjective assessment by the researchers, based on focus group responses, verbal and non-verbal cues, discussions before and after the focus groups, etc. It is an attempt to provide partners with a coarse sense of priority to help with implementation, without implying that the qualitative nature of the research can provide fine-scale prioritization. Summarized results from individual focus group sessions are in Appendices D-P.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Most focus group participants were familiar with playas. Some called them by other names (most common alternatives were “lagoons,” “buffalo wallows” and “mud holes”), but most knew them as playas. A handful of participants were not at all familiar with the term playas, and in areas where a different name is used locally, it would be very important to use the local name in communications. Most participants said their playas are dryer, smaller, and shallower than the ones they were shown at the beginning of each focus group. The notable exception to this was in York, Nebraska, where participants said their playas were much bigger than the ones in the photos. Participants were asked to name all the positive and negative aspects of playas they could think of.

Positive attributes of playas that were most commonly mentioned:

- Aquifer recharge (but the majority of participants did not know the scope of the recharge and were skeptical it was significant).
- Filter and purify groundwater.
- Provide wildlife habitat/refuge (waterfowl, pheasants, songbirds, deer, frogs, amphibians, insects, macro-invertebrates, and diversity of plants were specifically mentioned).
- Good wildlife viewing.

- Good hunting (waterfowl, deer)—landowner can lease hunting rights.
- Cultural heritage (at least one participant had a Native American site).
- They can grow good crops if conditions are right.
- They grow good forage for cattle.
- They provide water for cattle. Cattle like them.
- Aesthetic values—beautiful to look at (at least when they're green). They offer some visual diversity in the Great Plains.
- They increase property value.
- Natural flood control and erosion control.
- Seed bank—some of that vegetation doesn't grow anywhere else.
- Watersports on large playas in wet years.

Negative attributes of playas that were most commonly mentioned:

- They make farming more difficult (have to farm around them).
- They harbor noxious and/or perennial weeds.
- Trees grow in them and use up the water.
- Equipment gets stuck in them.
- Heavy clay soil is difficult to work and hard on equipment.
- Most of the time they flood the crops you plant.
- They produce poor yields when you are able to farm them.
- They encourage trespassing (poachers, wildlife watchers, ATV users).
- Some participants have been told (and others assume) that playas are jurisdictional wetlands, greatly reducing a landowner's property rights.
- They decrease property value.
- There is nothing valuable about them—they are a “dead zone” if they don't contain water.
- The water in playas is bad for cattle.
- Cattle can get stuck in them.
- They attract wildlife that carry disease and weed seeds.
- They grow a lot of mosquitoes.
- They can smell bad.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

Participants were asked whether they currently conserve any of the playas on their land (i.e., exclude them from farming or ranching operations) and if so, why. Focus groups contained a good mixture of participants on both sides of this issue.

For those that did conserve playas, the primary reasons were:

- Economics—the large majority said their decisions were mostly based on their belief that they could get higher financial return from the program than they could from farming/ranching that ground (“get paid for nonproductive land”).

- Conservation—many liked the idea of helping wildlife or restoring habitat. Coupled with the fact that farming playas was often very risky anyway, they saw it as a win-win situation. “Why fight it?”

Secondary reasons given were:

- Hunting—some mentioned that playas provide good hunting benefits and/or opportunities to lease the hunting rights for income.
- Rest the Land—several said they enrolled in a program not for conservation reasons, but rather just to rotate the land to make it more healthy and productive when the contract expires and they begin farming it again.

For those that did NOT conserve playas, the primary reasons were:

- Economics—there are powerful incentives to farm the playas. If they don’t flood too often, they can be very productive; when you take them out of production they become classified as non-farmed land, which reduces your base.
- Distrust government—programs change, staff change, and a program you thought was good can become very bad.

Secondary reasons given (related to economics but perhaps not directly) include:

- Hassle—it’s not worth the effort it takes to enroll the ground in a program (especially since most playas are very small).
- Location—some would be more willing to conserve playas if they were on the field edges, where they would be easier to “cut out,” but not when they are in the middle of a large field.
- Size—unless the playa is very large, it just doesn’t make sense to farm around it (and most are small).
- Available resource—it makes no sense not to graze playas when there is good forage/water available there.

Item 3. Considerations for enrolling land in conservation programs

Participants discussed the things they consider when deciding whether or not to enroll land in conservation programs. The primary considerations were:

- What price per acre does the program offer? Is it competitive with crop and/or insurance prices? Does it make economic sense to enroll? The economic considerations were mentioned more than any others, and many of the other reasons relate to economics as well.
- How long is the contract? Most wanted short contracts so they could respond to market changes, but a few wanted longer terms so they could “count” on the income (this was mostly true for operators closer to retirement).
- What control do you have to give up? What land management options are no longer available if you enroll the land?
- Who administers the contract? Some government offices and agency staff are terrible to work with. (There is a lot of mistrust of the federal government, and some mistrust of all levels of government. Mistrust appeared highest among ranchers; maybe slightly less for farmers.) There was great variability in level of

trust of non-governmental organizations. Some were trusted completely; others were mistrusted as much as government.

Secondary reasons given were:

- Does the program provide cost share for establishment of the practice?
- How convenient is enrollment? How many hoops do you have to jump through?
- Where is the playa located on the land? Some said they would enroll playas that were on a field border, but probably not playas in the middle of a field.
- Need better promotion of the programs—many participants had not heard of WRP or CP-23A. Examples from neighbors are best.
- Most operators saw themselves as the “original conservationists.” They take pride in caring for their land, and most recognize that sometimes these programs provide the best way to do that.

Item 4. Key attributes of playa conservation programs

Participants were asked what attributes they would include if they could design the “ideal” playa conservation program. The primary attributes were:

- It would pay fair market value for the crops the farmer could have planted.
- It would have an adjustment for inflation and changing market conditions.
- It would offer variable contract lengths or it would allow you to get out of it if the market changes.
- It would allow you to graze it on a rotational basis (could offer lower payments in the years that you graze it).
- It would be flexible to match local conditions (not one-size-fits-all).
- It would be under local control (not some far-away DC person who doesn’t know anything about local farming).
- It would let the operators decide what cover crop is best (sometimes operators are forced to plant stuff that they know is not going to grow).

Secondary attributes include:

- It would provide a signing bonus as incentive to enroll.
- It would provide cost share (and possibly a source of labor) for establishment of practices (planting cover crops, fencing, etc.).
- It would provide assistance with weed control if needed.
- It would offer reduction in tax base as possible compensation.
- Acres in this program should not count against your CRP max.
- It would guard against farmers who “farm the government” (e.g., planting corn on dry land in the middle of a drought just to get the crop insurance payments).
- It would use a name other than “easements.” The word easement makes it sound like you have to give up rights to the land.
- It would provide information on how to make the playas better (restore their function).
- It would not require mid-term management.

- It would allocate some of the lease payment to the tenants instead of all of it going to the landowner.
- It would provide more lead time for sign-ups (currently it is often last minute).
- It would allow you to maintain the playa at its original size (one farmer said his playa is growing and he would like to be able to pump it down to original size).

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

Participants were almost unanimous in their concern over the condition of the aquifer. It's clear that this issue is a "hot topic" for them and their families, and they were generally well informed about the condition of the aquifer in their area. **However, there was a wide range of understanding about the relationship and connection between playas and the aquifer.** A few participants were well informed about the connection, but the majority were unaware of the relationship and/or were skeptical. The primary issues for partners to address include:

- Even among the participants who believed that playas do recharge the aquifer, most believed the amount of recharge was not significant.
- There was a strong call from nearly all participants for more information (from credible sources) on this relationship (do playas recharge the aquifer? How much? How long does it take? Etc.).
- Many believed that conservation efforts are "too little, too late," and that the aquifer will probably be pumped dry before people will change practices.

Secondary points include:

- Some believed that only the large playas recharged the aquifer (they believed small, shallow ones evaporate before the water infiltrates).
- Some believed that once the clay bottom of the playa swells shut, no more infiltration occurs (even around the edges)—only evaporation.
- Some thought playas would work better if you dig them out.
- Some believed that pumping irrigation water out of the playas saves the water in the aquifer.
- Some said if they could be convinced, they would conserve their playas, but not through a government program; they would do it on their own because it's the right thing to do.
- One participant thought chiseling the playa would improve infiltration.

Item 6. If you were convinced playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?

Participants were asked to discuss the following scenario: If you were convinced by a credible source that conserving your playas (not farming or ranching them) would recharge the aquifer or provide other conservation benefits, would you conserve them? The key points were:

- There were a few exceptions, but **a large majority of focus group participants said they would be willing to conserve/restore their playas (or at least consider it) to help recharge the aquifer.** Of course, it depends on *how much* recharge would result and many other factors, but nearly all would be open to it if they

- were convinced it would help the aquifer. Recharging the aquifer is very important to these folks. “Water is the glue that holds this region together.”
- Fewer would be willing to conserve/restore their playas for wildlife benefits only, but many said they would consider it. Again, a key driver for farmers and ranchers was an understanding of how much benefit would accrue versus the perceived negatives of enrollment.
 - There was concern over out-of-county landowners who owned large acreages in some areas and who don’t care about anything but financial returns. (Even if all the “good” farmers conserved playas, these nonresident landowners who didn’t would reap all the benefits and the aquifer would not be in any better shape.)

Item 7. Vision for your land

Participants were asked to discuss their vision for their land after they were done with it. The key points were:

- Nearly all participants wanted to pass their farm/ranch operation onto the next generation—often within their families.
- Nearly all participants wanted to leave the land in better condition than it was when they got it. For some, this meant making the land more productive (higher yields); for others, it meant making the land healthier (more topsoil, less water use, etc.).
- Many mentioned that they wanted to be good stewards of the land. “No better conservationists than the American Farmer.” “We are the ‘Agro-Americans.’”
- Several mentioned that regardless of who inherited the land, they wanted to see it managed for its highest and best use.

