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**Sustainable Agriculture: The West Texas Future**

By: Sarah Prince

What happens to farming when the water runs out? Researchers, predominately from Texas Tech University, are working to address this question. They are looking into alternatives to irrigated crops, including an integrated crop/forage/beef cattle system. The alternative system involves the production of cotton and feedlot-ready stocker steers.

Dr. Vivien Allen, a Thornton Distinguished chair in the department of plant and soil sciences, is directing the project. "Crop production in the Texas High Plains is about a \$2.3 billion industry per year," Allen said, "but about 70 percent of that is supported by irrigated agriculture." The water comes mostly from the Ogallala Aquifer, which has supported the production of crops for more than 100 years.

"Today our problem is that our water supplies are running out," Allen said. According to the High Plains Underground Water Conservation District No. 1, the water level has dropped an average of 1.13 feet per year in the last 10 years in the 15 counties surrounding Lubbock. Researchers say this will make traditional one-crop systems unsustainable.

Research conducted thus far has established that integrated cotton, forage and beef cattle systems improve profitability and reduce water use by 20 percent. "We're looking for ways in which we can design agricultural systems that will use less water and still maintain the productivity and economic viability for this region," Allen said.

This research foreshadows what could be a breakthrough for High Plains farmers. Allen and fellow researcher, Matt Baker, chair of the department of agriculture education and communications at Texas Tech, agree that the High Plains must maintain a strong agriculture base in order to thrive.

Allen says it looks like it is possible to design a system for this region that will be more sustainable and compatible with natural resource utilization. Both Allen and Baker say it's important to make the general public aware of water conservation strategies.

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