

200 Gather for WEALTH Day at the State Capitol

About 200 people attended the March 16 WEALTH (Water, Energy, Air, Land, Transportation and Health) Day at the State Capitol to hear policy briefings from organizational representatives, comments from State Representatives and Senators, and visit offices of policymakers.

WEALTH Day is the result of state environmental and conservation organizations, businesses and individuals partnering to host an annual day of advocacy and education. Since 2008, several partner organizations led the Kansans for Clean Energy Day at the State Capitol. Now it has morphed into an even more diverse group of organizations and businesses who come together to support an array of water, energy and food and agriculture issues in WEALTH Day.

Over 100 crammed into the Capitol Building's small auditorium room for the policy briefings to listen to KRC's Paul Johnson talk about the overall state revenue picture, which looms over all other policy work. He predicted that it will be late May or June before the dust settles. The big question is what does not get funded under this current budget and income crisis? Most likely it will be water, air and environmental protections, and social net programs such as health care for the most vulnerable of the state's population.

Zack Pistora, Sierra Club, talked about the efforts to get \$8 million/year in funds dedicated to the State Water Plan back into the water plan budget after being siphoned off for several years. The State as well as hundreds of citizens have put considerable time and effort as part of the state's Water Vision process into identifying projects and solutions to the state's groundwater depletion, reservoir sedimentation and water quality problems only to be frustrated at the lack of state funding and commitment.

Climate and Energy Project's Dorothy Barnett explained how Kansas ranks 48th in terms of energy efficiency, but the dockets now before the Kansas Corporation Commission on the Westar/KCP&L merger and energy efficiency might be able to change that. Missouri has a good energy efficiency program and they want to bring those programs to the Kansas side of the KCP&L. A third KCC docket is distribution generation addressing how distribution of solar and wind energy can be designed.

Kansas Interfaith Action's Moti Reiber called for a stronger state climate plan in the absence of federal attention. He also addressed the connections of environmental protection to health issues, calling for support of Medicaid expansion in Kansas. One in three rural hospitals is facing financial distress largely due to loss of Medicaid dollars. Richard Mabion of the Kansas City NAACP spoke on the needs to educate the low-income community on energy efficiency to maintain community security needs.

KRC's Paul Johnson also talked about local food issues and the need for a permanent food policy council and coordinator at the state level and the need to focus on production and financing needs of growers. The federal farm bill also underlies food and farm policy; 75% of the total farm bill budget goes to the nutrition programs, yet 25% of the subsidies for production go to just five commodity crops (wheat, corn, soybeans, sugar and rice) with little to nothing to fruits and vegetables and the actual USDA food plate. Johnson urged participants to follow the farm bill debates over the next year or two to find ways to support nutrition programs and more production from farmers adopting more sustainable and diverse production practices.

About a dozen State legislators spoke to the group on water, land, air, energy and health topics before the participants fanned out to visit individual legislator offices.

WEALTH Day partners who organized the event are: Climate+ Energy Project, Kansas Rural Center, Kansas Interfaith Action, Kansas Natural Resource Council, KC Chapter of the NAACP, Diesel Health Project, and Grassland Heritage Foundation.

WEALTH Day sponsors included: Kansas Sierra Club, Friends of the Kaw, True Blue Women, Lawrence Ecology Teams United in Sustainability, Kansas Alliance Wetlands and Streams, Sustainable Sanctuaries Coalition, League of Women Voters of Kansas, King Solar, Community Health Council of Wyandotte County, Citizens' Climate Lobby, Audubon of Kansas, Shawnee County Democrats, Oak Grove Fabrication, JCCC Campus Farm and Sustainable Ag Program, Good Energy Solutions, Kansas Green Party, and Cromwell Solar.