

Lucas Bessire on RUNNING OUT: In Search of Water on the High Plains for the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast

Marshall Poe

Welcome to the New Books Network.

Hello everybody. This is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor-in-chief of the New Books Network. And this is an episode in the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast. And today I'm very happy to say that we have Lucas Bessire on the show and we'll be talking about his terrific book RUNNING OUT: In Search of Water on the High Plains.

I should add for listeners that I really enjoyed this book partially because it's about Western Kansas and I spent a lot of time in western Kansas and as you will hear, so did Lucas, so let me say to Lucas, welcome to the show!

Lucas Bessire

Thank you Marshall so much for having me. It's a real pleasure to talk with you about this.

Marshall Poe

The pleasure is all mine, my friend. So could you begin by telling our audience a little bit about yourself?

Lucas Bessire

Yeah, I'm an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oklahoma.

Marshall Poe

And you grew up in Kansas. Is that right?

Lucas Bessire

That's right. I'm originally from southwest Kansas but I left in my 20s. I got, you know, sucked into anthropology and that took me to New York and South America and then I spent a long time in the Gran Chaco region of Bolivia and Paraguay where I was trying to understand how environmental destruction altered the lives of a recently contacted native group and I ended up writing my first book project on that.

But then I returned home back to southwest Kansas and I discovered that something that seemed similar was unfolding on the plains where I grew up and that was through the extreme depletion of the Ogallala aquifer in that area. So I didn't really know what I would do with that. Yeah.

Marshall Poe

I was going to ask, so why did you decide that your next project was going to be in your own ancestral homeland? It must have been interesting to go back to where you grew up.

Lucas Bessire

Yeah, I mean, I was just originally struck by these kind of uncanny resemblances between the Gran Chaco and the high plains and I didn't know when I started the project, I didn't know what I would do with that. I just knew that I wanted to learn a little bit more and the reason I kind of wanted to learn more is because at the time, in 2016, aquifer depletion really seemed like a drama that was condensing much bigger tensions and problems in America that at that time were becoming increasingly hard to ignore and, you know, I had a vague sense at the beginning that somehow these tensions might be tied to personal, emotional connections between families and between families and the land, so I thought at the beginning that I was also finally ready to try to confront some of those personal dilemmas and reconnect with my own father.

The strange thing is that about halfway through my return to the plains I began to see that these sort of fault lines of my own feelings, my own memories, my own relationship to family, seem to be the very same ones that were driving this extreme aquifer loss more generally and that resonance really started to open things up for me and it made me start to think harder about the situation and really made me try to dig into how I could write about it.

Marshall Poe

Mmmhmm. It must have been absolutely fascinating to go back and talk to your relatives about these things. I have a similar sort of story as I told you in the pre-interview, my people are from the Flint Hills, which is in Central Kansas and they were wheat farmers and cattle ranchers and I also have relatives who lived in Dodge City and they were heavily involved in cattle pens, the original cattle pens, you know, where they feed barbiturates to large animals so they'll stand around and eat.

Yeah, I don't think many people know this about cattle pens, but they are very [unclear]; you can smell them miles and miles away and God knows what kind of environmental degradation they do. So, can you begin by telling us what an aquifer is?

Lucas Bessire

Yeah. It's a great question, Marshall, and it's actually a more complicated answer than many people think. So, you know, I don't know how familiar the listeners are with hydrogeology, but when I was growing up, I kind of got the vague sense from people that an aquifer was like an underground lake and it was united as a body of water that was buried. Well, it turns out that on the high plains, the Ogallala Aquifer formation, which is the one that I'm intimately familiar with, isn't that at all. It's more like kind of palimpsest of different layers of sediments that are containing water that only appears when you pump a hole--that you poke a hole into the sediment at layers and pump the water out.

So it's not a single thing in southwest Kansas. It's a set of relationships between a lot of different layers, some of which are interconnected and homogenous and some of which aren't at all; they're broken apart. So there's a kind of underground complexity there that is part of the mystery of depletion and it's part of what makes aquifers and irrigation such a complicated, twisty thing to write about, to think about, and to try to regulate or govern.

Marshall Poe

So would it be fair to say that the Ogallala is kind of a term of art for something much more complex?