Item 8. Impressions of *Playa Country* Radio Show

Participants were asked to listen to a four-minute radio spot from the *Playa Country* radio show, a weekly radio program about the wildlife, people and landscapes of the western Great Plains that is sponsored by PLJV. The sample spot was about conservation of playas (see script in Appendix C). Participants then were engaged in discussion about the radio show, usefulness of the message, and their preferences for how and where they receive information about farming.

Key results about the *Playa Country* radio spot include:

- Very few participants had any awareness or recollection of the radio show; fewer still had actually heard the program on the radio.
- Nearly all thought the radio spot was well done and a source of credible information. However, some thought the information was outdated, because conventional tillage is not used much anymore, so the concerns and solutions offered in the spot were no longer applicable.
- Most agreed the radio spot should provide a website address where listeners could go to get more information (very few noticed/remembered that the radio spot they just listened to *did* provide a URL with more information).

- Some said if they heard a website mentioned on the radio that really interested them, they would take the time to write down the URL and go to it later, but many said they would not. A few participants did write down the URL that was mentioned in the Playa Country radio spot, but most could not even remember that a URL was mentioned.

When asked where they get their information on farming, they gave a wide variety of answers. Primary sources included:

- Radio (this was probably most common answer, though some said farmers don't listen to radio as much as they used to).
- Neighbors, other farmers they respect.
- University Extension (most thought highly of Extension, though a few said Extension didn't have the reputation it once did).
- Internet (most said they used the Internet, but they couldn't give specific sites that they use frequently).
- NRCS.
- Farm magazines were mentioned frequently, although many participants said they no longer read them (*Fence Posts*, *Successful Farming*, *High Plains Journal* were mentioned specifically).
- Social media (especially Facebook and Twitter) was mentioned frequently for the younger generation, but many of those who mentioned social media said they don't use it personally).

Secondary sources included:

- Farm Bureau.
- SCS office and newsletter.
- Corn Growers Association.
- Kansas Ag Research Association.
- American Society of Agronomy.
- Natural Resources District Newsletter.
- Equipment dealers.
- Seed company consultants (Serve-a-tech).
- Pheasants Forever.
- Field Days (best when held on somebody's land you know and trust).
- TV weather or market reports.
- Ag Days.
- 4-H Program.
- Direct mail from a variety of farm-friendly sources.

Several participants mentioned that farmers have not done a very good job of communicating their conservation efforts to the public, and need to do better.

Landowner Confidence

A secondary objective of this project was to strengthen landowner's confidence in conservation organizations and programs. Achievement of this objective was mixed. Although there was widely held mistrust of "government," it was clear that this mistrust lessened significantly for local governments and/or local offices of the federal government. When participants personally knew a representative from a local office of a federal agency (e.g., NRCS), it generally increased the probability that they spoke well of them and/or trusted them. However, sometimes, personal relationships just reinforced the mistrust or irritation. It seemed largely dependent upon the individuals and circumstances involved.

Similarly, conservation organizations that were not locally known were generally viewed with suspicion, but others that had local representation were generally liked and trusted—some were held in very high regard—based on positive personal experiences with landowners.

PLJV and RWBJV were not well known (or known at all) among some of the participants, and participants often asked for repeated explanation of these organizations, objectives for the focus groups, how they were funded, etc. In nearly every focus group, some participants stayed around after the formal session ended to ask additional questions or ask for clarification about the JVs, the programs they were promoting, and how they could get more information. Often, these "post-focus group" conversations were some of the most important parts of the project, as participants were able to ask questions and get a lot more information about the project and the conservation programs discussed during the focus group.

It was obvious from participant feedback as they were leaving the focus groups that the majority (there were exceptions) appreciated the chance to offer their opinions about playa lakes, and usually learned a lot as well.

Individual Focus Group Results

More details from individual focus groups are summarized in Appendices D-P, and complete transcripts of each focus group are available in Appendix Q (under separate cover).

Impediments to Playa Conservation

Following are the primary impediments to playa conservation based on focus group results. These are numbered for ease of discussion and do not necessarily represent priority order.

1. **Lack of understanding (or misunderstanding) of playa functions and benefits.** Most participants didn't know much about the geology, morphology, or healthy vs. unhealthy functioning of playas, which make it impossible for them to make informed decisions about how to treat playas on their land.
2. **Need for more information on the connection between playas and recharge of the Ogallala Aquifer.** Many had no idea that playas recharged the aquifer; some did not believe it; others were skeptical. There also is a need for technical information regarding restoration of playas. How can a landowner improve the function of a degraded playa?
3. **Skepticism about whether playa conservation would have any significant impact on depletion of the aquifer.** Even those who were convinced playas were connected to the aquifer were skeptical that playa conservation could have any significant impact on its condition. There is great need for more solid information on this topic and MUCH more communication of that information to landowners.
4. **Lack of knowledge about conservation programs available.** Many did not know anything about WRP or CP23A. There is need for promotion of these (and other) programs directly to landowners and also to agency partners.
5. **Lack of sufficient lead time for signing up for conservation programs.** Some participants said they were not able to respond in time to qualify for a program.
6. **Farmers/ranchers seek higher economic incentives for participation in playa conservation programs.** It is clear from focus groups that when all else is equal, landowners are going to take actions they think will provide the most income. Partners need to address this equation from both sides: first, they should help communicate to operators the financial return available through existing programs, and perhaps develop new programs or additional incentives to improve financial return for participation; second, they should research, compile and carefully communicate all the intangible disincentives for farming or grazing playas (flood frequency, poor soils, equipment damage, inconvenience, etc.).
7. **Tradition.** Most operators have been farming or grazing playas for generations. Convincing them to change these ingrained practices will take significant effort.

Recommendations

In the focus groups, participants provided unique insights into their knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about playas and the socio-economic barriers that often prevent them from conserving playas on their land. Collecting those results has been a critically important first step toward increasing playa conservation and all the ecological benefits

that go along with it. However, for GPLCC, PLJV, RWBJV, and their partners, the results described above are just that—a first step. Next comes the equally important conversion of those results into strategies, actions and assignments to leverage this new understanding into conservation behaviors—into more playas functioning on the landscape.

To assist with this effort, DJ Case provides the following recommendations. These are based on focus group results, communication theory, and more than 25 years of experience in finding solutions and breakthrough ideas for communicating effectively about conservation issues. These recommendations will be further addressed and articulated at a strategic communications planning session with the PLJV in early 2014.

These recommendations are numbered for ease of discussion and do not represent priority order. Some would need to occur simultaneously and/or are closely related to each other. Specific prioritization of these recommendations should occur as part of a comprehensive implementation strategy.

- 1. Work in small, prioritized “focal areas.”** Even with the help of partners, PLJV and RWBJV do not have the resources to effectively deliver their playa conservation message throughout the entire Playa Lakes region—at least not initially. In addition, it’s clear from the focus groups that communicating effectively with landowners about playa conservation will require a personal, custom-tailored approach. Ideally, each JV would identify key target areas where potential for playa conservation is high, where there is good partner support, and where there are a few forward-thinking landowners who could provide demonstration sites to show other landowners the economic, conservation, and social benefits of playa conservation. Once the focal areas are selected, JVs should develop communication strategies that identify goals, objectives, target audiences, key messages, methods of delivery, assignments and evaluation techniques. The communication strategy should be developed in association with an advisory group of local landowners who can ground truth the proposed actions and assist with implementation (see #3 below).
- 2. Conduct intensive, not extensive communication efforts.** Most of the barriers to playa conservation (see *Impediments* section above) will require customized, personal communications to overcome. This is not the kind of information you can put on a billboard or leave in a brochure rack and expect landowners to suddenly “see the light.” Certainly there is a place for extensive communication efforts in any campaign, but they should play a supporting role, and should not be expected to change landowner behaviors by themselves.

- 3. Create Landowner Advisory Groups.** There probably is no better way to address most of the barriers to playa conservation than to enlist the assistance of key landowners within a given target area who are already engaged in some form of playa conservation. Ideally, these landowners would have large operations, be centrally located within a target area, and would be seen as opinion leaders in the local community. They don't have to be outspoken advocates of conservation measures (although that would be great); they just need to have personal experience with the economic, wildlife, or other benefits of engaging in playa conservation and be willing to share that with their peers. They should be engaged very early in the communication planning stage and involved throughout the process. They should be encouraged (and incentivized) to establish demonstration areas on their land and invite other operators to come see how it works.
- 4. When contacting and working with landowners, try to minimize the sense of (further) government entanglement that landowners fear might come with playa conservation.** Focus groups confirmed a key finding from the 2006 survey that many landowners see value in playas—but even though they're already accustomed to government incentive programs and other entitlements, they're hesitant to invite additional oversight on their lands, particularly for a landscape feature that is easily out of sight and out of mind. Playa conservation needs to make financial sense and needs to be relatively hassle-free to entice landowners to participate.
- 5. Work with partners to help deliver information about playas and playa conservation programs (and how to enroll) to landowners.** Some focus group participants said they would have participated in programs if they had known about them. That is, the programs *already* offer adequate incentive for increased participation among *some* operators—if they only knew about them. Other participants mentioned the enrollment process was a big hassle and not worth the effort. Partners could assist both these types of landowners by providing the needed information (getting the word out), helping them understand what is involved (“interpreting” the program to them), and then helping to guide them through the enrollment process, as appropriate.
- 6. Maximize and promote the economic incentives for playa conservation.** Economic considerations were most important to most focus group participants. There are exceptions, but most simply are not going to participate in conservation programs unless it makes economic sense. Agencies and partners who administer conservation programs should work hard to maximize and promote the economic incentives of their programs to landowners. This should include the direct incentives, such as payments and cost shares, as well as the

indirect incentives, such as the flood losses and hassles NOT incurred if playas are not farmed, etc.

