

Douglas County

Climate Action & Adaptation Plan

Report on Focus Groups

Summary

Douglas County is building a plan to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change; it will be tailored to our community's priorities and account for our assets and vulnerabilities. Starting in the fall of 2022, the Douglas County Sustainability Office hosted 11 focus groups to hear directly from groups identified as being especially impacted by climate change. The focus groups also served as a means to distribute listening geographically across the county. Vocational focus groups included first responders, human services, outdoor workers, and agricultural producers. The concerns and priorities identified by each group are in the Vocational section of this report, including demographics served and an organization list. Community focus groups included youth, Community Emergency Response Training (CERT) trainees, residents within and surrounding Eudora, Baldwin City, and Leocompton residents, Indigenous, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) residents. Concerns and priorities identified by each community group can be found in the Communities section of this report. Concerns shared by the groups included, but were not limited to, weakened community relationships, mental and physical strain of extreme weather, loss of native habitat and agricultural land to development and weather changes, cost of energy, barriers/tradeoffs of renewable energy, lack of confidence in effectively responding during and after extreme weather events.

Feedback from the focus groups is included in this report, additional community listening and engagement conducted through narrative interviews and a community survey can be found on the [Community Climate Action Plan](#) website in the *Building the Plan Together* section. Further public engagement will follow the drafting of strategies by staff in consultation with the climate action plan steering and staff advisory committees.

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Priority Groups

Vocational groups identified as being heavily impacted by climate change:

- First responders are on the frontline of assisting residents during and after extreme weather events.
- Human services workers provide services to individuals coping with issues that are exasperated by extreme weather, such as housing and health conditions.
- Outdoor workers endure extreme heat and cold temperatures throughout the year.
- Agricultural producers observe and respond to the effects of sudden and seasonal weather changes that affect crop productivity and therefore their livelihood.

Community groups were prioritized by recognizing some noticeable gaps in the geography and demographics of previous phases of outreach and by targeting meaningful learning areas for the planning team.

- Youth voices at the Boys and Girls Club helped connect the plan to the future of Douglas County.
- Reaching the surrounding unincorporated areas and municipalities of Eudora, Baldwin City, and Lecompton was essential to striving for county-wide perspectives.
- [Community Emergency Response Training \(CERT\)](#) participants are trained volunteers who watch for and prepare for hazards affecting their neighborhood.
- By holding a focus group for BIPOC community members, and one for Indigenous perspectives, both with a trusted facilitator, staff hoped to provide a safe space for those present to share perspectives on climate impacts that they experience uniquely. The separate Indigenous perspective focus group was held as recommended in the collection of narrative interviews earlier in this process.

	Focus Group	Attendance	Location	Date
Vocational	First Responders	10	Douglas County Fairgrounds Flory Hall	10/13/22
	Human Services	14	Douglas County Fairgrounds Flory Hall	11/18/22
	Outdoor Workers	26	Douglas County Fairgrounds Flory Hall	12/14/22
	Agricultural producers	21	Douglas County Fairgrounds Flory Hall	1/26/23
Communities	Boys & Girls Club	9	Center for Great Futures Boys and Girls of Lawrence	7/19/22
	CERT Training	16	Douglas County Fairgrounds Flory Hall	10/16/22
	Eudora & Townships	19	Eudora USD 491 District Office	11/3/22
	Indigenous	14	Tommaney Library Haskell Indian Nations University	12/7/22
	Baldwin City & Townships	21	Lumberyard Arts Center, Inc.	1/5/23
	BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)	15	Lawrence Public Library	1/10/23

Lecompton & Townships	9	Lecompton Community Building	1/18/23
total	174		

Structure

Each focus group meeting began with an informational presentation to prepare participants for a conversation about the impacts of climate change in Douglas County.

Discussions were facilitated by Douglas County staff and community members. Community members that were hired to help with facilitation built trust through their identities and work independently from Douglas County Sustainability. Alex Kimball-Williams facilitated the Indigenous focus group and co-facilitated the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) group with Cody Haynes. Scott Thellman, owner of Juniper Hill Farms, facilitated the Agricultural Producers group. A variety of options were available for participants to share their thoughts during the discussion section of the focus group.

In general, groups were asked what they believe are the top issues facing them, their community, or their professional cohort. Participants were asked to reflect on the physical and mental health impacts of hazards and environmental degradation on the community, and which specific weather extremes affect their lives most. Participants were asked how prepared their household, workplace, and community are for extreme weather and what barriers they experience in being prepared. Vocational groups discussed weather-related adaptations that have been made or should be made to remain effective while the community copes with a changing climate. Groups were asked what may be needed for the Douglas County community to thrive amid challenges posed by climate change, and what new connections participants found after participating in focus group discussions. Participants were asked to provide feedback via a survey and shown where to follow the process through the [Community Climate Action](#) website.

Resilience is defined as a community's capacity to cope with hazardous events, trends or disturbances, responding in ways that maintain essential function, identity and structure, while also maintaining the capacity for learning and adaptation.

Summary of Feedback

Main ideas and themes captured from the discussions are organized below. Each point summarizes a topic discussed and may represent the view of an individual, several participants, or the group as a whole. This is not comprehensive but a high-level summary of recurring themes.

