

European explorations and the louisiana purchase

[History](#)



When early governmental explorers surveyed the Louisiana Purchase in the early 1800s, much of the Great Plains region (primarily the area west of the 100th meridian) was labeled “ The Great American Desert.” In 1823, geographer Edwin James wrote of the area: “ I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course, uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence.” Obviously the region was eventually settled and it became one of the most important agricultural areas of the world. How could the early explorers have been so wrong?

First, these early explorations occurred at a time of significant drought. In fact, studies have revealed that the first half of the 19th century was a much drier period than we have seen since. So in reality, the area was very much the dry and parched region it appeared to be. Secondly, these early explorers did not yet know about one of the world’s largest underground reservoirs, the Ogallala Aquifer, and they could not have foreseen the ability of future generations to pump incredible amounts of this ancient water to feed crops and communities.

Nebraska is fortunate to be sitting atop a great reservoir of underground water and also to have many relatively reliable rivers and streams coursing through the state, primarily draining runoff from the Rocky Mountains.

This abundance of water in an otherwise semi-arid part of the world has allowed us to live well beyond our means and far beyond our normal rainfall. Are we pressing our luck? There is no guarantee that this abundance of water will be with us forever. Paleoclimatic research has revealed that multi-

year megadroughts have occurred in our region fairly regularly in the past 2,000 years and they will almost certainly return at some point (see “ Toward Drought-resilient Landscapes” on page 2).

Such droughts would greatly impact future water supplies. We would be wise to acknowledge in this discussion the uncertainty of a changing climate.

Although there is no way to know for sure what a warming climate will mean for our region, most climatologists agree that much of the Great Plains will become hotter and drier. Multi-year droughts will likely have significant impacts on the area, especially the western half of the region. Because of the increased energy in the atmosphere,