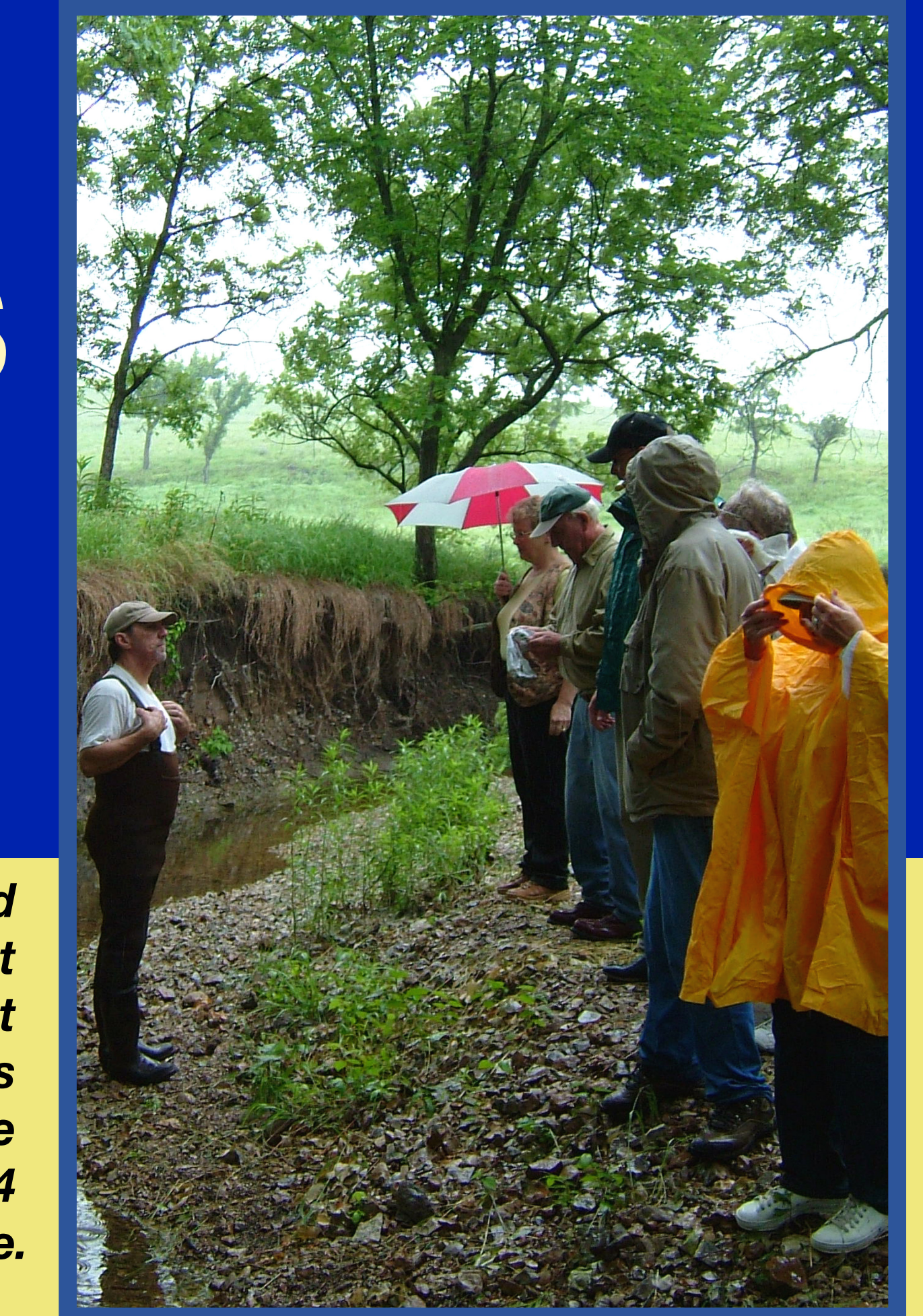


Taking Legislators to the Field: Communicating with Policy Makers about Natural Resource Issues

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Participants braved the rain to learn about Flint Hills streams at The Nature Conservancy's Tallgrass Prairie Preserve during the 2004 Field Conference.