- 7. Work with agencies and partners to adjust existing playa conservation programs to better meet landowner needs.** Focus group participants listed a variety of attributes they looked for when considering whether or not to enroll their lands in conservation programs. Agencies and partners should try to incorporate as many of the following attributes as possible into existing and new programs:

- Provide plenty of lead time for sign-ups.
- Offer a signing bonus.
- Pay fair market value for the crops the farmer could have planted.
- Offer mid-contract price adjustments for inflation and/or changing market conditions.
- Offer variable contract lengths or allow operators to get out of contracts if the market changes significantly.
- Allow rotational grazing (with lower payments in the years it is grazed).
- Provide cost share (and possibly a source of labor) for establishment of conservation practices (planting cover crops, fencing, etc.).
- Offer assistance with weed control if needed.
- Be under local control (not administered by a remote agency staffer who doesn't know anything about local farming).
- Do not count the acres in the program against landowner's CRP max.
- Offer technical assistance on how to restore/improve playa functions.

To whatever degree existing programs already contain these attributes, they should be promoted to landowners early and often.

- 8. Create new or supplemental programs to enhance economic incentives.** If the economic attributes shown in #7 cannot all be incorporated into existing agency programs, consider working with NGO partners to provide additional benefits in "supplemental" programs. Many operators are accustomed to looking for ways to leverage programs and benefits, and having private entities involved could also help disarm the fears some landowners have of working with government agencies (also see #4).
- 9. Engage as many different partners as possible to assist with playa conservation efforts.** It was clear from focus groups that there are a wide range of landowners who have widely varying degrees of trust/mistrust of and/or tolerance for various public and private agencies and organizations. A landowner who wouldn't dream of working with one agency/organization might be completely happy to work with a different one—based on a previous experience, a neighbor's recommendation, or some indiscernible reason buried deep in the subconscious. Having a diverse cadre of agencies and organizations working

together to deliver playa conservation will allow the team to reach more landowners with a voice that the landowner can believe and trust.

- 10. Use local terms.** When communicating in local areas, find out what the local landowners typically call playas, and use that local name in all communications. (Focus group participants said in some areas they are called lagoons or buffalo wallows rather than playas.) It will be extremely important to use the local terminology as much as possible. A landowner advisory group (see #3) could assist in identifying the most effective terminology. This effort should go beyond just the name. One participant didn't like the term "easement." It would be wise to enlist the assistance of local landowners to discover these kinds of local terminology issues and plug that information into all communication efforts.
- 11. Focus on aquifer recharge, then wildlife benefits.** Across the entire region, the most common denominator of all participant responses was their concern about the condition of the Ogallala Aquifer. This universal concern should be used frequently in all JV communication efforts. Even though the JVs are primarily interested in playa conservation for purposes of wildlife conservation, that goal will be best achieved as a by-product of conservation efforts for aquifer recharge.
- 12. Use pride of ownership as a supporting message.** Playas are extraordinary regional assets—unlike anything else in the world. Landowners can take justifiable regional pride in helping conserve such a unique resource. This pride of ownership probably should not be used as a primary message—it is not nearly as compelling as aquifer recharge, for instance. However it would be a good supporting message for landowners who are predisposed toward conservation—or for those who might be wavering and need that last little reason to get them on board.
- 13. Reconsider the *Playa Country* Radio Show.** Although nearly all focus group participants liked the sample radio spot and found it credible, hardly any had heard of it, which calls into question its effectiveness. Keep in mind focus groups are not quantitative research, so we cannot assume these results are representative of the entire population, but PLJV should carefully consider the cost of producing these spots versus other strategies that might play a more primary role in direct communication efforts with key landowners. The spots also could be repurposed for use on the website (see #14). Or PLJV could work with selected radio stations to seek earned media coverage (instead of paid programming). Specific solutions should be informed by development of a communications strategy. Future and repurposed stories should focus on the impediments to playa conservation listed earlier, and should feature examples of landowners who have overcome those impediments in their own operations.

14. Expand/upgrade website. Consider developing a new website (or at least a new section of existing website) dedicated to landowners and playas. It should be very intuitive, interactive, and should provide all the information operators need to make informed decisions about playa conservation. For example, economic considerations were very important to most landowners, so the website could display the spreadsheet that shows the true cost of farming playas, and how conservation programs can provide win-win scenarios for producers). Consider including edited versions of the *Playa Country* radio spots (edited together to tell the full story), and producing short videos about specific topics with which landowners struggle.

Although not a recommendation for increasing playa conservation, it should be noted that the playa conservation human dimensions work (2006 survey and 2013 focus groups) would make an excellent case study for continuing implementation of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP). The most recent NAWMP update emphasizes the need for human dimensions to better understand and engage existing audiences like hunters and wildlife viewers, as well as understanding how other audiences value ecosystem services, such as clean water, as a byproduct of waterfowl and wetland conservation.

The playa conservation human dimensions case study shows clearly how market research can significantly influence and improve methods for designing and delivering conservation programs—and then communicating about them—both for direct target audiences as well as other “non-traditional” audiences.

Appendix A. Focus Group Topic Guide

Topic Guide Playa Lakes Landowner Focus Groups 7-21-13

Arrival

Moderator and observers greet participants as they arrive. Give each a nametag and help them find a seat.

Dinner

Dinner is served between 5:30 and 6:30. Moderator steers conversation away from playas so no information is shared before the formal focus group begins.

Focus Group Introduction

As the last dishes are cleared from dinner, moderator gets everyone's attention, and then pitches to JV representative for welcome and introductory comments.

- Thanks for coming
- Description: PLJV/RWBJV is a regional partnership of federal and state wildlife agencies, conservation groups, and private industry dedicated to conserving playas, prairies, and associated landscapes that benefit the birds, people and wildlife of the western Great Plains.
- Recap of why we're here.
- Distribute paper and pens to everyone, and ask for introductions to help us all get to know each other a little better before we start the focus group. Please tell us:
 - Your name
 - Where you live
 - Brief description of your farming/ranching operation
- JV representative begins with introduction of himself, then goes around the room.
- Phil goes last, and leads right into focus group introduction.

Good evening and welcome. I'm Phil Seng, and I'll be the moderator for tonight's focus group meeting. I work for DJ Case & Associates, a communications consulting firm that specializes in natural resources conservation. We work with natural resources agencies and organizations throughout the country helping them communicate with the public about conservation issues. I'm a wildlife biologist by formal training, but I've been working in the communications end of this arena for over 20 years.

For this project, DJ Case is working with the Playa Lakes [Rainwater Basin] Joint Venture to ask for landowner and producer opinions and attitudes about an important topic in [state]—conservation of playas and the Ogallala Aquifer.

Ask group what they call them—playas, playa lakes, lagoons, buffalo wallows, mud holes, etc. Use the local name throughout the rest of the meeting.

Playas play an important role for conservation in this area, but often these connections are little known.

This is what we want to talk to you about this evening—what do you know about playas, what do you think about them, how do you feel about them, are they valuable, meaningful, a nuisance, a hindrance?

By the way, we're not trying to sell you anything or convince you of anything here tonight. Quite the opposite, in fact. We want to know what *you* think and feel about playas. We are audio taping the meeting, but that's just to be sure we capture your comments correctly. The final report that we submit will contain your opinions, but they will not be attached to your names in any way, so I encourage you to be honest and candid with your responses.

There are a couple observers joining us tonight. Introduce them again and explain the ground rules.

- They won't be participating, just observing.
- Sometimes this may be frustrating—you may have a question that they could answer, but I won't let them answer until after we're done. The point is to find out what *you* know and think and feel in the absence of "professional" input.
- These folks will be available at the end to answer any questions you have.
- Feel free to jot down any questions or issues you'd like to ask them about at the end of the session.

The process is very simple—I will bring up some general topics or questions. Then I'll ask you to discuss those things. Sometimes I'll ask for your thoughts or opinions one by one; other times, I'll just throw something out there and anyone can comment.

I encourage you to relax and enjoy the evening. Please express your honest opinions—it'll be my job to be sure everyone has a chance to participate. I apologize in advance if I have to interrupt anyone or move things along, but we have a lot of material to cover and I need to make sure we get through it all in the 2 hours we have.

Are there any questions about the process?

Okay, then the final thing we need to do before we begin is to show a few pictures of playas—just so we're all working from the same understanding of what we're talking about.

[Show slides of various sizes and types of playas. Make no value judgments.]

Are these what you think of when you hear the word "playa?" Did any of these slides surprise you?

DISCUSSION ITEM 1:

We are very interested to hear your impressions of playas. Please tell me what you know about them—both positive and negative. Let's start with the positive. Are there any benefits or values that playas provide (to you personally or to society)?

- [water quality, aquifer recharge, floodwater storage, farming or grazing system, wildlife viewing, hunting (for you or for others? For money?), Stewardship (leave it better than you found it), legacy, etc.]

What about the negatives—what kinds of problems do playas pose for your agricultural operations (or for society at large)?

- [get in the way, low yield, attract critters that compete for forage, attract annoying hunters asking for access]

What do your neighbors think about playas? Do playas come up in conversation?

DISCUSSION ITEM 2:

How many of you currently conserve playas on your lands? Why do you do that? (Stewardship? Money? Wildlife?) If you currently farm them, how do they perform?

DISCUSSION ITEM 3:

[It sounds like at least some of you are already using USDA programs to help conserve playas.] In case anyone was not aware, there are some USDA programs that pay you to conserve playas.

[Distribute handout that describes the conservation program options – WRP, Continuous CRP (CP23A).]

What are the key factors in your decision-making process when deciding whether or not to enroll in conservation programs to protect playas? Is it strictly a business decision? How do commodity prices affect your decision to crop or not?

DISCUSSION ITEM 4:

If you were going to design a program to help conserve playas, especially ones that are currently being farmed, what would this program look like? (Think about what works and doesn't work with existing programs; don't worry about realities or constraints for now, just tell me how you would set it up if you could start from scratch).