Lucas Bessire

Absolutely. It's a term of art in that it's a term of, you know, colonial expansion and colonial imaginaries. I mean, it's no coincidence that the early kind of hydrogeologists that were talking about groundwater formations in the high plains were naming them after the area's native peoples who were dispossessed. So the idea that there is a single Ogallala formation is a misleading.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, that's the impression I got from your boo. And it's enormous. It covers several states.

Lucas Bessire

Yes, it covers parts of six different states. It stretches all the way from southern South Dakota into eastern New Mexico and far down into Texas.

Marshall Poe

Well, let's talk a little bit about the people who were there before the European settlers came. Will you talk a little bit about that? Who were they?

Lucas Bessire

Well, you know, I'm no expert on the deep paleo-indian history and the archaeology of the area, but what we do know and what I can speak about are the native groups that were historically documented in the area prior to the kind of boom of settler colonization in western Kansas, and you're talking about different groups of Kiowa, current groups of Comanche, different bands of Cheyenne, different groups of plains Apache and different groups moved to the area, often around water sources, and use it at different times of the year for different activities and ceremonial purposes.

Marshall Poe

And now we can come to your family history. When did the European settlers first show up?

Lucas Bessire

Well, you know, there's a long history of trading and migration and movement through the area which predated the kind of settler colonial patterns, but the settlers really arrived after the 1870s the early 1870s is when there was a kind of boom of settler colonization associated with the railroads, associated with the massive extinction of local wildlife and the bison herds and various kinds of nefarious dealings between the United States government and native groups in the area, which eventually push them south of the Arkansas in the famous Medicine Lodge treaty.

So you had a kind of layered process of colonial dispossession and dislocation. And settlers came very soon after that. So you had people settling around water sources and claiming them for their exclusive property beginning in the late 1870s, but really consolidating through the 1880s and 1890s.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, one of the things I found fascinating about your book and this relates to my personal experience, too. I remember my grandfather talking about western Kansas as if there was no water there at all, because eastern Kansas is very different than western Kansas. We don't have

to do any irrigation. In eastern Kansas because, you know, they'll get 30 inches of rain commonly, but can you talk a little bit about the ecology of western Kansas? I mean, this is kind of a leading question. It's not as if you can, as you can in eastern Kansas, just plow the land and things will grow.

Lucas Bessire

Yeah. I mean, yeah, rainfall amounts in western Kansas range from, you know, they vary wildly. It's a semi-arid Great Plains ecology and there's not a lot of surface water, especially now there's very little surface water. Historically there was much more but it was often temporary or seasonal where you had a large number of Playa Lakes buffalo wallows that would fill in with temporary, you know, amounts of water, but the permanent water sources were extremely rare and very very celebrated.

There was a rich lore around the permanent water sources and the place that I'm speaking about in southwest Kansas. Wagon Bed Springs was one of the only permanent water sources in about a 50-mile radius. So everybody knew about it and everybody mapped those early waters like they were islands in the ocean.

Marshall Poe

And now we can kind of get into your family history. As I said and you mentioned, your great-grandfather. I believe you use the initials R.W. for him. Is that right?

Lucas Bessire

That's right. That's correct.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. Can you tell us a little bit about R.W.?

Lucas Bessire

Yeah. He's an interesting character and his grandfather had settled in central Kansas in the 1860s and then moved to the so-called "Indian territory" at the time and then back to central Kansas and R.W. was, you know, one of the second wave of real a growing industrial settlers that came to southwest Kansas and they started transforming the short grass prairies into a kind of industrial sphere and that was of course associated with the Dust Bowl. And all of the horrendous ecological disasters of the Dust Bowl that we're all very familiar with have become, become kind of iconic in our national history.

But R.W.? I never knew him. I believe that, you know, he held me when I was a small child. I have some vague recollection of, you know, some holiday at his house. So everything I know about him is kind of reconstructed from family archives and stories other people have told me about him. But those stories were really striking to me in their consistency about his nature, about his goals, and about his single-minded focus on agribusiness and agro-capitalism.

