



BUFFALO COMMONS

In a region where farming rules, irrigated agriculture adds an estimated \$630 million to the Texas High Plains' economy. The irrigation uses the Ogallala Aquifer as a source of water. The aquifer, however, is unsustainable and is rapidly depleting.

With much of the area's economy committed to irrigation, the time is quickly approaching to start thinking of alternatives to stimulate the economy when the aquifer runs dry.

The Department of Landscape Architecture (LARC) at Texas Tech University is currently working on a project referred to as the "Buffalo Commons."

LARC Professor Pat Westbrook said New Jersey couple Frank and Deborah Popper proposed the original idea for a "Buffalo Commons" in 1987, with the idea of a commons spreading from the center of the United States up to Canada. However, to make it more relevant to course work, LARC took the original idea and focused more on the Great Plains, while analyzing population and space to decide where a commons best fit.

The project looks into the possibility of creating a national park or nature preserve somewhere in the Great Plains where there is currently farmland and dwindling populations. The project also suggests a reintroduction of a herd of wild buffalo with the idea of ecotourism taking the place of the economic stimulus irrigated agriculture provides.

DeMera Ollinger, a fourth year student in LARC, has worked on the project. She said the project was initially introduced to the students in a Geographical Information System (a course with an emphasis on spatial analysis) course.

"The pseudo-project emphasizes the significance of the depleting Ogallala Aquifer in relation to

agriculture and proposes a unique solution," Ollinger said. "As we begin to exhaust our water resource, the project statement suggests we purchase – from willing participants – farmland expected to 'dry out' for twice its listed value, repair the land, and reestablish the plains bison."

However, according to Westbrook, there are several problems with reintroducing the bison.

"It is not the same environment when the buffalo were here originally," Westbrook said.

Along with the problem the environment poses, disease has the potential to be another major set back. Brucellosis could spread from the buffalo to cattle in the ranches around the herd, which would be detrimental to the livelihood of ranchers.

All potential problems considered, the project idea could potentially bring back the poetic beauty of the Llano Estacado, known by so many throughout history – including Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, who originally coined the name of the Llano Estacado.

The historic beauty could salvage some of the economy lost because of a depleted aquifer. Westbrook said ecotourism could blossom from a Buffalo Commons – especially where rail lines lie. It would give tourists a chance to "go back in time" to see how the range was back in the now romanticized view of the Old West.

Although irrigated agriculture plays a major part in today's economy in the Texas High Plains, the future could bring an economy which depends heavily on the area's natural beauty and a herd of buffalo roaming throughout the Buffalo Commons. 

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