

Rex Buchanan Receives Public Service Award

LAWRENCE, KS — Rex Buchanan, outgoing interim director of the Kansas Geological Survey at the University of Kansas, was honored by one of the world's largest geological organizations for his decades of accomplishments as a leader and communicator on issues related to geology and the earth's natural resources.

The Geological Society of America, with about 25,000 members in 103 countries, presents its Public Service Award annually to a member who has significantly enhanced the public's understanding of the earth sciences or had a major role in communicating scientific information to policymakers. Buchanan, who retired in September after 38 years at the KGS, has spent years doing both. "Rex has helped build the KGS's reputation among Kansas policy leaders from all levels —local, legislative, and the executive branch — and has created a bridge between our elected leaders and the earth sciences," said Dave Heinemann, former Kansas House speaker pro tem and past KGS advisory council chair. "The KGS is viewed as a trusted, non-biased source of critical information on the state's water, oil and gas, and our other natural resources."

As KGS interim director from February 2010 through September 2016, Buchanan regularly interacted with state legislators and other policymakers to clarify complex scientific research and provide analysis on politically sensitive issues affecting public policy. He also helped lead a multiday annual field conference that got Kansas legislators and other policymakers out of their offices to explore firsthand the state's natural resources and related industries.

The uptick in earthquakes in south-central Kansas, starting in 2014, and the continuing decades of decline of vital groundwater resources in western Kansas are two of the most pressing and politically charged issues the KGS dealt with during Buchanan's tenure. In 2014, Buchanan was appointed to the three-member Governor's Task Force on Induced Seismicity (earthquakes caused by human activities) to come up with a plan to investigate the cause and remediation of the state's increased earthquake activity. As part of the plan, the KGS installed a network of seismic monitoring stations. Scientists eventually tied the increase in earthquakes with the deep-underground disposal of wastewater produced with oil and gas during hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. The KGS continues to monitor the situation.

"Rex's national and statewide leadership on addressing the issue of induced seismicity is a model for all scientists as engaged citizens," said Greg Ludvigson, KGS geologist and section chief of stratigraphic research.

Buchanan also has been instrumental in presenting and explaining KGS research and data on the declining health of the massive Ogallala aquifer, and smaller local aquifers, to policymakers and water users. Those groundwater resources, at risk of depletion in some areas, provide the bulk of the water supply for irrigators, municipalities and industries in the western half of the state. Every January, Buchanan joined a KGS crew to hand measure the water level in 550 western Kansas wells as part of a program to track long-term trends in the aquifers. As KGS deputy director of outreach and public service in 2004, he also relayed the KGS's findings on the cause of the deadly natural gas explosions in Hutchinson.

A native of Little River, Buchanan has served in a public-outreach capacity at the KGS since 1978 and will continue to share his extensive knowledge of Kansas and its natural resources to a range of audiences, from scientific professionals to students and the general public, through talks, books, articles, the media, and radio commentary.

"Kansans know Rex's voice well as a regular commentator on the KPR network of local NPR affiliates," Ludvigson said. "His commentaries are always thoughtful and accessible to the wider public and exemplify his bone-deep commitment to public outreach. He serves as our chief ambassador to the wide open spaces of Kansas."

University Distinguished Professor Rolfe Mandel was recently announced as the new interim director of the Kansas Geological Survey.