So he was a big landowner in the area. He was associated with some of the first feed pens in that area which connects with your own family history and he was associated with, you know, being among the first group of people in that area that started deep well irrigation in the late 1940s. So he gives me a kind of narrative about, you know, agribusiness that's deeply tied to my own existence in my own family out there.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. My impression of him is he's a little bit like, I don't know, I'm reminded of Israeli settlers who wanted to make the desert bloom. He strikes me as that kind of person that he saw an arid place with nothing on it and he was going to make it bloom. Is that a fair characterization?

Lucas Bessire

I think that's a fair characterization. Yeah. I think that is fair, but I think it's also generous, you know, I think that there were a lot of contradictions in R.W. and in his peers in that time, where there was a kind of narrative or a sense of about divine right and domination over nature that guided him and made him feel justified in both, you know, going to a Christian church and also being single-handedly responsible for plowing up huge amounts of, you know, shortgrass prairie.

And so I think that from what I know everyone told me that R.W.'s primary drive wasn't a kind of mutual obligation to the future but really about profit and about taking advantage of a set of conditions to make money for himself.

Marshall Poe

There's one place in the book where you take on the notion of husbandry or "shepherds of the land..." and I got to tell you, my grandfather who sounds a lot like your great-grandfather, did not think of himself that way--not at all!

Lucas Bessire

That's right. They really thought of themselves as businessmen and this was an opportunity and you are smart and you worked hard and you made the right decisions and, if you were smart enough and ruthless enough, you made a fortune and that was what it was about.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, it does remind me of my grandfather and he was involved in wheat farming and cattle ranching and he owned shares in grain elevators. Hmm, and that's what I remember about him... and going out and riding the combines when he would harvest wheat and we put it in the grain elevator and you get the sense, even when I was young, that it was it was industrial. Everything was done by machines.

Lucas Bessire

Mmm-hmm.

Marshall Poe

And it was done without any thought of essentially anything else, but I don't want to say maximizing profits, obviously. They wanted to take care of their families. That was a primary part of it, but there was a sense that they were farmers, they were business people.

Lucas Bessire

That's exactly right. That's exactly right. And I think it's a key distinction. You know, I think that it's something about western Kansas that is really unique. It's something that's important and it's something that's again kind of in tension with these other community values that are also really prevalent there and a sense of neighborliness and watching out for other people and, you know, there's a contradictory impulses that are happening all the time.

Marshall Poe

So can we talk a little bit about pumping water out of the ground? When did the first European settlers get the idea to do that, because as I say from my grandfather's perspective, you couldn't grow anything in western Kansas.

Lucas Bessire

Yeah there is truth in that. Your grandpa was probably right about that. You know, before there was deep water or deep well irrigation, agriculture in western Kansas was really precarious. Yes, and there was a lot of people who gambled and and lost on agriculture. So you had a kind of rush around high wheat prices in the 1920s and a couple of wet years and a lot of investment that led to the Dust Bowl and a drought and everything sort of collapsed. I mean, it's hard to overstate the kind of degree of systemic collapse that people, many people besides me, of course, have noted that occurred out there in the 1930s.

But what is unique or striking to me is the way in which groundwater came around or came to figure in people's imaginary as "underground rain" or a sort of stabilizer that let people continue with that kind of gambling attitude and remain doing the same sort of practices that got them into trouble in the 20s.

So that's what happened in the 1940s late 1940s. It corresponded with the discovery of a giant natural gas field out there, the Hugoton Field, and with the combination of the natural gas prices, high wheat prices, people really started pumping groundwater. Massive amounts of groundwater were extracted and people started using it to grow crops that are not actually suited for the natural rainfall of that area, like corn and alfalfa and that kind of stuff.

Yeah.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, we'll talk about those crops in a second. But I like that you mentioned gas and oil because I also remember from my grandfather's experience. My father told me about this. I didn't know about it, but there was a point in central Kansas when every farmer wanted to drill an oil well on his land and he in fact had one; it didn't yield very much, but it was a stable source of income and so he was very glad about that and then oil prospecting became a huge business in central Kansas, at least.

Lucas Bessire

Yeah, absolutely.

Marshall Poe

But again, this goes back to your point about these people being businessmen and their businesses exploiting the land and whatever's under it. And so can you talk a little bit about how government policy help these agro-business men--we call them "farmers," I suppose, exploit the aquifer?