- Payments?
- Written agreements? Duration of agreement?
- Do playas in the middle of fields differ from those at the edge?

- Does size and shape matter? Does how often it is wet matter?
- Reserved rights, such as grazing at a reduced level?

DISCUSSION ITEM 5:

How many of you irrigate? Does the condition of the aquifer impact your mgt decisions?

[Who has applied to drill an irrigation well in the past year? 5 years? 10 years?]

What do you know about the relation between playas and the aquifer? Are you aware that playas recharge the aquifer? Do you believe that playas are a significant factor in recharging the aquifer? Does this motivate you to conserve your playa?

DISCUSSION ITEM 6:

We've talked about a variety of services that playas may provide, such as recreational opportunities, wildlife viewing and hunting, pollutant removal, floodwater storage, water for cattle, and aquifer recharge. Which are most meaningful to you?

[If they say hunting] Is that important for you or others? If for others, is it for money or recreation? How many of you hunt?

Does knowing that playas provide all these nature services make you more inclined to conserve your playa?

If you were convinced by a credible source that conserving your playa would improve aquifer recharge, would you be more likely to conserve it?

DISCUSSION ITEM 7:

What is your vision for your land after you have left farming or ranching?

- Are you interested in leaving a legacy on your land?
- What do you want the land to look like?
- How can partners help? Would you like to learn more about opportunities? (Share list of contacts with them)?

DISCUSSION ITEM 8:

Have you heard of or listened to the Playa Country radio show? Where did you hear it? [Play episode.] Please tell me what you think about this radio spot. Credible? What are best media to reach farmers?

CLOSING and THANK YOU

Appendix B. Photos of Playas.



Appendix C. Transcript of Playa Country Radio Show.

Playa Health Series – October 2012. Playa Sedimentation: Causes and Fixes

[SHOW OPEN]

This is Playa Country — a weekly look at the wildlife, wetlands and prairies of the western Great Plains, and the people who manage them — brought to you by Playa Lakes Joint Venture, an organization dedicated to conserving birds and bird habitat.

[NARRATION_1]

The topic is care and maintenance of playas and rainwater basins, those ephemeral lakes — those "mud holes" or "buffalo wallows" as our granddads used to call them. We used to think nothing of those ole mud holes except how we'd need to clean up our boots after fixing fence through them. Well there's been a bunch of science done on those things the past few decades, and it turns out they're important to the landscape and our way of life. Scientists say playas are a primary method of groundwater recharge.

[LAGRANGE_1]

"When these playas dry out you get deep, large cracks in the floor of the playa wetlands."

[NARRATION_2]

You're hearing Ted LaGrange of Lincoln. He's wetland program manager for Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

[LAGRANGE_2]

"And so when rainfall or snow melt enter that wetland, it goes down through those deep cracks and works its way eventually into the groundwater, recharging that aquifer."

[NARRATION_3]

Turns out playa lakes, by definition, have a floor of clay. When dry, there are those deep cracks. When wet the clay becomes impermeable to water, giving us these temporary lakes that are so good for the wildlife. But things happen to decrease the effectiveness of that clay pan from doing its job. Listen to Bill Johnson. He's a biologist with US Fish and Wildlife at Canyon Texas.

[JOHNSON_3]

"When you have soils erode into the playa lakes, the volume of water that the playa can hold is then much shallower. That water is then spread out over a much bigger surface area, but it's shallower, so it evaporates quicker. What you have is a playa that ultimately doesn't hold as much water; it has a much shorter hydroperiod. And then it's not as valuable to wetland wildlife; it doesn't have as much plant production."

[NARRATION_4]

When playas are situated on land that's under production, it's inevitable topsoil is going to runoff.

[JOHNSON_1]

“Playas are at the bottom of a hill, so in all directions around a playa the land goes upward. If there isn’t cover on that all the time, in the form of a grass or prairie cover, when you get heavy rains, you get erosion washing the plow-tilled soils downhill into the playa. One of the biggest threats to playas in general is sedimentation from farming.”

[NARRATION_5]

Playas on rangeland, says Johnson, are far more protected from siltation.

[JOHNSON_2]

“Even with heavy grazing pressure, there’s at least plant roots in the soil holding the upland soils to the best they can where they belong, but when it is being farmed, the crops and their roots are only in the ground for a period of time, and the rest of the year the ground is typically fallow, or it’s recently plowed, so it is highly susceptible to erosion.”

[NARRATION_6]

So you have one of these playas smack-dab in the middle of a field. What can you do to prevent that siltation? Ted LaGrange says you install a plant buffer.

[LAGRANGE_3]

“That is a fringe of grassland around the wetland that can slow down that water and remove any of the issues of concern—whether it be sediments, pesticides, fertilizer—those types of contaminants can be removed by those buffers. So again, the first thing you want to do is to try to eliminate as much of that as you can, even before it gets to the edge of the playa, but if it’s flowing in that water and reaching the edge, you want to try to remove as much with a buffer as you can.”

[NARRATION_7]

So not only do these buffers consisting of grasses and forbs help keep silt out, they also filter fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides from entering the ground water.

We can keep playas vital and functional by diverting topsoil run-off. Plant buffers around playas can keep topsoil from clogging playas, and the buffers filter chemicals from entering the groundwater. The USDA’s Conservation and Wetland Reserve Programs can provide landowners and producers cost-share funds to help restore playas.

You’ve been listening to Playa Country, a weekly show about the wildlife, people and landscapes of the western Great Plains. This program is made possible by the Playa Lakes and Rainwater Basin Joint Ventures. Learn more about today’s topic and listen to archived episodes on the website [playa country dot org](http://playacountry.org). That’s [playa country](http://playacountry.org). . . P-L-A-Y-A. . . [playa country](http://playacountry.org). . . dot org.

[END]

Appendix D. Summary from Garden City, Kansas.

Item 1.

The positive attributes of playas that people thought of included recharging the aquifer, aesthetics (beautiful to look at), wildlife habitat/refuge, wildlife viewing, hunting, and a source of cultural heritage (one participant's playas were closely associated with a significant Native American archaeological site). All shared the opinion that playas recharge the aquifer and that they can be productive for crops—especially with no-till farming practices. One participant really liked playas because they provide some scenic diversity in the monoculture of the Great Plains.

Negative attributes included trespassing and poaching (small but increasing), drag on the productivity of the field (yields are lower over time), sprinklers get stuck in them when they're wet. There are good government programs that pay you not to farm them, but there is a lot of paperwork, the rules are not common sense, and it is a real headache.

Item 2.

Only 1 of the 4 participants currently conserves at least one playa on his land, and he put it in a conservation program that paid him to conserve it. "Government said they would condemn the land." They all agreed there were powerful incentives to farm the playas. When you take it out of production, it becomes non-farmed land, which reduces your base. Several said they drag soil over the top of very small playas to make them more farmable. They would be more willing to consider conserving playas if they were along the edges of fields, not out in the middle.

Item 3.

It is mostly a business decision. We are in business here. There are too many hoops to jump through to put land in programs. They wouldn't allow an oil lease in WRP. When you agree to a 30-year or permanent easement, you rule out other options like wind energy, horizontal drilling. CRP payments have not kept up with crop prices. Some farmers are just farming for government insurance payments. Some thought this was fraud. They want to do the right thing. It has PR value with the public. Some had heard other farmers say they were avoiding CRP because payments were too low.

Item 4.

Program would have to factor in the current market value of crops. Needs common sense and local control to provide exceptions when conditions demand. If in a drought or under water, you shouldn't have to seed it when you know it's going to die anyway. Need to be able to control noxious weeds. Most were very frustrated with government programs. They felt the agency staff didn't know anything about farming, but were being super prescriptive about what should be done on the land. One participant had a fear of being "policed" by remote sensors, flyovers and satellite imagery. Felt they were

trying to catch farmers in any slight problem so they could make you look like an idiot on the local news.

Item 5.

All were irrigators. All had heard that playas recharge the aquifer. All believed it, or had no reason to doubt it. They agreed it should be measured. Does it recharge enough to make a difference?

Item 6.

Most thought that aquifer recharge was most important reason for conserving playas. Water is the key to staying on the land in this area. "Water is the glue that holds the region together." One participant felt the aesthetics were the most important reason—"prove to the kids that we didn't bring them to the end of the earth, to let them die out here."

Most felt that farmers themselves would do the right thing if they knew playas recharged the aquifer and provided those other benefits, but they said over half of the land in their local county was owned by out-of-county landowners, who wouldn't care about any of the benefits except the financial return.

One participant felt very strongly that communication about this issue should be positive reinforcement, not trying making farmers feel guilty if they don't conserve them.

Item 7.

All wanted to keep it in farming and pass it on to their heirs. Wanted to keep it in private ownership and leave it better than they found it. Strike a balance between farming and conservation.

Partners could help by working to increase the estate tax exemption for farmers.

Item 8.

One out of four participants had heard the Playa Country radio show. Thought he heard it on KFRM 880 or maybe High Plains public radio. They thought the information was outdated, because no one in this area uses conventional tillage anymore, so erosion is no longer a problem. Many farmers don't listen to radio anymore. Young generation uses social media. Get something to viral. Maybe partner with KState Extension. They could not think of a better medium than radio to get the word to farmers.

Financial aspects are most important. The wildlife benefits are gravy.

Farmers have not told their story very well.

Appendix E. Summary from Ulysses, Kansas.

Most participants had never heard of the term playa. They called them buffalo wallows or mud holes. When looking at the photos, most thought playas would have more water in them—be more like lakes rather than mud holes.

Item 1.

Positives

Good wildlife habitat. They attract wildlife. A couple people heard of aquifer recharge. Some didn't know if they recharged or not. If they do recharge, it takes a long time.

Negatives

They were not sure if playas were jurisdictional wetlands or not. If they are, it's a big problem because it limits what you can do on your land. It takes a long time to dry out to farm them. They are not optimal land—they are usually wetter or dryer than you want them to be. They can grow weeds that are hard to kill. Usually clay soil. Ragweed often does well here.

