

Using a Field Experience to Communicate Natural Resource Issues to Policy Makers: The Kansas Field Conference, Robert S. Sawin, Rex C. Buchanan, and Shane A. Lyle, Kansas Geological Survey, University of Kansas, 1930 Constant Ave., Lawrence, KS 66047, bsawin@kgs.ku.edu

Policy makers are an important, but difficult-to-reach audience for scientific information. As part of its public outreach effort, the Kansas Geological Survey (KGS) initiated the Kansas Field Conference in 1995 to communicate directly with policy makers about natural resource issues in Kansas. The conference targets state legislators, governmental agency officials, business leaders, environmental leaders, and others in positions that make or influence state policy. The primary objective is to present policy makers with balanced, unbiased information about Kansas's natural resources through a field experience that visits sites where natural resources are produced or used, or where there are important environmental issues. Participants gain first-hand knowledge from local operators, regulators, and others who are affected by, or carry out, their decisions.

The conference is 3 days of site visits, presentations, hands-on activities, and panel discussions. Participation is by invitation. Participants pay a small fee, but cosponsors (usually other state agencies) help defray expenses and broaden the conferences' topics. Travel is by chartered bus, and lodging, meals, and a guidebook are provided. Conferences have focused on topics (such as water or energy) or issues specific to various regions of the state.

The field conference has affected policy in many ways. Legislators regularly use conference information and contacts during the law-making process. Conference information played a direct role in decisions related to underground natural-gas storage rules, water-rights buy-back legislation, sand and gravel dredging regulations, and mining-related subsidence legislation. The conference also benefits the KGS and other agencies by raising the KGS's visibility within the legislature and improving relationships with other state agencies.

Geoscientists want to be involved in public policy decisions, but often don't know how to reach policy makers. The Kansas Field Conference is a highly effective way of communicating scientific information about natural resource-related issues to this audience. The concept has been adopted by other state geological surveys and is applicable to other earth-science organizations.