Lucas Bessire

Well, it's interesting. I mean that's another complicated set of questions. And I think that one of the things I discovered in the course of, you know, traveling around southwest Kansas looking for aquifer imaginaries, or information, or stories was that every single component that has to do with depletion is much more than it seems and it's more like every particular part has its own

tensions and fault lines and contradictions that prevent any single explanation from being restricted to that domain.

So with the, you know, the question around governance or politics or state policy. You had people who've long been concerned about dwindling groundwater in southwest Kansas. You have a lot of people who've long been trying to do something to prevent it. So it's not just that everybody out there was misguided from the very beginning. It's more like there were a set of conversations that were happening that could have gone a lot of different ways early on and one of those conversations was around the question about state authority over groundwater. So partly because local groups were concerned about the dwindling water table, the state agreed to cede much but not all of aquifer governance to what they call "groundwater management districts" in the 1970s. And these were set up--there were five of them--set up in areas of Kansas with particular pressures on groundwater supplies and resources and they meant to give local people the right to control their own destiny.

So you had a kind of intermediary management structure between state politics and local politics. And what happened is that some of those regional groups or management districts took a pro-conservation stance and some of them took a pro-use stance and often, you know, those management districts, and their particular stances, were to some degree at odds with certain parts of the people living in the area and it's a really interesting and complicated set of debates and processes and laws, but the end result in southwest Kansas is that you have a set of policies that until very recently not only permitted, but encouraged a kind of unsustainable level of pumping out of the aquifer and their end result we're seeing now where you have a lot of farms and a lot of people who are running out of water. Some towns are running out of water and you're getting down into a new kind of topography of groundwater that's setting up a lot of conflicts and making it impossible to ignore.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. Part of the reason I asked about government policy is--back to my grandfather who seems to be a major character in this interview, he was very excited about offset programs and set-aside programs where the government would pay him not to grow wheat. And I guess the question I had is, is there a similar sort of program that the government has for farmers in western Kansas not to grow and, that is, save, water?

Lucas Bessire

Yeah, there's a lot of contradictory mechanisms that are in place at the federal level and at the state level, some of which are designed to give farmers the option to take land out of production, which means usually out of irrigated production, in response or in return for some kind of support and many of those were developed, you know, in the aftermath of the Dust Bowl and were designed to, you know, get people to take cropland that was not being productive out of production: replant it to certain kinds of grasses or legumes that would recharge the soil and rebuild nitrogen and then there are some in the most severely impacted areas of irrigation where it's just clearly not sustainable and never has been, like the Sand Hills along the south of Arkansas, where the state has put into programs to encourage people to transition out of irrigated crops and back into a kind of more sustainable cover crop.

But once again, the key thing is that those are just one piece of the puzzle where you have other formations, including crop insurance programs, that are covering in. They fill in the gaps and

they allow depletion to move in a particular kind of a way that doesn't correspond to any singular programmatic aim.

So a farmer can participate in a lot of different programs and make his bottom line through those different programs and it's a really interesting set of contradictory impulses or imperatives that are in place, but I didn't know any of that. You know, I come from a family that's been involved in this kind of stuff for a long time.

And a lot of that was mysterious to me. When I started this I kind of learned by talking to different people what they were thinking about, what particular programs they were in and no single farmer is participating in the same programs. It's all kind of unique and idiosyncratic.

Marshall Poe

So just to dwell a little bit on these are groundwater management boards. How does one get on them and who is in charge of them?

Lucas Bessire

Well, you know, I thought that these were open kinds of elected positions and the way they're set up in Kansas, at least, is there's different country representatives and there's different industrial representatives and then there's kind of a directorate or a leadership group and they have the ability to permit new wells; they have the ability to not permit new wells; they have the ability to sanction people who abuse groundwater or over pump. They have the ability to kind of regulate where people put wells and try to prevent what they call "water chasers," or people who are following the last pockets of groundwater in a particular area. So whoever is on that board has a huge responsibility for depletion and for preventing depletion. Now, what is striking is that in Kansas the way the groundwater management districts were set up is that only people who either own 40 acres of land or control water rights to one acre foot per year are eligible to vote in the elections that appoint the people to those boards, which means that the vast majority of people in the area don't have a say in the electoral or democratic process by which those boards are constituted. At the same time, the vast majority of people in the area are dependent on groundwater for continued jobs, for, you know, the viability of certain communities, for schools, for property taxes, for all of these different things.

