



Introduction.—This report was prepared to describe the ground-water conditions in Polk County in central Nebraska and to indicate some of the effects of withdrawals of ground water for irrigation. The study is part of a long-term cooperative program of ground-water investigations begun in 1930 by the U. S. Geological Survey and the Conservation and Survey Division of the University of Nebraska.

Polk County, an area of 430 square miles, is situated in the east-central part of Nebraska. (See index map.) Topographically, Polk County comprises two distinct areas. The southern two-thirds of the county is an eastward-sloping, smoothly rolling upland plain. Although the Big Blue River and several of its tributaries have incised valleys below this surface to a depth of as much as 75 feet, about 125 of the upland plain drains to depressions having no outlet to a stream. The northern third of the county is mostly a third to 150 feet lower than the upland plain and consists of the present flood plain on the western side of the Platte River. Remnants of earlier flood plains at higher levels, and the step slope rising to the north border of the upland plain; this lowland widens from less than 1 mile at the Hamilton County line to about 6 miles at the Butler County line. As several streams tributary to the Platte River have outcrops into the north border of the upland plain and thus drain small parts of that surface, the topographic divide separating the Big Blue and Platte drainage basins lies south—from a fraction of a mile to as much as 4 miles—of the north border of the upland plain. The average eastward slope of the upland plain is about 5.2 feet per mile and the average northward slope of the Platte River flood plain is about 0.4 feet per mile. The altitude of the highest point on the upland (S2E sec. 31, T. 14 N., R. 4 W.) is about 1,781 feet and of the lowest point on the Platte River flood plain about 1,444 feet; thus the maximum topographic relief within the county is 337 feet.

The economy of the county is based almost wholly on agriculture. Crops—principally sorghum, corn, and wheat—are grown on 70 percent of the area and much of the remainder is used as pasture. About 3,000 acres of the more steeply sloping land has been terraced to retard runoff and to increase its capacity for crop production. In 1967, about 65,000 acres, or 34 percent of the land in crops, was irrigated with water pumped from 883 wells. As much of the land that is dry farmed or used for pasture is classed as irrigable, the number of irrigation wells is likely to increase. Water for all purposes is derived from ground water, but except for irrigation water, which is pumped out onto the Platte River lowland before it comes to rest. Soils on such colluvial-alluvial deposits tend to be less leamy and to be less retentive of moisture than the upland soils, but they receive water that runs off the slopes, much of which soaks into these deposits. Un-saturated infiltration to ground-water storage is somewhat greater here than on the upland.

Other soils in the Platte River lowland have developed mostly on alluvial deposits but locally have developed on loess. These generally sandy soils are widely variable in loaminess. As the less leamy have little capacity to retain water, a comparatively high fraction of precipitation infiltrates to ground-water storage in these soils, whereas in the more leamy permit faster infiltration of precipitation than do the silty loams. On the average, the fraction of annual precipitation added to ground-water storage probably is 5 to 15 times greater in the Platte River lowland than on the upland plain.

Geologic conditions.—The available ground water in Polk County is stored in Pleistocene deposits that range in thickness from about 35 to a little more than 400 feet and rest on bedrock of Cretaceous age. The general configuration of the bedrock surface on which the water-bearing deposits rest is known from logs of 31 test holes drilled along four north-south lines, from logs of 10 irrigation wells and 2 test holes for irrigation wells, and from observations at 2 gravel pits. As shown by the contour lines on the bedrock geologic map, the bedrock surface is characterized by eastward-trending valleys and ridges. The altitude of the highest known point on that surface is 1,547 feet (sec. 19, T. 14 N., R. 4 W.) and of the lowest point 1,249 feet (sec. 24, T. 14 N., R. 4 W.). A north-south relief of about 200 feet is indicated by the difference between the lowest and highest bedrock altitudes along the lines of test holes passing near the center of the county.

Two formations—the Carlisle Shale and the Niobrara—are truncated by the erosional surface of the Pleistocene deposits. The Niobrara is a sandstone and shale, and the Carlisle Shale is a sandstone and shale. The Pleistocene deposits consist principally of ancient interbedded stream alluvium, detrital deposits, and lakebed deposits under the entire county. Glacial till underlies an area of about 35 square miles near the center of the county, whereas wind-deposited silt, which generally is above the zone of saturation, underlies the entire upland plain but is not present beneath the Platte River lowland.