Abstract

Policy makers are among the most important audiences for scientific information. In particular, legislators, legislative staff, governmental agency staff, business leaders, environmental leaders, and others need accurate, objective natural-resource information to make policy decisions. This audience is busy and difficult to reach with technical information. As part of its public outreach program, the Kansas Geological Survey (a division of the University of Kansas) communicates directly with policy makers through an annual field conference. Operated since 1995, the conference presents information by combining field experiences, presentations by experts, and participant interaction. The primary objective is to give policy makers first-hand, unbiased information about the state's natural-resource issues.

The field conference takes policy makers to locations where natural resources are produced or used, or where there are important environmental issues, introducing them to experts and others who carry out (or are affected by) their decisions. The conference consists of three days of site visits, presentations, hands-on activities, and panel discussions. Participation is by invitation. Participants pay a small fee, but most costs are covered by co-sponsors, usually other state or local agencies, that are recruited to help defray expenses. Participants receive a guidebook before the trip. Travel is by chartered bus; lodging and meals are provided. Conferences have focused on topics (such as energy or water) or regions of the state. The most recent conference focused on cross-boundary issues and included stops in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri.

Written, post-conference evaluations are extremely positive. Legislators report that they regularly use conference information and contacts during the law-making process; conference information played a direct role in decisions related to underground natural-gas storage rules, water-rights buy-back legislation, and sand and gravel dredging regulation. The conference has raised the Survey's visibility within the Legislature and improved relationships with state agencies. The annual field conference is a highly effective way of providing scientific information to this difficult-to-reach audience. The concept has been adopted by several state geological surveys and is applicable to other earth-science organizations.

1 Objective

- Give policy makers first-hand, unbiased information about the state's natural-resource issues

2 Audience—Policy Makers

- Need accurate, objective natural-resource information to make policy decisions
- Busy and difficult to reach with technical information

