

Kansas Rural Center 2020 Town Hall
Climate and Energy
By Rick McNary

The Kansas Rural Center, in their ongoing quest to strengthen rural life, hosted four Town Hall meetings to listen to the voices of those who practically live out the joys and struggles of Kansas communities. The third in their series focused on climate and energy by bringing a diverse set of panelists to inform on current issues as well as respond to questions.

Town Hall Attendees

How is climate change affecting your life or what you do right now?

Woven throughout the answers was a concern that people don't take the issue seriously, yet an awareness that true change happens if the issue becomes practical rather than theoretical or political. Kansans, by nature, are practical people who want to understand the practical impact so they can come up with practical solutions. While the messaging of climate change has focused on east and west coastal areas, or polar regions, there is a need to make it practical in the everyday life of Kansans. For example, in the increase in the growing season of ragweed, tick and mosquito-borne diseases, extreme weather patterns leading to natural disaster and reservoirs filling up with sediment to the point they need dredged, move the issues from theoretical into practical.

The varied answers fell into these issues, all of which were then addressed by the panelists:

- Soil health
- Changing weather patterns
- Extreme weather
- Public health
- Renewable energy
- Regenerative farming practices

Panelists

Farmer Led Panel

Zack Pastori, an environmental champion, a KRC board member and the Legislative Director for the Kansas Chapter Sierra Club, moderated the panel discussion.

Rachel Myslivy is from rural Perry and is with the Climate and Energy Project, a Kansas based nonprofit organization

Myslivy started her career in food systems and, as a young mother, was concerned about what she was feeding her kids. They have a small family farm so wanted to use that to grow healthy food and as a revenue stream. Over time, she began focusing on clean energy as both a climate solution and a health solution.

Brian Grimmet is a journalist for KMUW, Wichita and has been covering energy and environment energy for three years. The intersection of technology, economics, and agriculture allows him to cover broad topics.

Sister Jane Belanger is from Heartland Farm. The farm is operated by the Dominican Sister of Peace based in Western Kansas, in the SE corner of Rush County, which has a total population of 3,000. Belanger from central Ohio where she had worked on a similar farm. She's been involved in 80-acre Heartland Farm which was begun to create an awareness among ag neighbors about other ways to farm.

Panel Takeaways

What kind of grade do you give Kansas right now on its actions on clean energy and/or environment?

Brian Grimmet - Kansas was quick to jump on the fact has great wind resources and are fourth in the nation with 41% of electricity from wind energy. There is a good relationship with KDA and KDHE helping ag with technology and water to do better and smarter.

National survey by Yale Climate, majority of changes say the climate is changing, the earth is warming, increased research and funding. A lot of people recognize that a lot of the issue is human caused. Still, less than half of Kansans think that global warming with harm me personally even though they think it is happening.

Rachel Mysylivy – She would give Kansas a, “Needs Improvement” grade. She couldn't talk about climate change 20 years ago without derision, but now there is more open-mindedness and curiosity. large part a matter of lack of good communication. For a long time, it was about ice caps and coastal areas, but no one in Kansas made the connection in a practical sense.

They decided to make a connection between climate change and public health, for example, ragweed lasts longer - increased 25 days per year - then there are more ticks than you used to. Now, pet owners have to give flea and tick meds to dog year around. We used to have a handful of tick-borne diseases; in 2004, hardly any, but 250 cases last year. Tick borne diseases are 20 times higher and mosquito borne diseases 35 times higher. If we are going to make people believe it, we have to make it real and practical

Jane Belanger - When the sisters bought the farm, they were some raised eyebrows about doing farming practices differently, but her experience has been there is a sense of solidarity. They raise alpacas, vegetables and other specialty crops in an area known for growing commodities like corn, soy and wheat. While they don't all do it the same way, they deal with the same issues together. They find a connection with local farmers through shared values of taking care of the land and taking care of animals which are the bedrock issues.

Kansas is full of vast tracts of land that used to be prairie and prairie sequesters more carbon than a forest. Therefore, cover-cropping and other practices can be used to find the solution is in the soil and the plants we grow on it.

Summary

As the practical reality of climate and energy issues become reality for people as it's effects are felt close to home rather than somewhere else, Kansans have already begun addressing the systemic changes needed to provide a better future for our grandchildren. Although there is much work left to do, the nature of Kansans to find practical solutions to practical problems in the context of community ensures that the change already taking place will create a better Kansas for our children and their children.

SWOT Analysis: Climate and Energy

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil health – we have increased knowledge of the “incredibly underground livestock system” thanks to science. • Public health – there is more connection between the practical impacts of climate (i.e., ticks/ragweed) • Renewable energy – more support from government to subsidize and make appealing to landowners. • Regenerative farming practices – technology and agricultural equipment make it easier, and more productive, to do regenerative practices • Community engagement – Kansans are known as “fix-it” people and can do it as a community. Farmers banding together out west to save the Ogallala.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil health – traditional farming practices, pest management and fertilizer inputs have damaged the soil. • Extreme weather – Topsoil run off from flooding on one hand, or wind-blown from drought, is irreplaceable. • Public health – The pandemic has placed the majority of emphasis on mitigating the impact of the spread, taking resources away from focus on climate and energy. • Renewable energy – it is still too costly without some type of subsidy. ROI takes too long. • Farming practices are still tradition with soil turnover and frequent discing to mitigate the farmers #1 enemy, pigweed. • Community engagement – Because of gathering restrictions due to the pandemic, communities are not able to gather around meals, projects, sporting events or other ways that brought them together to solve problems. • Communication strategies were focused on theoretical issues in coastal areas or polar caps, as opposed to making it local and practical.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil health – Corporations and agri-related groups are making it financially attractive for farmers to get engaged in focusing on soil health and regenerative farming. For example, General Mills is funding a project with all five counties that drain into the Cheney Lake reservoir system to do regenerative practices. • Carbon capture and storage from ethanol and coal plants and sticking it under ground in rock formations, you can put the carbon dioxide right back in the ground. • Renewable energy – making this appealing and reasonably priced, either through subsidies or new technology that reduces manufacturing costs. • Community engagement – if we can convince communities to focus on solutions on the local level, as they are able to adjust to meeting online or hybrid events, they will be able to develop solutions. • Seeing the rapid transition of social behavior because of Covid-19; if we can do that so quickly, we can make it more climate friendly.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By and large, KS grows commodities, but Covid-19 woke people up to food and local food is a way to eat when the grocery stores are available. • The things with the grandkids is a big motivator; are they going to have a better future than me?
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil health – agriculture practices have, in some cases, caused almost irreparable damage to the soil. • Extreme weather – all great practices can be wiped and face significant setbacks with a tornado, flood, drought, or hard freeze at the wrong time. In May of 2019, wettest month on record and the impact on communities - 287 national flood 3.78 Million insurance claims, only 10% of homes in the flood plains carry insurance. • Public health – as resources are being focused on the pandemic, overworked and strained agencies and organizations will put less-pressing things on the back burner. • Community engagement – even if society opens back up, there is fear baked into citizens who will be reluctant to meet in person and be unable to because of lack of technological savvy, or even adequate broadband.

Additional Resources

Kansas Rural Center On Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLHfd8ooMjd4vhuDrRT0Lbg>)

KRC Town Hall on Climate and Energy on Youtube. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcahkVE_8BU)

KC Food Hub Video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-cc_qqDcWo)