Derived mostly from sources to the west, the alluvium comprises deposits laid down during the Pleistocene and early morning temperatures in winter are below freezing on an average of 145 days. At times, hot winds are very damaging to crops. Similarly, extremely low temperatures coupled with high winds can ruin winter wheat not protected by a snow cover.

Growing seasons range in length from about 135 to 185 days and average about 160 days. Occasionally, late spring conditions necessitate a delay in planting or the first freeze in the fall is unusually early, the season is too short for maturing of corn and sorghum.

How large a part of the precipitation is returned to the atmosphere through direct evaporation and through transpiration of vegetation, how large a part is added to ground-water storage, and how large a part runs off to streams is determined by a variety of climatic factors, by topography, and by man's attempts to promote infiltration and retard runoff. As none of these factors are measured directly, they can only be estimated.

During a year of near-normal precipitation, the volume of precipitation on the county is about 560,000 acre-feet. Of this amount about 375,000 acre-feet falls on the upland plain and about 185,000 falls on the Platte River lowland. The part returned to the atmosphere from the upland plain is estimated at 135,000 acre-feet (34 percent), the part added to ground-water storage at 45,000 acre-feet (12 percent), and the part running off in streams leaving the county at 15,000 acre-feet (4 percent). Disposal of precipitation on the Platte River lowland differs markedly. There, although possibly as much as 40,000 acre-feet (22 percent) may infiltrate to ground-water storage, the quantity returning to the atmosphere probably is nearly as great or possibly even greater than the quantity of precipitation on the lowland area. The seeming discrepancy is explained by the following: overland runoff to Clear Creek and the Platte River is almost negligible in an average year; water returning to the atmosphere is derived in large part from ground-water storage; the source of some of the ground water stored beneath the Platte River lowland is underflow from beneath the upland plain, and virtually all water leaving the area as streamflow is derived from ground-water storage.

During years of less-than-normal precipitation the amounts infiltrating to ground-water storage or leaving as streamflow generally would be less and, conversely, during years of more-than-normal precipitation the amounts generally would be greater than those indicated. However, various combinations of weather and soil conditions can affect the disposition of precipitation from individual storms so markedly that the proportionate parts annually returning to the atmosphere, infiltrating to ground-water storage, or running off in streams cannot be defined in other than general terms.

Soil infiltration characteristics.—The parent materials on which the soils of Polk County have developed are loess (wind-deposited silt), colluvium (slope-wash deposits), alluvium (stream deposits), and dune sand. The loess-derived soils are the most extensive, occurring in the extent with the upland plain; the other soil types are limited to the deeper valleys incised into the upland plain and to the Platte River lowland. Because the upland is the oldest surface extant in the county, its soils have had a longer time to develop. Infiltrating precipitation has removed much of the clay fraction from the upper soil and concentrated it in the subsoil to the extent of forming a hardpan; it also has leached calcium carbonate from the upper soil and concentrated it in the more compact subsoil. Decomposition of prairie vegetation has added organic matter to the top 6 to 14 inches, changing the original light-brown to yellowish-brown loess to a dark brown or dark brown gray. Classified as silt loam,

the loess-derived soil ordinarily absorbs water readily. However, most of the absorbed water is retained by soil and is returned to the atmosphere by evapotranspiration processes. Only when the retentive capacity of the soil is exceeded is precipitation likely to penetrate to depths where it will escape return to the atmosphere and thus eventually be added to ground-water storage.

Where the loessial soil has never been plowed it has a columnar structure, and, on drying, the soil columns shrink and pull apart. The spaces between columns greatly increase the ease of penetration by water, remaining open until the soil columns become thoroughly moistened and swell to their original size. Now that most of the soil is under cultivation, a greater part of the precipitation probably is held in the soil zone and a smaller part reaches the zone of saturation than would occur if the columnar structure of the loess was destroyed.