Vocational

First Responders

Staff

- Current staff capacity is already stressed by increasing demand.
- Large community events such as festivals, games, and graduations during extreme weather, like storms and heat, strain first responder staff capacity.
- Extended fire seasons require more resources.
- New energy technology requires staff training and community education.
- Community preparedness programs could be an important resource.
- Communication infrastructure systems essential to effective response wear more rapidly in weather extremes.

Community Impact

- Mental health is strained by compounding, chronic stresses such as COVID, tornado recovery, and cost-of-living.
- Accommodations like translation and guardianship of minors may be challenging to access when emergency response is required at irregular hours.
- Extreme heat events burden institutional energy infrastructure.
- Partner with community preparedness programs such as Community Emergency Response Training (CERT) and community resource hubs such as local libraries.

Departments Represented

- Lawrence / Douglas County Fire Medical
- Douglas County Emergency Communications
- Douglas County Emergency Management
- Eudora City Fire & Emergency Medical Services
- Lawrence Police
- University of Kansas Police
- University of Kansas Office of Public Safety

Human Services

Intersections of Housing and Health

- Mold or other chronic issues in rental homes may be difficult to remediate due to owner dynamics, code requirements, feelings of comfort accessing code services, and enforcement capacity.
- Life expectancy of the houseless population is reduced due to chronic exposure.
- Current shelter housing is not built as a storm shelter, nor is its community spacing designed to minimize air-borne infections. .
- Front-line workers face compounding work-related secondary trauma and cost-of-living stresses.
- Housing construction centered around universal design and accessibility is needed.
- Equity investments including racial and LGBTQ considerations are needed.
- Everyone needs or will need accessibility aids and Universal Design at some point.

Transportation

- Sidewalks and roads degraded by climate change affect people with disabilities first.
- Isolation impacts the mental and physical health of all service groups.
- Include people with disabilities in preparedness plan discussions.
- Exposed bus stops without weather protection are a mobility barrier.

The Douglas County organizations that participated in this focus group serve low-income, adults, physically disabled, mentally disabled, houseless, prenatal, young families, and immigrant / Spanish-speaking community members.

Outdoor Workers

Essential Skills and Services

- Skills required to do technical infrastructure work need to be acknowledged and respected by the community.
- Reinforce the need and importance of infrastructure projects in communications with the public.

Productivity and Adjustment to Practices

- Day-to-day weather shifts alter equipment and labor tasks, slowing productivity.
- Increased safety awareness positively affects worker mindsets about personal safety.
- Install drought-resistant species and expand watering capacity after installation to mitigate new street tree and landscaping loss.
- Clear communication with the public about projects is needed to protect on-the-ground workers during construction and maintenance.
- Incorporate extreme weather days for outdoor crew members into payroll.

Agricultural Producers

Natural Resources

- Potential solar and wind developments raise concerns about the potential impacts on agricultural land.
- Concerns were expressed about water quality impacts from runoff, as well as water rights, usage, and future needs in a changing climate.
- Improving soil health can be a land stewardship strategy for carbon sequestration.

Weather

- High winds frequently damage farm infrastructure like high tunnel greenhouses, and getting repair help is difficult and costly.
- High tunnel greenhouses are an adaptation for protecting specialty crops from temperature fluctuation.
- Drought is a big concern for those with less access or water rights than long-established farmers.
- Flooding limits productivity and damages farm infrastructure like service roads.

Community

- Quick, on-call labor is needed to respond to rapid weather swings.
- Resource and labor sharing is practiced among rural landowners; could be an opportunity for expansion, building connections, and sharing between generations and practices.
- Engagement with farm service businesses and youth groups like 4-H and FFA could connect youth and farmers.

Communities

Community Response Emergency Training (CERT)

Risk to Vulnerable Neighbors

- Low-income or elderly neighbors may use unsafe heating methods.
- Aging neighbors are at higher risk to chronic extreme heat and cold.
- Individuals with illness and disability need extra community connection for safety during and after extreme weather and disaster events.

Housing Concerns

- Extremely dry soil from drought can shift home foundations after extreme rain events.
- Existing older homes are not built for new weather shifts.
- Building codes for new construction need to reflect these changes.

Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence

Outdoor Play

- Extreme heat makes pavement and unsheltered play areas and streets unsafe to play outdoors.
- Allergies limit playing outside.
- Prioritize safer pedestrian crossings from residential areas to nearby parks to improve access to cooler, shaded play spaces.

Climate Impact Concerns

- Feelings of worry, nervousness, exhaustion, stress, fear, anger, powerlessness, and sadness were expressed by students.
- Building community connection and placing focus on proactive action and the ability to adapt may ease mental health burden.

Eudora and Surrounding Townships

Environmental Protection and Green Spaces

- Protect air, soil, and water quality, increase wildlife biodiversity, and expand habitat.
- Preserve and expand Eudora “Tree Streets”; plant native landscaping in public spaces.
- Floods are expanding beyond mapped floodplain boundaries.
- Increase county-wide trail infrastructure and green space connection.
- The future Panasonic development raises concerns about sprawl, batteries, and loss of farmland.