And so I was surprised to notice that there's a kind of disconnect between, you know, the majority of people in the area and the people that can vote on water governance and water policy.

Marshall Poe

Hmm. I should pause to say that I bet that many of the listeners to this podcast, though they've never been to western Kansas have seen exactly what we're talking about because if you've flown into, for example, any airport you can over western Kansas and you see the crop circles because they are everywhere.

Lucas Bessire

Yeah, that's right and it's stunning, you know, like when you see it from an aerial perspective. It's like a painting. You can see that almost every acre is somehow covered in either a pivot irrigation circle or a flood irrigation square and you realize the extent of what's happening and, you know, on one hand proponents of irrigation say, "well look, that's great; we produce more

grain. We feed the world. Do you know we produce grain for way out of proportion to the amount of people that are here and we're doing a public good for the world?"

And if you're anti-depletion you fly over it and you see a kind of stunning industrial scale of unsustainable consumption and productivity—that this is actually sustained by groundwater and eventually that's going to run out.

Marshall Poe

I know that in central Kansas there's been some consolidation of farms. And actually I learned the other day that Bill Gates is the largest owner of agricultural land in the United States. Isn't that interesting? I don't know if it's true. I just read it. Has there been that kind of consolidation in western Kansas?

Lucas Bessire

Yeah, absolutely. I mean it, you know, the interesting thing about groundwater use in western Kansas is that it follows some of these well-known and well-documented national trends, but it takes them in its own way or there's a particular twist that's given. So in western Kansas, I presumed and I'd always heard that, you know, the kind of groups of people that were driving this were local farmers like my great-grandfather who may or, you know, were more or less successful in agribusiness. And the successful ones had more land and the less successful ones have less land and it worked like that, but I discovered, to my surprise, that in fact a huge amount of the farmland that's irrigated in western Kansas is owned by people who don't live there, who live somewhere else, or by corporations and, you know, those include the cattle feeder corporations, but they also include mega dairies which are expanding in southwest, Kansas and throughout Kansas and those big multinational, multi-state corporations have all kinds of land holdings that are often hidden from public view because, you know, you have tenants or shareholder farmers who farm at the behest of the corporation and you have a lot of movement of crops and commodities that extend far beyond the reach of any particular local farmer or regional group of farmers.

So I think that, you know, you have a consolidation and you have an industrial form that's bent on extracting groundwater resources while they're available for at, you know, a relatively undervalued cost and then blaming any critiques of that unsustainable pattern as someone who's opposed to local community values, or, you know, "upstanding local citizens" and that's just simply not true.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I'm thinking of Bill Gates as a "steward of the land," but I think actually many of the listeners will recognize this: if you look in your 401k or whatever sort of retirement instrument you have and if you look deep into it you'll find alternative investments. I noticed this in my own retirement account. They're not equities and they're not money, like bonds. It's land and often it's agricultural land. So I think that I probably own some it, am a "steward of the land."

Lucas Bessire

It's time to disinvest.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. Well, you know, I mean it does well, it does get to the point and that this land is a kind of, you know, it's an investment instrument and, you know, it's done to kind of add weight and

stability to, you know, people's stock portfolios, but those people like me are so far from it and all I'm interested in my stock portfolio is what the yield is. I mean, I'm just confessing this. I don't look carefully at it. And so when I see that, you know, in my you know, "suite of investments" that there is agricultural and I don't think a thing about it, but it goes to your point that there are forces far beyond western Kansas that are in control of these things.

Lucas Bessire

Absolutely, and I think that's a really important point because there's, you know, all of these things are hyper-politicized and it's easy in this kind of hyper-politicized world that we occupy and inhabit at this moment to assign blame to a particular group of people who we believe to be homogeneous and then let ourselves off the hook for our own complicity and responsibility or collusion in these kinds of planetary dilemmas.

And that's true in that that's true for people from outside. Like we're talking about where, you know, aquifer depletion ripples out and really casts a stunningly wide net and it demands all of us [to] take a hard look at our relationship to these sorts practices and extractive industries and flows.