Depressions on the upland surface are sites for accumulation of runoff from the surrounding slopes and must contain water for a time after heavy precipitation. The soil in such depressions generally is higher in organic matter and highly calcareous, and the subsoil generally is very compact. As the very compact subsoil beneath the depressions is virtually impervious to penetration of the north border of the upland plain and thus drain small parts of that surface, the topographic divide separating the Big Blue and Platte drainage basins lies south—from a fraction of a mile to as much as 4 miles—of the north border of the upland plain. The average eastward slope of the upland plain is about 5.2 feet per mile and the average northward slope of the Platte River flood plain is about 0.4 feet per mile. The altitude of the highest point on the upland (S2E sec. 31, T. 14 N., R. 4 W.) is about 1,781 feet and of the lowest point on the Platte River flood plain about 1,444 feet; thus the maximum topographic relief within the county is 337 feet.

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contour lines—the following can be inferred from the map: ground-water movement is generally eastward in the southern half of the county and northeastward in the northern half; ground water enters the county by underflow from Hamilton County on the west and northwestern York County on the south and leaves the county by underflow into Butler County on the east and northeastern York County on the south; some of the ground water beneath the Platte River lowland is derived by underflow from beneath the upland plain; the only discharge of ground water into a stream channel occurs near the confluence of Clear Creek with the south channel of the Platte River in the northeastern corner of the county. As the average natural rate of ground-water movement under the conditions existing in Polk County is only a few feet per day at best, the minimum time required for a molecule of water to travel the full width of the county is more than a century. The confined water moves even more slowly.

Pumping from irrigation wells that tap the confined water results in high initial and widespread reduction in artesian pressure. Thus simultaneous pumping from several wells in the same general area results in mutual interference and a greater withdrawal of water than would occur if the water were under water-table conditions. However, with cessation of pumping at the end of the irrigation season, water levels recover much more rapidly than they would if the water were unconfined.

The effect of pumping water that is under artesian pressure is illustrated by the hydrograph for a water-table observation well at Osceola. Although this observation well is more than a quarter of a mile from the nearest pumping for irrigation, the water level declines markedly in response to well pumping and recovers promptly when pumping stops. Such effects have caused considerable consternation to some irrigators because the water level declines and water levels in some artesian wells are dormant yield less during the irrigation season when irrigation pumps are in use. A partial remedy to this problem would be to schedule pumping so that wells less than 1,000 feet apart would not be pumped at the same time. Wells tapping unconfined water generally are not mutually interfering if more than 600 feet apart, as is now required by State law.

Because the water table is not parallel to the land surface, the depth to water ranges considerably from place to place in the county. Depths to water are least in the Platte River lowlands, ranging from less than 5 feet near the river to as much as 60 feet at the base of the slope between the lowland and upland. On the upland the depth to water generally ranges from 75 to 115 feet and is less than 60 feet where the upland is incised deep into the upland by less than 1,000 feet apart would not be pumped at the same time. Wells tapping unconfined water generally are not mutually interfering if more than 600 feet apart, as is now required by State law.

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Chemical character of the ground water.—Water in the Quaternary deposits is of the calcium bicarbonate type (see water-quality map). It is suitable for irrigation and other industrial uses and for use by humans and livestock. Analytical results for samples from 7 irrigation and 2 public-supply wells are given in the accompanying water-quality map. Criteria used in evaluating water for irrigation include salinity hazard, sodium hazard, residual sodium carbonate, and boron hazard. If moderate leaching occurs, there is no salinity hazard if the specific conductance of the water is less than 750 micromhos per centimeter. Conductance ranged from 379 to 723 micromhos in 9 samples analyzed. The sodium-adsorption-ratio (SAR), an index that expresses the relation of the concentration of sodium to the concentration of calcium and magnesium, is a measure of the soil's water-level drawdowns is less than 15 feet in wells yielding 1,000 gpm and in about 23 percent it is more than 15 but less than 40 feet. The largest yield recorded by the Weakly (Smith and Weakly, 1968) when inventories in the county the water-level drawdowns is less than 15 feet in wells yielding 1,000 gpm and in about 23 percent it is more than 15 but less than 40 feet. The largest yield recorded by the Weakly (Smith and Weakly, 1968) when inventories in the county the water-level drawdowns is less than 15 feet in wells yielding 1,000 gpm and in about 23 percent it is more than 15 but less than 40 feet.

Hardness of water is caused principally by calcium and magnesium which contribute to scale formation in boilers and pipes and combine with soap to produce an insoluble curd. No limits for hardness have been established, but according to generally accepted standards 8 of the 9 samples would be described as very hard (>200 mg/l hardness) and 1 as hard (121-200 mg/l hardness).