Item 2.

All of them farmed their playas except one, who got tired of fighting it and put it into CRP. It was strictly a financial decision. He said he couldn't get a crop off of it once out of 25 years.

Item 3.

Most had heard of the farm programs. Several were using WRP and CP23A. One liked WRP because the payments were higher. Another didn't like it because it tied up the land for too long. It would affect his kids. One said WRP regulations prevented him from using the mineral rights. He would have put his land into WRP if not for that. One said he was suspicious of government programs and would rather farm the land than take government money. Not interested in cutting out small chunks of land—it's too inconvenient. "The bottom line is that it has to make financial sense."

Item 4.

Program would have to be flexible. Payments need to be fair market value—equal to or greater than insurance payments. Length of contract should be variable. Older famers want longer terms. Make it possible to get out of the program without penalty if conditions change so much that it becomes viable for a young farmer to farm it again. Most were very concerned that it was more and more difficult for young farmers to make it anymore. It would be best if it were run by an NGO instead of the government. Some farmers are planting corn on dry land in the middle of a drought—that is called "farming the government." It is not sustainable. For marginal ground CRP can be a great program-just get the money and walk away from it.

Item 5.

All but one of the participants irrigated at least some of their land. All were concerned about the aquifer, but did not see it changing. They felt the big operations were the problem—feed yards, dairies, hog farms, industry. One just hoped they left enough water for drinking. They all thought people were probably going to mine the aquifer until it was gone. Greed. They worried about it, but didn't see it changing. Only about half thought playas had any impact on the aquifer.

Item 6.

All thought aquifer recharge was the most important benefit. Most thought any efforts to recharge the aquifer were too little, too late. BUT, if they could be convinced by a credible source that playas did have an impact on the aquifer, they were willing to change their positions. But it would have to be compelling evidence that they could really make a difference.

Item 7.

Most wanted their kids to take over their farms. They wanted to leave the land better than when they found it. Wanted to be good stewards of the land, and give it to the next generation to farm. Nobody really had any ideas how partners could help.

Item 8.

None of the participants had heard of the Playa Country Radio Show. They thought the spot was credible, but the government scares them in general. Credible sources of information for them included Farm Bureau, Corn Growers Association, KS Ag Research Association, K State Extension.

You really have to be careful who you listen to. There is an Environmental Working Group in DC that is spreading a lot of misleading information. It's funded by a private trust.

They thought Facebook and Twitter and satellite radio would be good media for reaching younger farmers, but they didn't have any specific ideas. Older farmers are still probably best reached by radio.

Print media include: High Plains Journal, Successful Farming, and pubs that have market information.

Appendix F. Summary from Guymon, Oklahoma.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Positives

Participants said the primary benefits of playas were related to wildlife. Playas provide good duck hunting in the winter, and many other wildlife benefits. People like wildlife. They also said playas can be good to farm in dry years, and they believed that playas do recharge the aquifer.

Negatives

Most playas have heavy clay soil that has accumulated over the centuries. This makes them difficult to farm. They also mentioned that perennial weeds can get established in playas.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

Participants did not conserve the playas on their land. Rather, they farmed through them. They said that all the farmers they know do this. They said farmers might farm around the large ones (60-180 acres), but most playas are small.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

They said they would need a monetary incentive to conserve playas. One participant mentioned there was a person in his local SWCD office that was horrible to work with, and it was not worth the hassle. Another said his FSA agent never said anything about the available programs. One had heard of the programs, but didn't know much about them and never looked into it. They wondered if their landlords would go along with it? They were not aware of any other farmers currently using the programs. They were irritated at the great inequality between states in the CRP rates.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

It would have 100% cost share, which would be at least the cash rent values or higher. They did not specify a length of program duration, but said that the longer the duration, the higher the skepticism of most people. They wouldn't want to tie up their land permanently or for long periods. The program would have to build in inflation adjustments. They weren't sure if it should be run by government or non-governmental organizations—they had a general mistrust of both. They said the incentive could be a reduction in the tax base rather than direct payment.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

These participants did not irrigate, but the condition of the aquifer was a big concern to them. Water is very spotty in their county, so irrigation is not worth it to them. They

believe that the days of watering corn are numbered – it can't last much longer. They did not know anything about the relationship between playas and the aquifer.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them? They readily agreed that if they knew conserved playas recharged the aquifer faster, they would be more inclined to conserve them. They said a good source of information for them would include the American Society of Agronomy or university extension programs.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it
They wanted to leave the ground in better condition than they found it. Leave it to kids and grandkids. They felt strongly that there are no better conservationists than American farmers--at least the dry land farmers. They felt that some of the irrigators aren't very conservation oriented. They felt that PLJV and other partners could help by providing tax incentive to conserve playas.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show
Participants had never heard of the radio show, but they liked it. They thought the spot should have been more specific about how many acres of buffer were needed. They thought it was interesting, but said it probably won't stop people from farming playas. These participants don't really listen to local radio anymore. They can't pick it up very well where they live. Now they use XM satellite radio.

Appendix G. Summary from Pampa, Texas.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Positives

Playas catch some water from storms and keep it from eroding fields. Several said they enjoy them when they're green. They provide good hunting. One participant said he accepts them as part of the landscape. They often grow more grass than other areas for grazing—most productive in dry years. They make good habitat for wildlife. My grandchildren like them. One mentioned aquifer recharge. Others didn't seem too sure, but one participant said that the Texas Wildlife Association says that playas recharge the aquifer about 1" per year. All seemed to believe it after hearing that.

Negatives

They are a hassle and a pain to farm around. I get no use out of them. I can't farm them or graze them, but I still have to pay taxes. They are difficult to farm because they turn rough when they crack, and you don't want to break your sprayer. Having playas slows you down. In some places, coyote hunters trespass on them to hunt, but most did not have poaching problems. Crane hunters will occasionally trespass.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

All agreed the playas have bad soil erosion if they have no cover crop (Randall Clay). One said it was marginal farm ground anyway, so why fight it? His playas were fairly deep and not suitable for farming. It simply was not productive to fight the water. But most playas are too small to treat separately. Most farmers just farm through them.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

Only one participant was using a government program to conserve playas. Some of the others had heard of the programs, but didn't know anything about them. Most didn't trust the federal government—felt the government changes its mind too often. Need to justify their jobs. Species they used to recommend for planting are now listed as invasive. One person said all levels of government are suspect. "The faces change and then it goes to hell." All felt that most farmers are good stewards, and don't need government intervention. Most did not think that government programs were worth the hassle or the risk. One participant said he only loses about one crop every five years to playas, so it's not that big of a deal.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

Most were reluctant to offer ideas about what the program would look like. One said it would have to provide fencing to keep the cattle out, and would need to provide people to help set the fence. All agreed it would need cost share, and the amount of the cost share would depend on where the playas were on the landscape – if center pivot irrigation goes through it, that would cost a LOT. The program would have to be flexible

to account for different situations. In general, they said excluding playas from their farming operations makes it more expensive to farm – mostly because they would have to make more turns. Where the playa occurs makes a big difference – if it is on the edge of field, it would be okay.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

The condition of the aquifer is of great interest to all of them. They all agreed it's a hot topic. Most believed that playas recharge the aquifer, but they don't know much about it. They had the perception that it takes a long time to recharge. One participant said that the Edwards Aquifer recharges in one year, but that it was much longer than that for the Ogallala Aquifer. All said that if they could be convinced that playas increased aquifer recharge, they would be more interested in voluntary conservation programs. They made it clear they don't want to be told what to do, and they don't think enough research has been done yet. Most agreed that if they were convinced of the benefits of playas, they probably still wouldn't participate in a government program—they would just conserve them because it was the right thing to do.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?
Skipped – already covered it.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it

All felt very strongly that they wanted to pass their operations on to their families.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show

One participant had been interviewed on the radio show, but none of the others had heard of it. All participants were no-till farmers, and since they were not plowing anymore, they felt the radio spot should be changed to reflect that. All participants thought it would be great to create a website to contain this information. They did not remember that a website had already been created and was promoted on the radio spot. When asked where they got information on farming, one participant said he got it from equipment dealers. Only half read print materials unless they were very interested in the topic. Several said they did not receive any local radio channels. One mentioned RFD TV and KGNC radio. Several agreed county extension agents are credible sources of information. CEU meetings usually have good information.

Appendix H. Summary from Hereford, Texas.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Positives

Participants in this focus group really focused on the positive aspects of playas, and most were related to wildlife. They said that playas provide great habitat for pintails, amphibians, macroinvertebrates, neotropical migrants, even pronghorns. Several thought that pit pumps in playas also provided wildlife benefits. Others mentioned that pheasant hunting was good around playas (and in them when dry). One person mentioned that irrigation wells around his playas seem to be better than other wells on his property. Several mentioned that playas provided extra water for the cattle and wildlife. Most believed that playas do recharge the aquifer. They didn't think the recharge was very great, but it's the best we've got. One mentioned it was important to keep the silt out of them in order for the recharge to work. Another participant actually thought silt might enhance the recharge aspect. Someone else mentioned that playas provide a seed bed for some native plants you don't see anywhere else. Most agreed playas provide some natural flood control benefits.

Negatives

One participant couldn't think of any negatives. Several agreed playas are a "dead zone" if they don't have water. Playas do not increase the value of your property, and they are an eyesore when they don't have water. Playas can be a source of flooding in municipal areas—especially if their function has been diminished and they don't drain to the aquifer. They also can be a source of noxious weeds if you mistreat them.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

None of the participants in this focus group conserved playas on their property.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

Most people in this focus group did not know there were conservation programs for playas. A couple thought they had heard of it, but were not sure what the programs did. They agreed that the key factors they looked for when considering any government programs were money and regulations. The money had to be pretty good to overcome their concern about regulations.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

One rancher participant said he wouldn't design a program even if he could—there simply was no reason not to water cattle in playas. Someone else said that cost share payments would have to cover the costs of establishing a cover crop, and it would need to stipulate that the farmer wouldn't have to replant after the lake fills up with water. Make the payment rate at least enough to pay the taxes on the land, and adjust

payments for inflation rate over the life of the contract. Make the length at least 10 years. This program shouldn't count against your other CRP.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

Farmers in this area have lost a LOT of capacity in pumping. The perception of this group was that farmers are pumping as fast as they can—hoping to get what water they can before it runs out. Most felt that this area will eventually revert back to grassland after the water runs out.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?