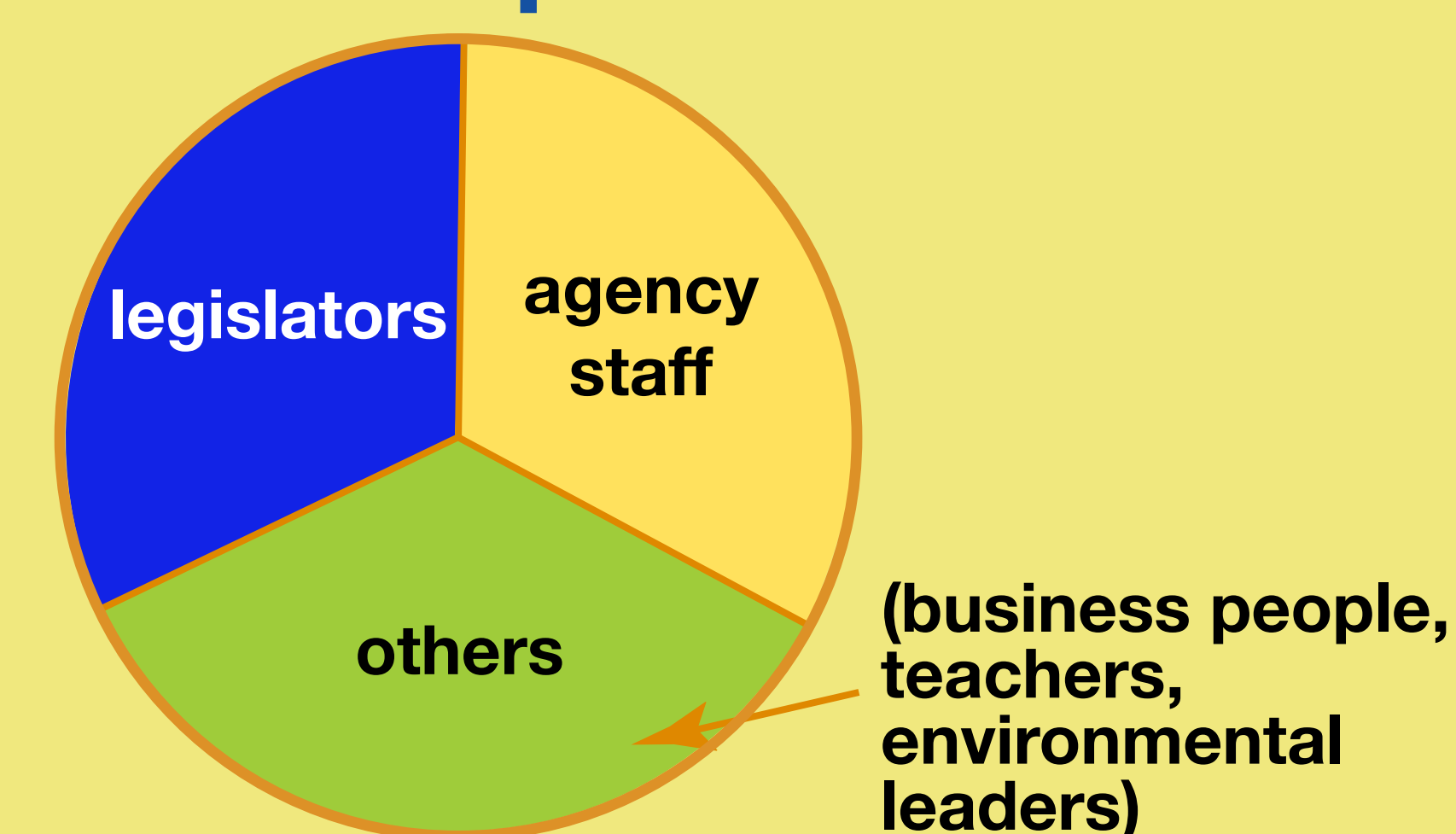
3 The Kansas Field Conference

- Field experience provides first-hand knowledge about resources
- Three-day traveling conference
- Topics focus on issues (e.g., water or energy) or specific regions of the state
- Transportation by chartered bus, lodging, and meals provided
- Guidebook provides background information and a post-conference reference
- Co-sponsors (other local and state agencies) utilized for financial and logistical support
- Post-conference evaluations used to improve the program



The 2006 Field Conference examined the environmental results of over 100 years of lead and zinc mining in the Tri-State Region of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri. Here participants climbed to the top of a chat pile in Picher, Oklahoma.