Evaluation of the ground-water resource.—An estimated 5.5 million acre-feet of water is stored in the Quaternary deposits underlying Polk County. The immensity of the supply is appreciated better if it is compared to the estimated current average withdrawal rate of 52,000 acre-feet per year, or about 1/100 of the water supply. According to estimates by K. E. Logan for the years 1962-66 (State-Federal Division of Agricultural Statistics, 1964-68), water pumped from 883 wells for irrigation in Polk County during that period returned from all crops in the county an average \$2,550,000 per year, or nearly 340¢ per acre of irrigated land.

Recent studies by the Conservation and Survey Division and the Agricultural Extension Service of the University of Nebraska have shown that the estimated pumping ground water for irrigation on the upland part of Seward County, Nebr., where hydrologic conditions are similar to those in Polk County, cost about \$20 per acre-foot (J. M. Jess, oral communication, March 1969). Costs of pumping for even present transmission of water.

The glacial till underlying the central part of the county consists of scattered pebbles in a matrix of rock flour. Where penetrated in test drilling its maximum thickness is about 35 feet. It is both underlain and overlain by coarse-grained water-bearing material and is a barrier to vertical movement of the water.

The wind-deposited silt (loess) that overlies the other types of Quaternary deposits throughout the upland plain is 35 to 80 feet thick, and all water added to ground-water storage beneath the upland must filter through it. Some of the silt has washed down into and has been redeposited as alluvium in the valleys that are incised into the upland; some also has washed or slumped down onto the Platte River lowland where it now constitutes a band of alluvial and colluvial deposits along the lowland margin.

Availability and use of the ground water.—An estimated 5.5 million acre-feet of fresh water is stored in deposits underlying Polk County. This value was derived by determining, from the geologic sections, the average thickness of saturated material, multiplying that value by the area of the county, and dividing the result by 5 on the assumption that 1 cubic foot of saturated material contains 0.2 cubic foot of water. Under the natural conditions that prevailed before large withdrawals for irrigation began, the quantity stored remained almost constant because the long-term natural additions to the supply were balanced by the long-term natural losses. Now, however, the quantity in storage is decreasing slowly because the natural additions plus infiltration of applied irrigation water are exceeded by the natural losses plus withdrawals for irrigation.

Part of the ground water in the Quaternary deposits occurs under water-table conditions and part under artesian conditions. Both conditions exist beneath most of the upland. The artesian conditions exist because the water in the valleys that are incised into the upland and in the stream sediments. The water in the upper zones is under water-table conditions and, so far as could be determined, ground-water beneath the Platte River lowland is mostly under water-table conditions.

Withdrawals for irrigation and public supply are slowly diminishing the quantity of water in storage beneath the upland area but are having virtually no effect on storage beneath the Platte River lowland. As shown by the hydrographs for 10 observation wells, the water level in each of the 7 located in the upland plain is lower in 1968 than at the beginning of the record; the maximum decline shown by the hydrographs for upland wells is 12 feet in 20 years. No significant water-level trends are indicated by the lowland wells.

The progressive decline of water levels beneath the upland area shows that withdrawals are not balanced by either an increase in the rate of additions to storage or a decrease in the rate of natural discharge from storage. Thus, the quantity of water in storage there is slowly being depleted. Large-scale pumping on the upland will become impossible first where the coarse-grained water-bearing sediments are the thinnest; that is, generally speaking, where the bedrock surface is highest. Currently, withdrawals in the Platte River lowland area are being balanced at least partly by an increase in natural losses due to evapotranspiration. Moreover, the water level declines and water levels in some artesian wells are dormant yield less during the irrigation season when irrigation pumps are in use. A partial remedy to this problem would be to schedule pumping so that wells less than 1,000 feet apart would not be pumped at the same time. Wells tapping unconfined water generally are not mutually interfering if more than 600 feet apart, as is now required by State law.

Because the water table is not parallel to the land surface, the depth to water ranges considerably from place to place in the county. Depths to water are least in the Platte River lowlands, ranging from less than 5 feet near the river to as much as 60 feet at the base of the slope between the lowland and upland. On the upland the depth to water generally ranges from 75 to 115 feet and is less than 60 feet where the upland is incised deep into the upland by less than 1,000 feet apart would not be pumped at the same time. Wells tapping unconfined water generally are not mutually interfering if more than 600 feet apart, as is now required by State law.