Land Access

- Regulate development to prevent it from happening on productive agricultural land and historical sites.
- The opportunity for affordable land acquisition is decreasing.
- Off-set industrialization with planned green space and renewable energy requirements.

Utilities

- Increase grid resilience and access to quality HVAC systems to lower household utility costs.
- Create energy efficiency and stormwater management incentives for residents.

County-wide Relationships

- Weak community relationships are worsening mental health.
- Strengthen county-wide relationships by expanding community education opportunities on conservation and adaptation practices.
- Provide an information hub with research, long-term disaster assistance resources, local risk maps, and development projects to increase transparency and trust.

Indigenous Perspectives and Allies

System Awareness

- A healthy community for all species depends on access to clean drinking and surface water, and healthy food.
- Intense heat and drought lower the availability of foraged foods and the productivity of other food crops including livestock.
- Wildlife behavior is noticeably shifting as a result of the extremes of climate change.
- Prioritize protection of the wetland ecosystem from current and future development.
- Biodiversity loss weakens life-sustaining species relationships that maintain our resilience.
- Surrounding rural areas' drinking water infrastructure is seen to deteriorate.
- Rising food and utility costs strain Indigenous communities.
- Incorporate Indigenous biocentric knowledge into county decision-making.

Community Relationships

- Connect with Haskell University and Indigenous community groups before making land use decisions that may have cultural implications.
- Invest in youth voices for the future through engagement and education opportunities.
- Consider a holistic theory of sustainability for county projects that centers relationships with all life.

Baldwin City and Surrounding Townships

Community Connection

- Identify or create rural community centers for social and educational events, intergenerational knowledge, and resource sharing.
- Unincorporated areas contain diverse agricultural knowledge and practices from big farms to small farms and agritourism operations.

Land Use and County Management

- Solutions for climate change must include a holistic look at protecting native plants and wildlife as they struggle with swift changes in weather conditions.
- Agritourism and small specialty farms are emerging land uses for unincorporated Douglas County.
- Investigate options for local, low-cost recycling and community amenities to minimize travel time.

Energy Grid Considerations

- Intense concern was expressed for the potential unintended consequences of industrial energy, including negative impacts on wildlife, property values, farmland, agritourism, and rural character.
- Advocate for renewable energy funding for residential and institutional building installations.
- Grid resilience measures are needed to prevent brownouts and blackouts in southern Douglas County.

- Many rural residents in attendance are prepared for a short-term loss of power but primarily rely on wood, propane, and natural gas heating systems in extreme cold.

BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Perspectives

Community Inclusion

- Educate and work with community assistance groups to provide culturally relevant resources and assistance.
- New immigrant community members depend on strong cultural groups for local knowledge; immigrants without these networks may feel less prepared.
- Social support is significant when facing a crisis. This may be inaccessible or absent in white spaces.

Diverse Knowledge

- Indigenous elder strategies must be used along with other BIPOC community knowledge networks to guide strategies.
- Work with BIPOC communities to expand upon institutional resources; they should go beyond academic knowledge and traditional outreach methods.

Housing Resilience

- Rental housing may not sufficiently and/or affordably keep residents cool or warm during extreme temperatures.
- Concern about lack of preparedness knowledge, resources, and control over housing to add adaptation or efficiency enhancements.
- Wealth gaps may cause household damage to be much more devastating to People of Color.

Lecompton and Surrounding Townships

Development

- No incentive to buy land and conserve it, raising taxes instead.
- Fear of losing land value, agriculture, and nature due to wind and solar developments.
- Concern about government decision-making and eminent domain.

Natural Resources and Weather Patterns

- Concern about water availability into the future.
- More extreme rain, flooding, and drought than in the past is affecting farming.
- Water quality and water rights are a concern as drought extremes worsen.

- Access to the outdoors and active rural life is essential for a healthy community.

Public Services

- Trash dumping occurs frequently on rural roads.
- Smaller municipalities would benefit from cost assistance for infrastructure improvements.
- Rural road maintenance and stormwater are more difficult to manage than in urban areas.

Community Connection

- The pandemic, and dependence on technology, have weakened in-person connections.
- Find common ground to solve problems and think about the next generation.
- Sustainability is a way of life for the rural community, as well as neighbors helping neighbors.

Conclusion

While each focus group was uniquely shaped by the experience and dialogue of attendees, the threads of several foundational values and concerns were identified across the 11 groups gathered. Shared themes included: meeting everyday needs safely and affordably; sustaining or restoring healthy ecology and natural resources; providing environmental awareness and education; a sense of worry and imminence about development; the systemic inequities at all levels which, unless addressed, will compound climate change impacts; feelings of stress or loss; and the importance of community relationships and local solutions.

Thank you to the 174 community members, and additional partners, hosts, and guest facilitators, who generously shared their time, lived experience, concerns, and opportunities with the planning team. The perspectives shared during these sessions continue to strongly influence planning efforts - from additional learning, goal setting, and strategy exploration - to bring forward a climate action and adaptation plan crafted around the Douglas County community.