Participants



4 Keys to Success

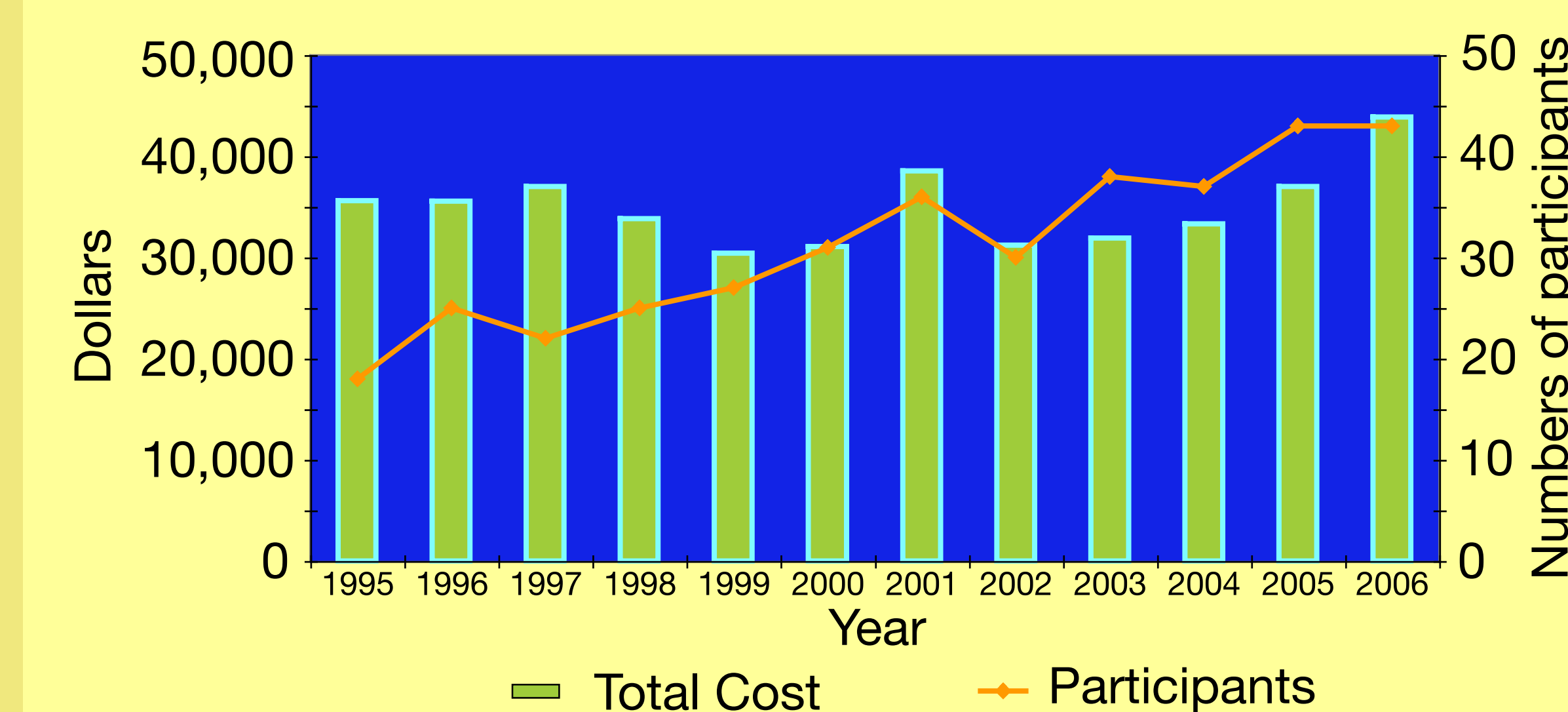
- Provide a well-organized, first-class trip
- Stay on schedule
- Invest the necessary staff time in details
- Solicit financial co-sponsors from appropriate agencies, organizations
- Invite participants with diverse backgrounds
- Seek participation from key legislators, cabinet secretaries, agency heads, and other high-profile policy makers to increase credibility and bolster participation
- Provide balanced treatment of the issues, remain non-partisan, but don't shy away from controversial subjects
- Make the trip enjoyable as well as educational



During the 2005 Field Conference, participants stand in the main channel of the Arkansas River and discuss how irrigation has affected streamflows in western Kansas.