Most participants agreed that aquifer recharge and water for the cattle were the most important benefits of playas, but they didn't think playas provided very much recharge. Their decision about whether or not to conserve playas depends on the amount of recharge they may provide. The aquifer is very important to their way of life, but if conservation doesn't have much effect on it, they probably won't change practices.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it

All mentioned leaving their land to their kids and grandkids. They were very interested in seeing more youth in agriculture. Several mentioned leaving the land as good or better than they found it. Most agreed their area is really going to change in next 20 years. They were not sure how partners could help them. Really need to increase rental rates in their area.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show

None of the participants had heard of the radio show before. After listening to the spot, one person thought he might have heard it before—maybe on KPAN radio. They all found it credible and good information. When asked where they get their information on farming, they said farm magazines and local radio (KGNC Amarillo). One advised putting an ad on 10:00 pm weather TV. Most farmers watch the weather. Nobody remembered that the playa country website was mentioned on the radio spot they heard.

Appendix I. Summary from Clovis, New Mexico.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Positives

They provide water for livestock, and good grazing when they are dry enough. Most believed they recharge the aquifer. They are good for frogs and other wildlife. They are part of ecosystem. They provide recharge of our water wells. They don't blow silt as bad as they used to. They provide good hunting opportunities when they have water, and good bird watching.

Negatives

One participant did not believe playas recharge the aquifer. Having playas on your land used to detract from land value, but not so much anymore. They are harder to farm and ranch, and they don't produce as much per acre in normal years.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

One participant said he did conserve playas on his land, but not for conservation—just to rotate the land.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

Several participants have enrolled in government programs, but not WRP or CP23A.

Permanent easements are scary. Several thought the name should be changed.

“Easement” sounds to them like you have to allow hunting or something, which makes people worry because trash and litter can be a problem. Landowners don't want to give up their rights to the land. Shouldn't call it CRP – people are already maxed out on that program. Profit margin is key to all of them. All agree that most farmers want to take care of the land, and sometimes programs are the best way to do that. But it has to benefit the operation. It has to make money – short or long-term.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

It must offer price points similar to what an operator could make by farming and ranching. It should allow rotational grazing. Ten-year contracts are good, and should be renewable. Need to help landowners enhance the vegetation on playas – some of it is really bad weeds. Provide information on how to make it better.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

No one in this focus group irrigated.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?

This group agreed it was very difficult to choose between the benefits of the playas to their farming/ranching operations and the benefits to wildlife and to aquifer recharge. Need to have a balance between the two. When pressed, they seemed to lean toward

conserving the aquifer. If convinced, they thought they would keep cattle off. But they need a lot more information. One participant said “We know more about the moon than we do the aquifer. We need more studies.”

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it

All agreed they wanted to instill a land ethic within their families and pass the land and the operation on. They wanted to leave the land in better shape than it was when they got it. They mentioned that there are some problems with absentee landowners who may not care about the land ethic.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show

No one in the group had heard of the radio show. They found it very credible. One participant pointed out that you can't put buffers on some playas. Another said the content was just common sense. All agreed with the content. When asked where they get their information on farming/ranching, they said: KGNC – farm reports TV weather and market reports, RFD TV.

Several mentioned that Joe Whitehead (retired NRCS) does excellent programs in local schools. They also mentioned NRCS field days. They recommended getting a farmer who has a good playa (like John Wood) and having field days to show other farmers what you're talking about. Several people in the group remembered that the radio spot mentioned a website, but they didn't remember what it was. They thought 4-H would be a good way to get information out to farmers. Universities were credible. New Mexico State does a poor job with ag information, but Kansas St and OSU do a good job. OSU is best for soils.

Appendix J. Summary from Lubbock, Texas.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

After showing them the photos of playas, they said that most of the playas in this area are dry. Most are smaller than the ones in the photos, too. Most are shallow here.

Positives

Playas are good for wildlife – pheasants, ducks and all kinds of vegetation and insects. They provide a source of water for cattle. Half said playas were good for leasing hunting rights, but the other half didn't really agree. Several people mentioned recharge of the aquifer, but wildlife seemed more important to this group.

Negatives

No one in the group mentioned any negative aspects of playas. One person said he heard they could be a source of invasive weeds. Others said that most playas are too shallow for that. All agreed they wished they had more playas on their land.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

One participant said he never farmed his playas, but it wasn't necessarily for conservation reasons – he just didn't need to.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

No one was familiar with the two programs. A thirty-year easement is WAY too long. All were hesitant to take the risk for that long. Government programs turn off 90% of ranchers. It's probably not quite as bad for farmers. The primary considerations are length of contract, dollar value, and the small print.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

The most important aspect is for the program to have flexibility. There should be local input on what is in it and how it is applied. Anything that comes out of DC doesn't work. They try to make it one-size-fits-all. Ten years is a good contract length. Most felt it was going to be a difficult sell to ranchers. Need to understand that location of the playa is a big factor. In some places they wouldn't even consider putting playas into a program. Need to allow grazing on a rotational basis. Price has to be competitive. How it affects the rancher's bottom line is key.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

Half of the participants irrigated their land. The group was mixed on their beliefs about whether playas recharge the aquifer. One participant did not believe playas recharged the aquifer at all. Another said very little or none. One believed it does recharge, but very slowly. Another said the big playas recharge the aquifer, but not the little ones they have around here. One participant was totally convinced that all playas recharge,

because he said when the playas are full on his land, they don't have nearly as much trouble pumping water.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them? Wildlife was most the most important benefit of playas to this focus group. Several said that if they were convinced that conserving playas would increase those wildlife benefits, they would do it, but on their own—not through a government program. Several others said they would consider it. Several also said they would consider it for the aquifer recharge benefits. Even if it took 100 years for the recharge, if they were convinced it made a big difference, they would do it.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it
They all agreed it's all about family. They want to pass it on to the next generation. They have strong ties to the land. One participant said "We are "Agro-Americans". They also want to leave it better than they found it – for whoever gets it.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show
No one in this focus group had heard of the radio show. All found it informative, but several said they could be edited to make them better. When asked where the spots could be played to reach farmers/ranchers, participants said sports talk radio, farm show reports or livestock reports. Half remembered hearing the website mentioned in the spot; half didn't. Most used Internet or iPhones to get information.

Appendix K. Summary from Holyoke, Colorado.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Positives

Most of this group mentioned wildlife benefits. When they are wet, they are good place to hunt—ducks in the playa and pheasants and quail on edges. Playas are marginal land for farming, but conservation is a good use for marginal land. They can produce a good wheat crop around the edge. Several mentioned aquifer recharge, but most were concerned primarily with wildlife benefits.

Negatives

It is a hassle to work around them. One participant said he did not understand the difference between a playa and a wetland, and that worries him about regulations. Playas are hard to farm—only works well 1 in 5 years. You get your equipment stuck in wet years. But if you don't farm them, they can make big weed problems. Trees might seed in and use the water that is there. One participant said you could lease land with playas on it to the state's walk-in hunting program. Most people don't know what playas are. The group agreed that having playas on your land generally detracted from land value.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

Two people conserved playas on their land—for hunting and economics purposes. One said it doesn't pay to plant them. He could make more consistent money in conservation programs. Three had land in WRP, because of the inconvenience of farming it and getting stuck or for wildlife purposes. This group seemed very wildlife oriented.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

Most said they had land in CP-23. Several had land in WRP. They said it was great to get paid for non-productive land. They said a lot of farmers had their sprinkler corners in CRP in this area. These programs help conserve the land. They enjoy seeing the trees and CRP grass. It is a slow, gradual change on the landscape. One guy's land didn't qualify for CRP re-sign-up, but his playas did qualify for WRP. He is hoping to get a signing bonus for WRP. He said his FSA office didn't know they still offered WRP. Tell farmers that these programs allow you to improve lesser-quality land. When commodity prices are high, people aren't interested in CRP. Farmers need to be educated about these programs. One said his land was sandy and it used to blow very badly. Now it's a good hunting place. They recommended setting up demonstrations on farms with good examples. A neighbor's example is much better than hearing someone talk about it.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

It must be very location-specific. It should include tree planting options and warm-season grasses. It should have a signing bonus—that's a very good enticement. It should have good payments and should cover the maintenance costs (weed control, etc.). A 10- or 15-year timespan is good. Provide cost-share for trees and grass planting. About half of the farmers in this area are conservation minded. A competitive rental rate is very important. Most felt that the appropriate programs were already in place—we don't really need to improve them. NRCS has bent over backwards to make the programs work. One problem: in some areas they won't let you re-enroll CRP land with trees.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

Two of the six participants in this group irrigated. "We are drinking beer instead of water." All agreed the aquifer is going down. All believed that playas helped recharge the aquifer, but had no idea how much. One suggested that the playa doesn't recharge enough to make a difference, which is why he said he thought the wildlife benefits were more important.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?

All said the wildlife benefits were most important to them, and most would conserve playas for the wildlife benefits. They want to leave the land better than they found it. One asked whether a playa was still a playa if you dig it out.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it

All wanted to be good stewards of the land—leave it better than I found it. Improve the marginal areas. Pass it on to the next generation. Need to figure out how to stabilize the water table. They said they can't drill any new irrigation wells in CO. Most want to leave their land to family. One said he just wants somebody to take care of it like he has tried to do. One said that PLJV and other partners can help educate farmers about conservation. Improve how it's done and how it's communicated.

