

KS Rural Center Weighs In On KS Water Plan

Whiting, KS -- Sustainability must be the goal of the 50-Year Vision for Water in Kansas. More of the “development at-all-costs” thinking at the expense of conservation and protection is neither sustainable nor acceptable. This was the message of the nine natural resource and environmental groups who gathered in Topeka to deliver comments to the Kansas Water Office and Kansas Department of Agriculture representatives on the Governor’s 50 Year Water Vision on May 13.

“We have over-appropriated water in the state; we built reservoirs without insisting on or supporting upstream land management so now they are silting in. We are removing wildlife habitat, forests, and grasslands that protect water quality and provide biodiversity, and our children and grandchildren will pay the price,” stated Mary Fund, of the Kansas Rural Center, summarizing the group’s comments. “Addressing the problems we have today require that we take a hard look at the way we use the state’s water, how we live, how we produce food, crops and livestock, and what kind of business and industry we pursue.”

The group warned that making the same mistakes as in the past—promoting growth beyond a practical and reasonable water availability-- will prove very costly for the health and well-being of communities and future generations. Balancing use and conservation is critical in any long term planning.

Kansas has had a State Water Plan since 1985, stated several of the groups, with programs to provide conservation, management and protection. “It works if funded,” stated Jim Hays of the Nature Conservancy, a sentiment echoed by all present.

It has not been funded adequately, the group claims, and has in fact been robbed for other uses in recent years. A wide range of stakeholders worked out a mix of user fees, Economic Development Initiative Funds (EDIF) and state general funds in 1989. Kansas law states that \$6 million from the State General Fund is to be transferred to the State Water Fund each year, as well as \$2 million from EDIF funds, but these funds have been repeatedly diverted to other state purposes. Without dedicated funding, the new plan will go nowhere, claimed the resource and environmental groups.

Primary attention in the Vision planning discussions so far, the group claimed, has been on increasing supply to make up for the declining Ogallala Aquifer, which feeds irrigation in the western part of the state, and solving the problems of sedimentation in the state’s major reservoirs which provide water supply for population centers. Providing water for economic needs is important, but conservation and stewardship of the water resource, as well as of our soil, wildlife and aquatic resources, the groups argued, is critical to our own well-being.

“Water is not just for human use, or just a supply issue,” stated Sharon Ashworth, Kansas Natural Resource Council. “It supports wildlife habitat, aquatic life and our entire ecosystem, and when we protect the ecosystem we protect ourselves.” Ashworth and others pointed to Cheyenne Bottoms, Quivera Wildlife Refuge and other natural wetlands as critical parts of the Central Flyway that are of international importance, and as significant for water quality for healthy populations of aquatic life.

The groups represented included the Kansas Natural Resource Council, Kansas Chapter of the Sierra Club, Audubon of Kansas, Kansas Wildlife Federation, Friends of the KAW, The Nature Conservancy-Kansas Chapter, Climate and Energy Project, Kansas Farmers Union, and the Kansas Rural Center.

In addition to the call for dedicated funding for water programs, the group’s recommendations to the KWO and KDA called on state planners to:

- * Recognize that protection of the natural resource base is as important if not more important than economic growth; long term economic health depends on how well we protect our natural resources.
- * Balance water use with conservation, and approach any interbasin transfers of water with extreme caution.
- * Reduce consumption to sustainable yields across the state.
- * Elevate water quality to be a strong part of the vision not just implied as being part of supply issues.

- * Consider all the evidence of changing climate patterns as part of any 50- year plan.
- * Coordinate with state energy planning to promote less water intensive energy sources. Renewable energy sources like solar and wind use less water than the traditional fossil fuel sources.
- * Increase public education related to water issues to raise awareness and understanding of problems and solutions.

The KWO and KDA are currently writing the first draft of the 50-Year Vision and Plan based on input from stakeholders from around the state. The draft will be distributed to the public in July for another round of input and comments, before being finalized in November. The above environmental and natural resource groups will continue to provide feedback and recommendations.

Many Signals Communications