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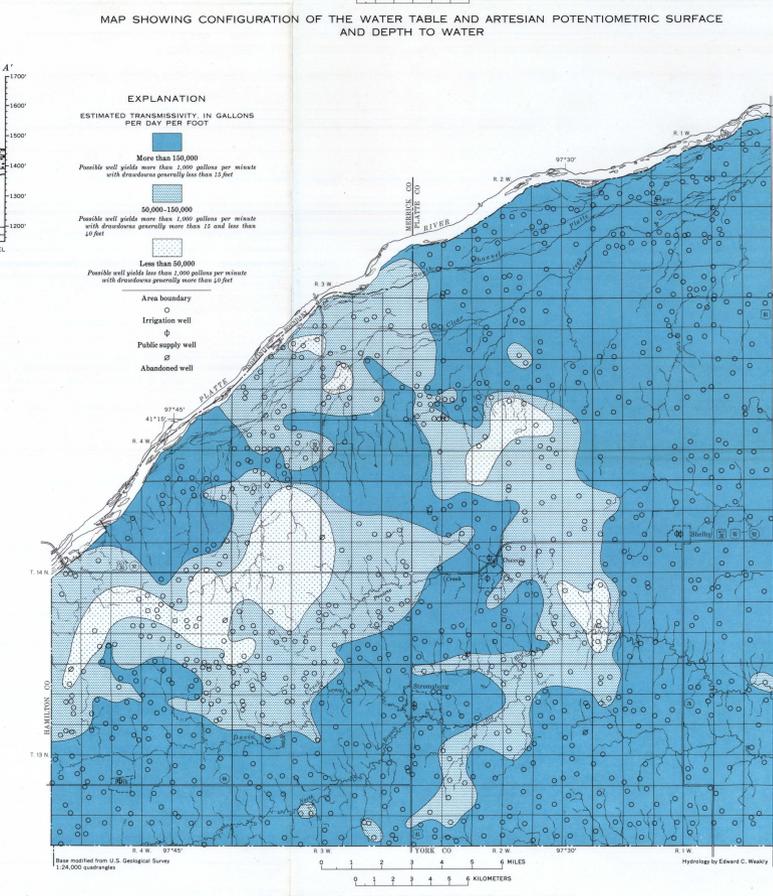
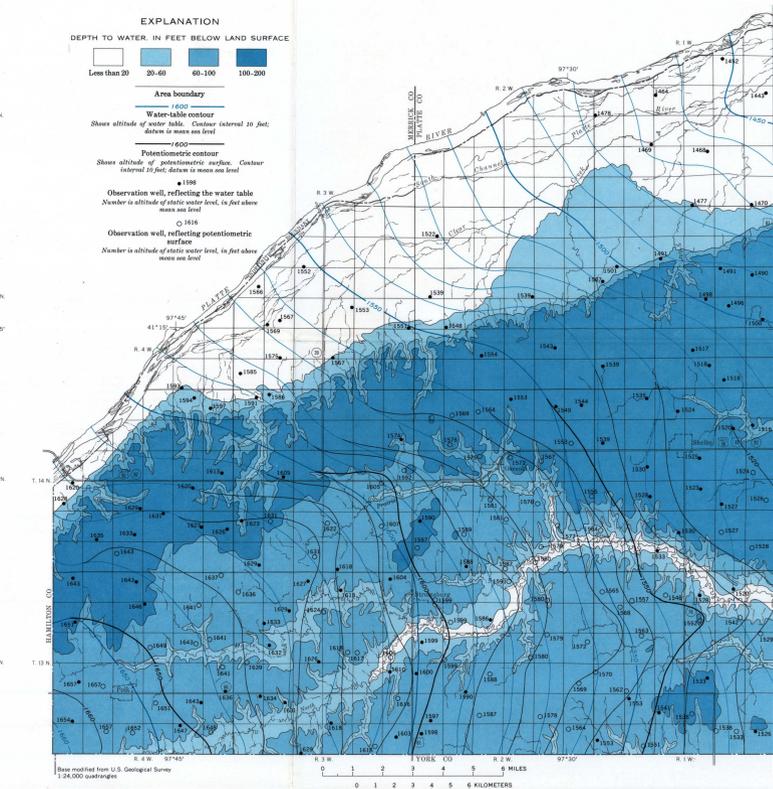
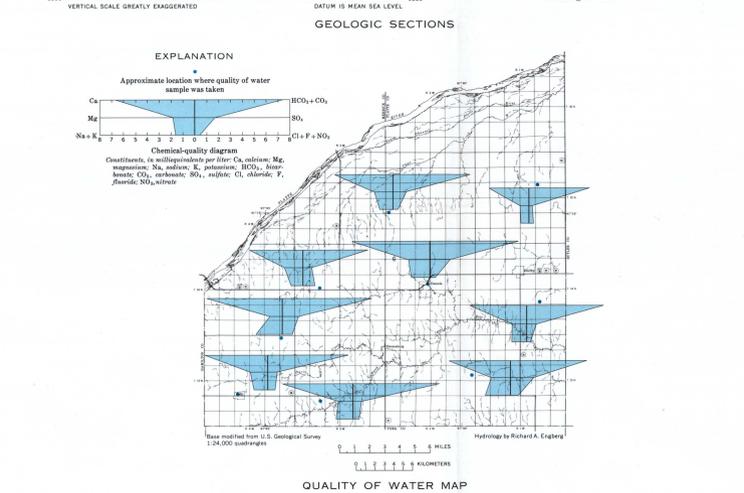
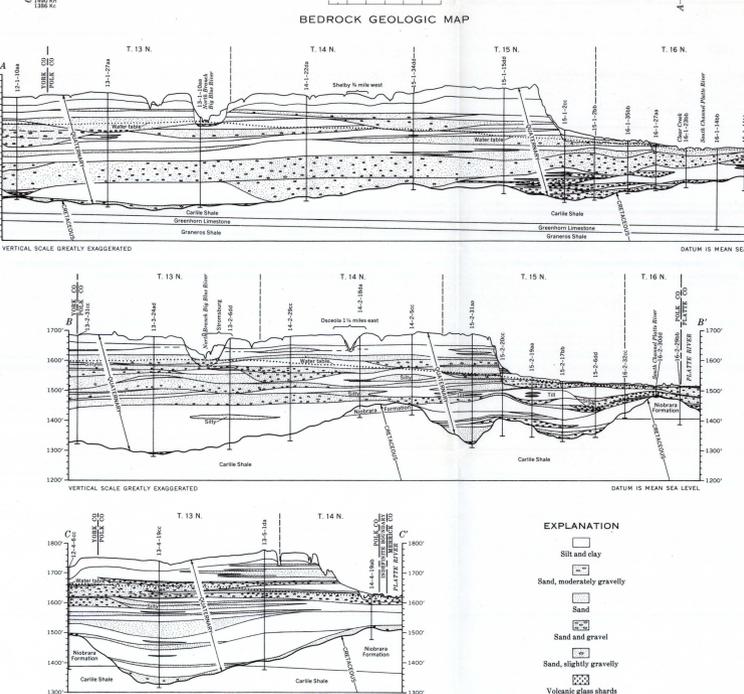
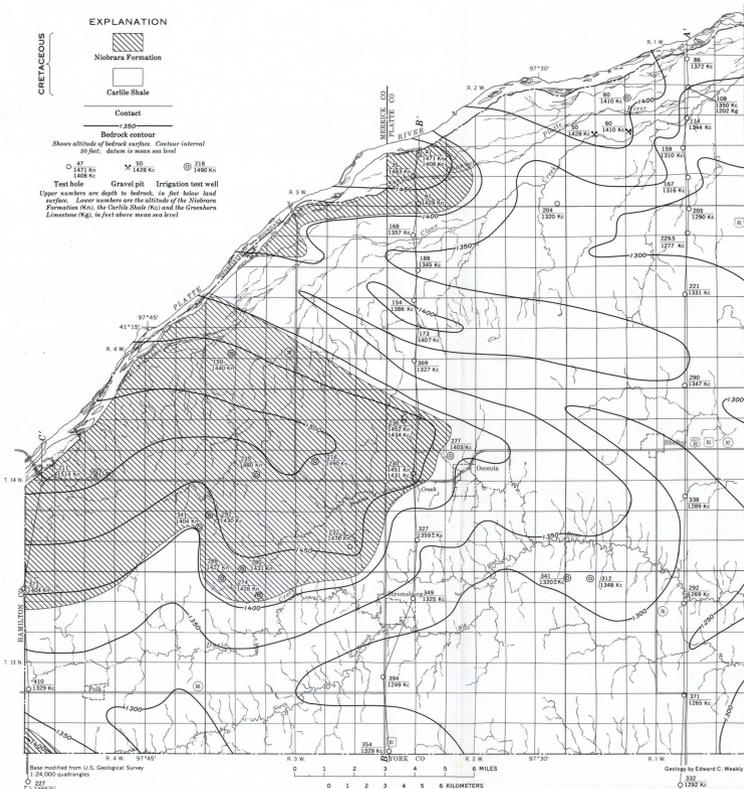
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Availability and use of the ground water.—An estimated 5.5 million acre-feet of fresh water is stored in deposits underlying Polk County. This value was derived by determining, from the geologic sections, the average thickness of saturated material, multiplying that value by the area of the county, and dividing the result by 5 on the assumption that 1 cubic foot of saturated material contains 0.2 cubic foot of water. Under the natural conditions that prevailed before large withdrawals for irrigation began, the quantity stored remained almost constant because the long-term natural additions to the supply were balanced by the long-term natural losses. Now, however, the quantity in storage is decreasing slowly because the natural additions plus infiltration of applied irrigation water are exceeded by the natural losses plus withdrawals for irrigation.