It also applies in western Kansas where, you know, it's easy to paint any critical voices as somehow, you know, "not understanding the situation" either. So I think that, you know, one of the things that comes up in my book and through this process of trying to connect across social divides is the fact that there's a kind of radical commonality at stake.

And you know, the question is how we activate that; how we take responsibility for that; how we really acknowledge what that means for our politics and for real people who are often struggling to get by in a situation that's not necessarily of their own making.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, and one of the things you point out in the book, which I think is completely correct and I would just add that it's completely opaque to most of the people who, for example, might own a little chunk of western Kansas. They don't even know they own a little chunk of western Kansas. I mean, they probably don't know what an aquifer is nor do they care.

So yeah, the number of degrees of remove that the owners of these assets are from the assets themselves sort of makes it impossible to be the "shepherd" of anything other than the bottom line.

Lucas Bessire

That's right. And it extends all the way from, you know, the kind of like clear people who are benefiting but also, you know, the people who are writing the algorithms to manage risk; people who are understanding insurance policies; people who are involved in the subsidies programs. There's a lot of different aspects of this that remain invisible in a way. And there's something very peculiar and insidious about the ways in which we are comfortable letting those things remain invisible and breaking it down into a kind of binary or like, you know, dichotomous opposition between groups where we already think we know what they're doing and who's to blame for things and I think that, you know, if we're really trying to make a difference or find a better way to inhabit these kinds of places, a way to return home, a way to reconnect with our family, it starts with opening up those questions and really critically exploring them in all of their complexity and depth.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, so I wanted to talk a little bit about what the people on the ground in western Kansas think about all of this. How do they understand the depletion of the Ogallala?

Lucas Bessire

Well, you know again, I think the question is “who is the ‘they’” and in my book there's a lot of different “theys” and many of them are at odds with one another. So, you know, it's a common misconception that this is a really homogeneous area of people and the people who live in these areas share the same kind of class consciousness or self-interest, or even, you know, ethnic racial gendered sensibilities, and it turns out that that's just not true either.

So you have a large number of people in these industrial centers and like Dodge City, which you mentioned, that's a very complicated ethnic community as is Garden City and liberal where I went to high school. So you have a lot of different groups of people with different sensibilities around the aquifer but, that said, even within irrigation farmers, who are more of a homogeneous group of people, there's no agreement on what depletion means, on how we should address it, and on what the proper responsibility is to future generations or to the land. And so one of the interesting things, you know, the book started, the project started, with my father expressing his concern and I realized that there are groups of people who are irrigation farmers who are just as concerned and who are actively trying to find better ways ahead. Then there's a big group of people who are irrigation farmers who are local. And again, this is a fraction of the landowners because most of the landowners are external but out of those people, I would say the majority don't agree with depletion. They don't want the aquifer to run out. They would prefer to find a better way ahead. But they feel like they have no other choice. They feel like they're trapped in these systems of finance, of debt, of obligation, of different programs. And the only thing that they can do is to keep going because if they stopped it would mean immediate problems for them and their family and then there's a small group of people, and I think they're a minority of people in terms of local landowner and irrigation, first, who have kind of cynically given up and are, you know, actively okay with depleting what's left, getting what they can and moving on.

So those are some of the fault lines around what people in that area think, yeah.

Marshall Poe

I'm glad that you mentioned the diversity of this area because one of the things I'm sure you write about...and this is one of the misconceptions about Kansas and in fact, all Midwestern states is, that they're very homogeneous. I mean, I know from my experience in western Kansas that there are large and very old, I mean many many generations, of Hispanic groups there.

Lucas Bessire

Absolutely, absolutely and, you know, the majority of the you know, recognized population in many of the counties in southwest Kansas, it's 50% or greater self-identified Hispanic of you know, either Mexican-American or Central American or more recent migrants, but it's not, you know, a homogeneously euro-American settler population and even amongst any Hispanic designation there's all kinds of diversity within that and then there's all kinds of other groups of people. There's a lot of resettled refugees in the area who were originally involved with, you know, industrial agribusiness, and then there's a large African American population too in southwest Kansas that people often from outside don't recognize that there's an environmental

justice issue. There's also an environmental racism issue involved in aquifer depletion in southwest Kansas.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. I'm really glad you mentioned this because often astounded...you remember this book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* and I looked at it and I wanted to say "which Kansas?" because the people in Manhattan and Lawrence are not like the people in Liberal, who are really not like the people in Wichita. You only have to travel around Kansas a little bit to understand that there isn't really One Kansas. There are a lot of Kansases.

