

OKA' THE WATER INSTITUTE

Event explores water's value

At the recent 2019 Oka' Water Sustainability Conference here on the campus of East Central University, the economic value of water bubbled to the surface.

Water is an economic driver for the state of Oklahoma, said Susan Paddack, executive director Oka', the Water Institute at East Center University, which presented the fourth annual Sustainability Conference.

"We talk about quality and we talk about the quantity, but we don't often talk about the value of water," Paddack said. "When you think about water, it is either an economic stimulator or it is a limiter. We cannot grow or prosper as a state or rural communities and water districts if we don't have a sustainable water future."

Oka' is the Chickasaw word for water, and the Oka' Institute was created in 2016 with support from the Chickasaw Nation, the Ada Jobs Foundation and the city of Ada.

The conference focused on innovators and technologies that are creating new ways to remediate and recycle polluted water, the importance of soil health and ways to protect key water resources such as the Arbuckle-Simpson aquifer and Blue River.

But this year's conference also tackled the issue of water as an economic driver with a panel discussion that featured a trio of state legislative, environmental and economic development leaders who brought their perspectives to the topic.

Katricia Pierson, Ph.D., East Central University president, moderated the panel, which featured Ken Wagner, state environment secretary; Speaker of the House Charles McCall; and Brent Kisling, executive director of the Oklahoma Department of Commerce.

"If you don't recognize water as the most valuable resources we have in this state, you need to reconsider your position," McCall told the audience. "Water will always be an economic driver in the sate of Oklahoma. We have been very blessed with it and we have to be very careful not to squander it."

Kisling hails from the northwest Oklahoma community of Burlington, an area of the state where the scarcity of rainfall makes water conservation a critical ongoing issue. As the former economic development director of the city of Enid, he organized a consortium of neighboring communities to tackle water issues through a coordinated water plan.

"We have to all work together, especially in a watershed, to make sure we are maintaining our water resources on the quantity side and on the quality side," Kisling said. "Now there is a consortium of major water users that communicate each month about what's going on with water in the northwest part of the state."

Wagner plays a key role in setting policy that ensures the protection of water resources throughout the state, while meeting the water consumption needs of people and businesses alike.



“We have to balance, how do we protect the resource but help these communities sustain their way of life, from creating jobs to ensuring the recreational capacity, making sure that fish and wildlife can thrive, protecting our scenic rivers, protecting our aquifers,” Wagner said, “knowing all the while that we all need water to sustain life.”

The conference was highlighted by a keynote speech by Bill Anoatubby, governor of the Chickasaw Nation, who described the Oka’ Institute as “real positive development” to water sustainability in the south central Oklahoma region.

“The Oka’ Institute has a deep understanding that water issues affect us all and that it will take us all working together to develop viable, long-term solutions to water sustainability,” Anoatubby said. “Health and sustainability of our water is vital to everyone’s future and reasons to work together for the benefit of all.”

[See the story in the 10-23-19 Oklahoman](#)

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