Item 8.

No one had heard of the radio show, but their first impressions were good. Rural and urban people aren't on the same page when it comes to ag issues. Rural folks don't have the numbers. Need to figure out a way to show how playas benefit the city folks—in both water quality and quantity.

When asked where they get their information on farming, they said:

Farm magazines

ASCS office – newsletters

Workshops (NRCS and PF)

KLGA – Ogallala 99.7 FM

98.3 Uma

Advertise on TV – during football games

One participant only listened to radio. Most said they would go to a website if the topic interested them. E-mailed newsletters are great—can read it on the tractor. Try to get discussions started at the local coffee shop.

Appendix L. Summary from Sidney, Nebraska.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

After reviewing the photos of playas and hearing the moderator's brief introduction, participants mentioned that "Playa" is not a common name in this area. Most people call them "wallows."

Positives

Playas are great for wildlife – waterfowl and shorebirds during migration, and also amphibians. A great diversity of plants also grow in a playa. Dry playas give excellent farm yields. One participant said he gets a crop off of his playa in 9 out of 10 years. But another had the reverse—only gets 1 crop out of 10 years. Playas provide good flood control, and they trap erosion during rain events. The slow percolation of the water through the playa improves the water quality as it goes down. No one in this focus group had ever heard that playas help with aquifer recharge, and they thought it would be very limited. Silt and clay reduce the recharge. Most agreed playas provide aesthetic values – especially ones that hold water. Scenic quality. Most thought that the wildlife values associated with playas would increase property values. They can be very good for hunting – waterfowl, pheasants.

Negatives

You can get stuck very easily trying to farm them. They often harbor noxious weeds. Hard to grow a crop – too wet most of the time. Most landowners generally dislike them because they are hard to farm. Several participants lamented that not too many farmers will do much for wildlife. It's all about getting a crop off. Wetland regulations are a negative—they impact what you can do on your land.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

Two participants had playas they didn't farm at all. They put that ground in CRP. They couldn't get a crop off that land most years, so CRP was their best option. It was a combination of economics and wildlife values.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

All participants were familiar with both the programs we discussed. They heard about them through the USDA newsletter, NRCS & FSA staff. Decisions about whether to enroll in programs like this are mostly driven by economics. Because of the wind around here, they have to keep a cover crop to save the soil. Programs allow them to do this as a soil conservation measure. It also rests the land so it might be more healthy if we decide to farm it again in the future.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

Most important is reimbursement at fair market value. Provide initial incentive to participate and cost share for establishment. Maybe set it up so some of the money

goes to the tenant, not just the owner. No mid-term management like we have in CP-25. Needs to be flexible. Needs to allow rotational grazing. Let the operators decide what is best, although the selected activities can still be approved by the agency. Needs common sense. NRCS & FSA are good agencies to administer the program. NRCS is best. Need local control. Only problem they have with the feds is they don't get information out very well, which results in last-minute decisions. Some liked WRP just as it is.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

No one in this focus group irrigated. They know that the aquifer is dropping overall. They believed there was a connection between playas and the aquifer, but they didn't think it was very significant. One participant attended an NRD meeting on the aquifer, so he knew about the connection. Local authorities have regulated the number of new wells that can be drilled and how much water they can pump. They have used summer fallow as a way to increase groundwater. They were concerned about what happens if the water runs out. It would have huge impact on lifestyle throughout the Great Plains.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?

All participants said they would quit farming playas if they knew it would help recharge the aquifer. They said they would quit for the wildlife benefits, too.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it

All wanted to see their land used to support the next generation. They take pride in it and want to keep it in good condition. Most thought the coming years would see more cropland go back to range land in this area. None had immediate family interested in farming, but all wanted to see their land stay in farming. When asked how PLJV or partners could help, they said to educate young people about natural resources and how to work with them—in cities as well as rural areas. Playas would make good outdoor classrooms.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show

Only one participant had heard of Playa County Radio Show—said he heard it on NPR station. All found it credible and liked it. They had lots of questions about how playas recharged the aquifer and how to make them better. All remembered that the URL was mentioned in the radio spot. One wrote it down. When asked where they got information on farming, they mentioned farm magazines ("Fence Post,") internet, (weather and market sites and the NRCS site), and radio (94.1 KNAB). Weather is most important. One mentioned the Weather Channel on TV. They recommended using NRD as a partner. That would be very effective. Contact Don Ogle (254-2377). And use the USDA/FSA newsletter.

Appendix M. Summary from Broken Bow, Nebraska.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Only a few had heard the term playa lakes. They usually call them lagoons or wallows. The participants in this group were very mixed in their responses. There were some supporters of playas, but in general, this group probably contained the most vehement opposition to playas of any focus group.

Positives

Replenishing the aquifer, water for cattle, wildlife habitat, and a good place for hunting. One said that playas were what nature intended to be there. Another mentioned he collects water in the playas and then reuses it for irrigation. One said he'd rather own land that the water ran onto than land that the water ran off of. One said that Pennsylvania smartweed grows there, which is good for bedding cattle. Crops that grow around the edges of playas are usually good. But inside the playas, not so much.

Negatives

Some of the items listed as positives above were listed as negatives by other participants. One participant said playas are "the biggest waste ever." They are a loss of farm ground, they create infestation of insects, they always drown the crops, and the stagnant water in them is bad for cattle. Several participants wished there was a way to get rid of them. They are very inconvenient to farm around. One did not like the fact that people were farming playas, because it has to be bad to put chemicals into the aquifer. Farmers who irrigate don't like them because the pivots get stuck. Playas drown out the crop more often than not. One participant thought wildlife living in playas bring in weeds and diseases (like West Nile virus). Several said they hate playas.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

None of these participants currently conserves playas. One said playas are classified as wetlands, and you can't alter or pit them if they are wetlands. They asked NRCS for designation and were told they were wetlands. This greatly reduces your options on that land. Several participants admitted they hated playas. One said that playas produced great yields when they were able to farm them. And they produce lots of pheasants.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

Several had CP23A for pivot corners. One had WRP, but most didn't like the permanent nature of the easement. "We still have to pay taxes on the land, but we can't run a pivot over it." Need a formula that will actually pay you the land value. Control was the biggest concern. They resented being told what to do on their land.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

It needs to pay fair rental value for the land. It could be a tax abatement program. Needs to adjust for inflation, and needs a firm end date. Offer several year-ranges. Ten years seems pretty good. Allow farmers to run a pivot through it. Allow you to pump water out of it. Don't require a buffer around the playa – just the actual size of the wetland. The program needs to be simple and flexible. One said the wetland under his pivot is growing, and a program should allow him to pump it down to the original size.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

Most of the participants were irrigators. The condition of the aquifer concerned them a lot. There was very poor understanding of the aquifer and its connection to playas. Some thought there was no connection whatsoever. Others thought there was a connection, but it was insignificant. One thought playas filter and purify water as it makes its way to the aquifer. They said there was a moratorium on drilling in their area, but most would drill new wells if they could. One said that when the clay in the bottom of the playa seals up, then no water gets through to the aquifer.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?

Most said they would need more information, and it would have to be a big benefit. One said if he was out of water, he'd be interested, but probably not before. One said the sandhills region recharges his wells, so he doesn't really care. Aquifer recharge was not enough to get this group to conserve playas. For most government programs, it's not worth the hassle. One said we should continue to pit playas and pump out of the pits—that will save the aquifer.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it

They all wanted their offspring to keep it going. They wanted to improve it before passing it on—increase the productivity and keep the land viable. Be good stewards. They didn't have many ideas for how RBJV could help. Everyone is in a different position. Maybe share information with landowners about conservation benefits and how to improve the land. Collect more information about the connection between playas and the aquifer. Need more data.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show

No one had heard of it, but they thought it was very good. One said the radio spot was based on wildlife values, and we were talking about production during the meeting. One participant did not think grass buffers would work. Most thought the spot was credible. Most people learn best from their peers. When asked where they get information about farming, they said the University of Nebraska was the most respected source around. They also said Nebraska Farmer; Ag Web; DTN; NRD newsletter; Google search; not many people used traditional media of any kind; workshops are good. One ended by saying that "Communication is everything – meetings like this are fantastic."

Appendix N. Summary from York, Nebraska.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

After viewing the photos of playas, participants said their playas are much bigger than the ones shown. Theirs were hundreds of acres.

Positives

Playas are good sources of water, they prevent erosion, they grow good forage for cattle, they provide great habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds, they provide good hunting, they recharge the aquifer, they help control flooding, and they can be good farm ground.

Negatives

Water drowns the crop in wet years. The soil is hard pan. Pivots get stuck when it's wet. Locations of playas can make them hard to manage. They are a challenge to graze – they either have too much water or too little. Weeds and trees that seed into them are hard to manage. It's hard to keep the same number of cattle on a given area because of the change in water level—have to move them around a lot. Playas catch silt, which creates a dam, which holds more water on the land.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

Three of the participants currently conserved some of the playas on their land. One participant had some land in CP23A – He said that program does not allow haying or grazing, which seems crazy to him. Another was not in a program, but might consider it. He gets a crop 2 years out of 5. Another gets 3 out of 5. Several others were only getting one or two years out of ten. They agreed playas had good cropping potential, but there are large extremes and a lot of uncertainty.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

Four participants were using these programs already. They based their decisions to enroll largely on economics—does it pay? Also, how much hassle will it be? How long is the contract? One wanted a shorter timeframe. Need to be able to re-negotiate if the market changes. Some other questions they mentioned: What are the expenses to maintain the required practice? What are insurance rates? How many years do you lose a crop? One participant said the changes in the rules are too hard to keep up with. He would rather manage it himself. Do pivots run through the playa? It's a huge hassle to reverse the pivots—it's much more convenient to run through the playa. All agreed that higher commodity prices increase the incentive to try to crop the playas. The programs need to adjust their rates over time to compensate for market changes. Some disagreed with that.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

It would need to have adjustments for inflation. It should allow rotational grazing. Provide cost share for fencing. Offer shorter terms (5 years) for those who want that. You can't make everyone happy – all properties are different. Need flexibility. Payments will have to match insurance and crop prices. Don't allow absent landowners to re-enroll. They don't manage it. Existing programs have come a long way.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

All were concerned about the aquifer, but in this area, the aquifer level follows rainfall very closely, so it's not as big a concern as it is for the Ogalalla. They are worried about the quality of the water, too. And they suspect it won't be here forever.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?

