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Boone Pickens Hates Water Conservation

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For all the black ink Boone Pickens has garnered for his green energy plan, I wish he would get an equal amount of press for his blue devilry. What I'm referring to is Pickens' long-brewing scheme to amass an ocean of groundwater in the Panhandle and then sell it to cities when they get desperate enough.

Pickens' water company, Mesa Water, already has an estimated 210,000 acre-feet of Ogallala Aquifer water rights, potentially worth hundreds of millions. That's a lot of water. An acre-foot is enough to cover one acre with one foot of water. Austin uses about 170,000 acre-feet each year.

Pickens has made no secret of his views on water: It's a commodity to be owned, bought and sold. "There are people who will buy the water when they need it," he [told](#) *BusinessWeek* last year. "And the people who have the water want to sell it. That's the blood, guts, and feathers of the thing."

That's a nice purist, free market approach but a lot of folks in the Panhandle aren't buying it. One of the problems Mesa is running into is that some groundwater conservation districts, locally-controlled entities that manage pumping, want to leave a lot of the Ogallala in the ground.

Right now, the state's 16 [groundwater management areas](#) – consortiums of groundwater districts that roughly follow the boundaries of major aquifers – are working on 50-year groundwater plans that will ultimately result in pumping limits. (To simplify a ridiculously arcane process.)

[Groundwater Management Area 1](#), which oversees much of the Panhandle and the Ogallala, is faced with an especially difficult task. The Ogallala Aquifer is being depleted, slowly but surely. The question before water planners is simply how quickly they want to draw the aquifer down.

Most of GMA 1 has settled on allowing 50-60% of the groundwater to be pumped over the next half-century.

In contrast, the Hemphill County Underwater Water Conservation District, which oversees an ecologically-interesting area of the Panhandle with many seeps, springs, creeks and river, has decided to take an aggressive conservation approach. That district has proposed to leave 80 percent of its portion of the aquifer intact in 2060.

Pickens is pissed.

The *Amarillo Globe-News* [reports](#) on a meeting this week in Amarillo in which Mesa Water and another water rancher complained about any efforts to limit withdrawals:

Staff members of the Texas Water Development Board listened to representatives of Mesa Water and G&J Ranch explain why they think recent water plans for the region are unreasonable.

"It is my desire to do what I want to with my property," said George Arrington, co-owner of G&J Ranch and an independent oil and gas producer. "I really wanted to be treated like

everybody else in (Groundwater Management Area 1)."

[...]

Mesa Water representative Steve Stevens said the company, owned by T. Boone Pickens, owns water in restrictive Hemphill County and wants to make money on it by selling it to thirsty cities. With about 210,000 acres of water rights at \$400 an acre, there's a lot of money riding on producing at least as much as most of the Panhandle.

"With groundwater rights and other costs, it's right at \$100 million," Stevens said.

The goal of maintaining 80 percent of water "makes the water in Hemphill County worthless," he said.

The Hemphill Underground Water Conservation District has more than 100 affidavits from people supporting the 80 percent goal, said Janet Guthrie, general manager.

"Their rights and interests should not be pushed aside or trampled on," she said.

This is a battle about competing notions of rights. Pickens thinks he has an absolute right to do what he pleases with "his" water. Hemphill County believes they have the right to manage their water based on the community's desires, in this case to keep the springs and streams flowing.

Based on the best science to date, if the aquifer was drawn down by 50%, much of the surface water in and around Canadian ("The Oasis of the Panhandle" and the Hemphill seat) would simply disappear, a fact that doesn't seem to have ruffled Mesa.



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