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WATER RESOURCES

Kansas

On October 23, the University of Kansas (KU) hosted the 2025 Kansas Economic Policy Conference, themed “Ripple Effect: Water and the Kansas Economy.” The conference brought together researchers, farmers, policymakers, and water managers to explore the critical intersection of the state’s economy and water resources. The agenda featured research presentations and panels on urban and rural water systems, legislative approaches, and conservation strategies. One panel consisted of Kansas State legislature and Water Task Force members including: (1) Representative Sandy Pickert, three-year member of the House Water Committee; (2) Representative Linday Vaughn, Ranking Member of the House Water Committee; (3) Senator Kenny Titus, former WSWC member; and (4) Josh Svaty, former state legislator and agriculture secretary. The panel discussed the Water Task Force’s scope and funding, State Water Plan funding challenges, water reuse, water quality, augmentation, regionalization, and reorganization of water management agencies.

Rep. Vaughn discussed efforts to secure funding for the State Water Plan. She explained that in 2021, Governor Laura Kelly (D-KS) fully funded the State Water Plan at its statutory requirement of \$8M for the first time in over a decade. While still below the \$53M estimated need, this momentum led to the passage of HB 2302 (2023), which added \$35M to the fund and created a technical assistance program for public water supply systems. Although earlier attempts to secure sustainable funding via sales tax were unsuccessful, Rep. Vaughn emphasized the importance of keeping the effort moving forward. “We have to be creative about identifying a sustainable source for that funding that isn’t subjective to legislative sweeps.”

The panel discussed the role of water reuse in Kansas, with Rep. Vaughn identifying it as a key solution while noting legislative challenges around regulation, incentives, and funding, including potential state-federal cost sharing and low-interest loans. Sen. Titus emphasized that water reuse strategies must account for regional variability in water quality and local community needs, including available supply and cost considerations. Josh Svaty highlighted the importance of understanding the downstream ecological and community impacts of wastewater streams before making significant investments in reuse.

On the topic of water quality, Rep. Vaughn expressed interest in developing local nitrogen management plans, enabling groundwater districts to assess contamination, develop mitigation strategies, and have support from the legislature for their implementation. Svaty emphasized that failing to adequately fund State Water Plan initiatives can lead to far higher costs in the long run, particularly for water quality issues. Drawing on his EPA experience, he noted that major settlements, including a consent decree costing \$2.5B for Kansas City—largely addressed upstream nitrate pollution, illustrating the value of proactive investment to prevent costly enforcement actions. Svaty emphasized that failing to adequately fund State Water Plan initiatives can lead to far higher litigation costs in the long run, particularly for water quality issues.

The panel highlighted Kansas’ unique positioning for water management, including abundant data due to early metering requirements that helped avoid private property disputes. Sen. Titus noted that Kansas integrated groundwater and surface water management early, relative to other States. He also cited the absence of litigation history on issues like water reuse and return flows, providing Kansas with flexibility to innovate through programs such as Local Enhanced Management Areas (LEMAs) and Intensive Groundwater Use Control Areas (IGUCAs).

Although some panelists expressed interest in learning from other States’ agency restructuring, most felt the notion was premature. A similar sentiment emerged toward regionalization. Svaty argued that regionalization tends to occur naturally when local pressures make it necessary. He held that the task force’s role is exploring how to assist those entities. Rep. Vaughn noted that past reorganization efforts, such as HB 2686 (2022), faced strong opposition to moving their water quality regulation department out of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment because it operates under EPA standards and funding. She said future talks could consider consolidating the Water Office, Division of Conservation, and Division of Water Resources under a secretary-level agency, while keeping the Division of Environment separate. See <https://ipsr.ku.edu/2025-kepc>.