Most of the participants would quit grazing or cropping playas if they were convinced it would make a big difference in aquifer recharge. Some would stop if they knew it would benefit wildlife, but it was less than half.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it

Most wanted to leave the land as good or better than when they got it (in terms of yields) – conserving it, too. They wanted to make improvements to leave the soil healthier (more organic matter) than it was before. They wanted to pass it on to the next generation. Leave it a productive farm that also has wildlife benefits. Keep flexibility in the operation for my kids. Pass on land values.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show

One participant had heard of the program. He thought it ran on Saturdays at 7:15 a.m. Most liked it, and thought it had a lot of information. About half said it seemed "opinionated," like they were "going after" the row crop producers. These folks advised not to make the producers angry. Rather, pat their back for the good things they are doing. The facts mentioned in the spot needs a lot of back-up—they wanted more information. When asked where they get their information on farming, most said they listen to radio. About half use smart phones to view ag websites and CME exchange for markets. All got farm magazines, but few read them. Most didn't remember that the radio spot had a URL, but three said they did. Some recommended putting signs along roads so the public knows who is behind the program. Have contact information on the sign so others could follow up.

Appendix O. Summary from Colby, Kansas.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Positives

All agreed playas recharge the aquifer. In some years the playa is the only place we can harvest any wheat—it grows good crops in the dry years. One participant had a very large playa (2-300 acres). They go surfing and sailing on it in wet years. Most recognized that playas offer great wildlife values (deer pheasants, birds) and aesthetic values.

Negatives

The towers on the pivots hang up when playas are wet. Playas lower the value of the land. Weeds do well in playas. They take more time to farm, because you have to go around them. It's a pain. You usually have to wait longer to harvest so they can dry out enough to get equipment in. Everything gets stuck in playas. The soil is very tight, so it doesn't grow well. Mosquitos are bad. Often smells bad. They can be an attractive nuisance for trespassers with 4 wheelers.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

Four participants had at least one playa they didn't farm. All put that land in a program. They said it was easier than fighting the water. One said his was in the corner of a field, so it was convenient to carve it out of the larger field. He admitted he wouldn't have put it in the program if it had been in the middle of the field. Too much hassle.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

Several had land in continuous CRP or the Pheasants Forever walk-in hunt program. In those programs you can't hay or graze it. It is a 10- or 20-year contract. The important elements they consider when deciding on whether to participate: Crop price, land price, amount of water available in that location, and cost of implementation. Several agreed that farming corners used to be very difficult, but with advances in equipment, corners are much more feasible/lucrative to farm. One said that not all decisions are made for strictly economic reasons. Several went into a lot of detail about how some of the program requirements made absolutely no sense. Some of the grasses they were required to plant were "totally ridiculous" for this location and did not work. Some of the established practices were "stupid." The rules need to be more flexible.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

The program should have adjustable term lengths based on commodity prices and the value of the land. In general, 3-5 years is a good term, although some have to be longer, and being longer would be okay if they had adjustments for costs. Administration of the program needs to be someone who the farmers trust. But this varies a LOT from county to county. NRCS staff interprets the rules differently from place to place, which breeds a lot of mistrust. Any program should allow the landowner to maintain control of access.

Allow landowners to dig playas out so they hold water permanently, and put trees around them. One participant thought chiseling through the playa would improve the infiltration.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

Most participants thought that the condition of the aquifer was very important. One said the level of the aquifer is dropping 6 inches per year in this area. All of them said it has impacted their operations already. They believe playas recharge the aquifer, but not when there is no rain. They are not permitted to drill any new wells here, and they weren't sure if they would drill more wells even if they could—there is too much uncertainty regarding policies, fuel/pumping costs.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?

Most participants would still farm them because of convenience factors, and they didn't think the recharge would be that much anyway. They felt the crops used the water before it gets to aquifer. If they could be convinced otherwise, a couple of them said they might change their practices – but most wouldn't. Most thought it was a losing battle. They predict that farmers/ranchers/producers will probably run the whole aquifer dry and then figure something else out. Most will use the water until it's gone, and then change to a different crop or practice. They felt the most important thing is to use the water as efficiently as possible. One said they are now raising almost twice the corn with half the water they used to. It didn't make sense to them to keep people from using the aquifer's water. Need to dig pits to enhance the recharge. Shallow playas don't help wildlife because the water doesn't last long enough, and when the water mostly evaporates, there is no recharge.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it

Most wanted to pass it on to family. One participant just wanted someone else to no-till it so it keeps erosion down. One said he hopes it is used for its highest and best use – whatever that is. One participant said that as he gets older, he thinks more about conservation, but conservation at all costs is not good, either. And not all conservation groups are good. Not all are created equal. Most believed that TNC was good.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show

One participant had heard the radio show multiple times. The others had not. They all thought the spot was well-done and very informative, but some didn't think it applied to them, because they thought all the playas had been silted in already and aren't really functioning anymore. They thought you'd have to remove the sediment. Another said he saw the benefit of buffers if you farmed the old way, but we don't farm that way anymore. We are already doing good conservation. Most thought it would be very difficult to restore the functions of the playas. All listened to radio, but not always local stations. They mentioned KSNW TV ag report and Ag Days. They don't look to Extension programs nearly as much anymore. Now it's seed/chemical companies. The ag industry

is much better. The seed companies have paid consultants (“Serv-a-Tech”). Some thought they were too “selly,” But most listened to them. These consultants good be a good way to get information to farmers. They also look to progressive neighbors and they go to conferences. Most of them used the Internet: Newagtalk.com; Progressive Farmer; Agweb; DTM Farm Futures; Successful Farmer. All participants remembered that the radio spot mentioned a URL, and most of them wrote it down.

Overall, this group was not really convinced that playa conservation was worthwhile. They will keep farming them until the water runs out.

Appendix P. Summary from Limon, Colorado.

Item 1. Impressions of playas

Positives

Playas provide good grazing and the cattle like the water. Someone mentioned aquifer recharge, but they would like to see the data about that. Playas are great for migratory waterfowl and wildlife. Extra vegetation is there, which catches the water. But it doesn't work if it's not wet. Antelope and other wildlife use them even if they are dry. One person mentioned the Mountain Plover festival—they tour the playas during the festival. Aesthetic values – like looking at them. Good for prairie dog shoot.

Negatives

Equipment can get stuck in them. Noxious weeds tend to come in there. Cows can break through ice in winter and get stuck. Could die that way. They can be a hassle to farm around, but ours are fairly small.

Item 2. Conservation of playas (exclusion from farming/ranching)

All three participants conserved at least one playa on their land. One said: "They handed us a carrot." He said Game and Fish, RMBO, and DU pooled money to cost share the project. "I got great benefit for what I had to give up." He received cost share to put a piped water supply into the area for his cattle, which was a much better water supply than the playa had been. It was a win-win situation. All participants really like Tammy and Seth at RMBO. Tammy "sold" them on playa conservation. They felt that RMBO is sincerely interested in their best interest. The federal agencies are not always like that.

Item 3. How do you decide whether to enroll land in conservation programs?

Two of the 3 participants were using some NRCS programs, but not sure which ones. All three were partnering with RMBO—mostly with 10-year contracts. They have the ability to graze those lands every 3 years for lower payments. This gives the landowner flexibility—you have to consider the restrictions and ramifications. All believed that the RMBO folks were their friends—there was a lot of trust there. Other considerations: What are the penalties if I don't do it right? How flexible are the programs? These participants wanted to use their playas to educate people about their situation.

Item 4. If you could design a conservation program, what would it look like?

It has to make economic sense. It must pay market value or higher. Rancher needs to be able to do rotational grazing. Must have technical experts to help implement the program so no mistakes are made. Ten year contracts are just about right. These participants said if they are offered the opportunity, they will probably do it again, and they would consider putting even more land into the program.

Item 5. Relationship between playas and the aquifer

Only one of the participants irrigated, and he said he doesn't have much water. His wells are going down fast. All were very concerned with state of the aquifer, but recharge wasn't that much of a factor in their decisions to conserve their playas. For them, it was more economics and conservation.

Item 6. If you were convince playas provided benefits, would you conserve them?
All were convinced that playas are not going to recharge the aquifer as fast as we're draining it. They all thought that digging pits in the playas would help (reduce evaporation and increase infiltration), but they were not sure. They would like to have more information. The top reason for them is habitat for wildlife. It wasn't the biggest reason at the beginning, but is now.

Item 7. Vision for your land after you are done with it
This is the only group that didn't mention keeping the land in their family. They all wanted to keep their land in ag production, and leave it better than it was when they got it. They wanted to increase diversity, so it was not a monoculture. They thought PLJV and other partners could provide technical expertise and more of the programs that help ranchers achieve this vision. One mentioned that it seems like farmers get a lot more programs than ranchers.

Item 8. Impressions of Playa Country Radio Show
One participant might have heard the radio show, but wasn't sure. All agreed it was credible, informative, interesting and educational. One said it was preaching to the choir, because this group was already on board with conservation. They said they got their information about farming from: KOA in Denver, RFD TV, newspapers, High Plains Journal, direct mail, personal experience and from other farmers. They mentioned using the Web, but not much. One of the participants remembered that the radio spot had a URL. Two of the three participants would allow their playa conservation efforts to be used in a field day for some type of compensation.