We've taken up a lot of your time, but I want to ask you, what can be done about stopping or hindering or reducing the depletion of the aquifer now?

Lucas Bessire

It's a good question, Marshall, and I think that you know one of the ways into this is around the existing mechanisms. So one of the most surprising things that I discovered in my, you know, researching and writing this book is that there are concrete mechanisms that are already in place in Kansas to intervene and prevent extreme depletion in these kinds of situations, but they have to be enacted at the state level and that involves a negotiation with the groundwater management districts, so some of those mechanisms could be activated by groups of farmers who wanted to organize themselves, and I discuss some examples where that where people have tried to do that some of those mechanisms can be activated at the state level by state officials. Some of those mechanisms could be activated by the groundwater management districts themselves, but I think that a key thing is raising awareness amongst residents in the area about the way that water governance works, and if you could open up water management decisions to an actual democratic process I think that the people in southwest Kansas are invested in doing the right thing and making tough decisions that would benefit future generations. And I know that that's the kind of value that I was raised in and I know that that's the value that a lot of people out there share. It's just a matter of making sure that people are informed about the situation and letting democracy actually work.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I have to think that one of the basic principles of any public policy is that you can't ask people to do something they can't do and people's livelihoods, families, hundreds and hundreds of them thousands and thousands depend on the system as it exists now and you can't ask them just to stop doing what they're doing because then they wouldn't have livelihoods and I just have to imagine that there's, you know, I'm not a huge fan of state level or federal level intervention, but it seems like this is a place where it's kind of called for.

Lucas Bessire

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think people, you know, in general and like you I agree with this, nobody wants government or regulation for its own sake. People only want government regulation that works and that's sensitive to their actual realities and, you know, allows people a space for dignity and self-determination and in the case of southwest Kansas, I think that that is a possibility, you know, it's a matter of having hard conversations and bringing together groups of people that share certain investments in the future.

So I think that, you know, it's not just telling people to stop doing what they're doing. It's giving people a way to do what they're doing and what they want to do that actually gets from Point A

the Present to Point B the Future, in a sustainable and inclusive kind of a manner and the good news is that that's possible out there. We have those options. We have those mechanisms and I think that the people of southwest Kansas, if they're given all of the correct information, would make the right decisions.

Marshall Poe

I think you're right. I mean the people that I know in Kansas, and these are my people, they do want to do the right thing and there's sensible folks. I hope what you said is true. Let me ask this, have your family members read your book and what did they think?

Lucas Bessire

Yeah, I mean, they have. My father is a central character in the book and one of the things about the process is that writing the book and thinking about these issues really helped us rebuild a connection and recharge some kinds of trusts and commonality between us that was really more than I could have hoped for when I began the process and he was a partner in this from the beginning to the end and without him nobody would have talked to me about a lot of these things. And so I owe a great debt to him for the book and he read it, and it allowed us to have conversations about things and, you know, he was very supportive of it. So you know, I hope that other people out there, some farmers, have read it and given me feedback. I hope you know it was extremely helpful and useful and I hope other peoples read it and I hope it starts a conversation.

Marshall Poe

I hope it does as well. I think that that Princeton University Press should produce a hundred thousand copies and distribute them in western Kansas just to start this conversation.

Lucas Bessire

Thank you, Marshall. I appreciate it. And I appreciate the chance to get the conversation started on your podcast.

Marshall Poe

Absolutely. Great! Well, let me tell everybody that we've been talking to Lucas Bessire today about his book *RUNNING OUT: In Search of Water on the High Plains*. I highly recommend that you read this book. It's a great read comes from Lucas's personal experiences and in many moments it's informative and, as he says, kind of touching because he's writing about his own family members. So Lucas, let me thank you for being on the podcast.

Lucas Bessire

Thank you so much. It's my pleasure.