5 Costs

Comparison of Costs and Participants

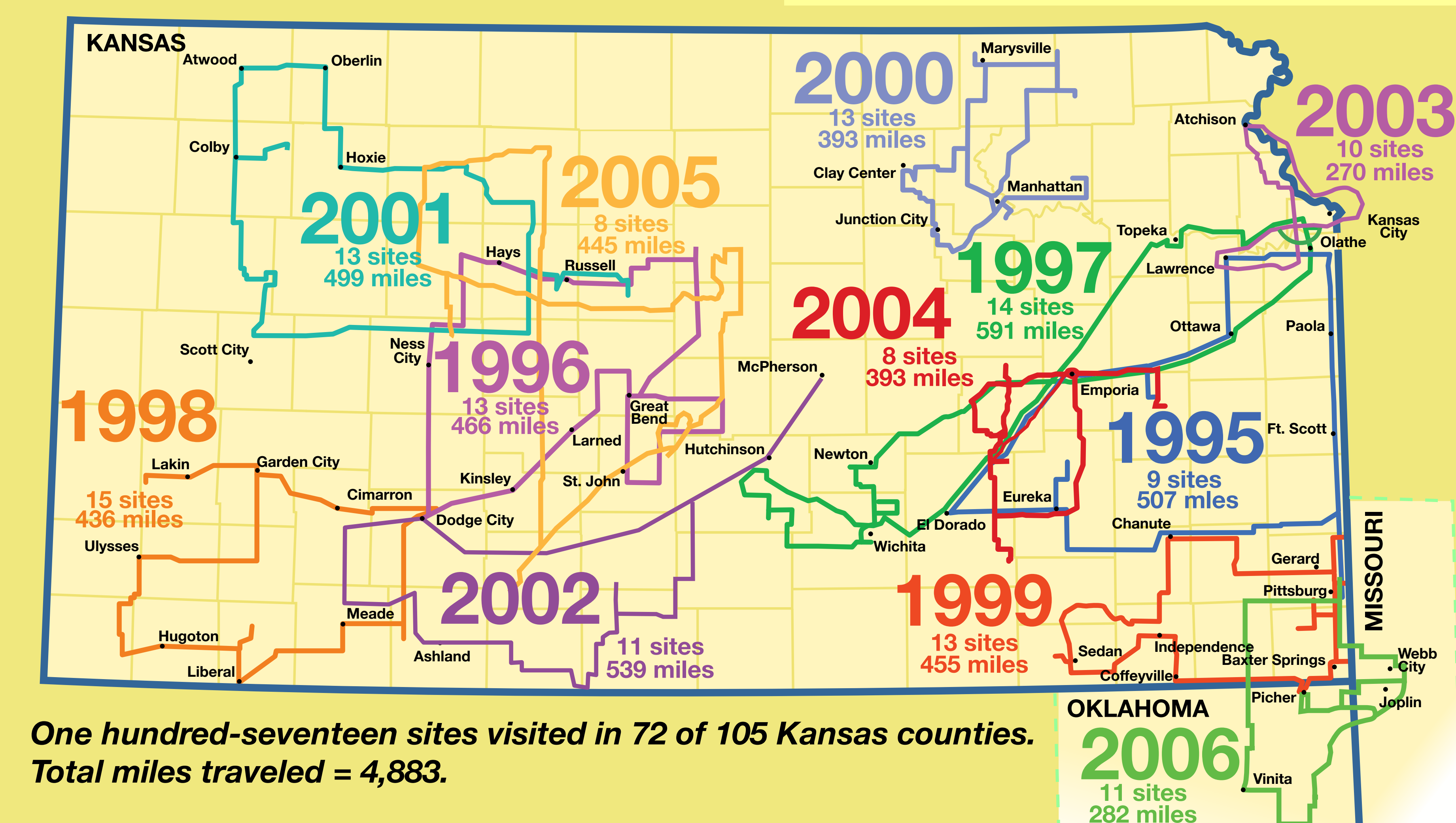


Budget 2006

Cost	
Transportation, lodging, meals etc.	\$13,825
KGS personnel expenses	\$30,050
Income	
Registration fees (\$95 per person)	\$ 2,850
Co-sponsor support (\$2,000 each)	\$10,000
Meal co-sponsors	\$ 1,000
Total	\$13,850

6 Benefits

- Effect on Public Policy
 - Legislators better understand results of policy decisions
 - Enhanced interagency cooperation
 - Provides an informal opportunity for interaction among policy makers
 - Legislators use conference information and contacts during the law-making process
 - Raises the visibility of some issues (e.g., natural-gas storage rules, sand and gravel dredging regulations)
- Benefit to KGS
 - Provides direct communication with policy makers
 - Raises visibility within the Legislature
 - Informs policy makers about the KGS and its programs
 - Improves relationships with other agencies
 - Helps KGS plan future research and service activities
- Benefit to Others
 - Concept has been adopted by some several state geological surveys and is applicable to other earth-science organizations



One hundred-seventeen sites visited in 72 of 105 Kansas counties. Total miles traveled = 4,883.