Part of the ground water in the Quaternary deposits occurs under water-table conditions and part under artesian conditions. Both conditions exist beneath most of the upland. The artesian conditions exist because the water in the valleys that are incised into the upland and in the stream sediments. The water in the upper zones is under water-table conditions and, so far as could be determined, ground-water beneath the Platte River lowland is mostly under water-table conditions.



Chemical analyses of ground water in Polk County, Nebraska (Results in milligrams per liter except as indicated. Use of water: I, irrigation; P, public supply)

Well location	Use of water	Date of collection	Silica (SiO ₂) (mg/l)	Iron (mg/l)	Manganese (Mn) (mg/l)	Calcium (Ca) (mg/l)	Magnesium (Mg) (mg/l)	Potassium (K) (mg/l)	Sodium (Na) (mg/l)	Total dissolved solids (TDS) (mg/l)	Specific conductance (micro-mhos/cm at 25°C)	pH	Temperature (C/F)											
NW1/4SE1/4NE1/4 sec. 13, T. 13 N., R. 2 W.	I	200 8-18-66	38	0.07	0.06	84	15	34	8.8	305	0.74	4.4	0.2	24	0.03	439	271	21	0.00	69	648	7.7	12	53
NE1/4SW1/4NW1/4 sec. 29, T. 13 N., R. 3 W.	I	213 8-18-66	43	0.08	0.11	82	12	23	3.3	344	0.25	5.8	3.1	12	0.02	395	283	0	0.1	604	8.0	13	55	
NW1/4NW1/4NW1/4 sec. 1, T. 13 N., R. 4 W.	I	130 8-18-66	32	0.08	0.03	98	10	37	7.6	365	0.49	7.2	5.7	27	0.04	453	287	0	0.27	1.0	701	7.8	13	55
SW1/4SE1/4SE1/4 sec. 1, T. 13 N., R. 4 W.	I	45 8-18-66	51	0.11	0.04	101	12	24	1.0	372	0.54	3.7	3.0	12	0.04	372	258	0	0.06	6.7	536	8.1	13	55
NE1/4SE1/4SE1/4 sec. 23, T. 14 N., R. 1 W.	I	291 8-18-66	39	0.08	0.09	112	23	51	6.0	2.4	0.2	9.5	0.03	350	0.27	407	333	0	0.02	6	536	7.7	13	55
NE1/4SW1/4 sec. 16, T. 14 N., R. 2 W.	P	190 8-18-66	38	0.03	0.06	107	25	69	3.73	0	67	7.5	1.94	0.04	477	333	27	0.00	6	723	7.2	13	55	
SE1/4SE1/4SE1/4 sec. 14, T. 14 N., R. 3 W.	I	258 8-18-66	34																					