

# **Regional Scientists are Talking – Is Anybody Listening?<sup>1</sup>**

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**Don Macke, Donald Hirasuna, Chuck Fluharty, and Martin Shields\***

## **1. Introduction**

As members of the regional science community, we have long taken pride in our policy work. While the topics of our research and applied work are far ranging, our interest in, and commitment to, local, state and national policy is remarkable. Indeed, many regional scientists were initially drawn to the field because of their desire to conduct and disseminate research that shapes and informs the public debate.

And we are actively working in this area. Our parent organization—Regional Science Association International—lists 26 scholarly journals devoted to the field on its webpage. In perusing the abstracts of these journals, I found no less than 10 of them that list “policy” as an area of interest. And a quick scan of any of their respective *Table’s of Contents* shows that policy research is the predominate theme in our work.

Recently, there have been some glowing examples of our works’ adoption. For example, industry clusters—the focus of some of the field’s best, and most visible emerging research—are being touted by many state and

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\* Don Macke is Co-Director of Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, 317 South 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Lincoln, NE 68508-2197; email: [dmacke@rupri.org](mailto:dmacke@rupri.org). Don Hirasuna is a Research Economist with the Minnesota State House of Representatives; email: [Donald.hirasuna@house.leg.state.mn.us](mailto:Donald.hirasuna@house.leg.state.mn.us). Chuck Fluharty is Director of RUPRI, 214 Middlebush Hall, Columbia, MO 65211; email: [cfluharty@rupri.org](mailto:cfluharty@rupri.org). Martin Shields is Assistant Professor and Community Development Economist with the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at Pennsylvania State University, 105-C Armsby Bldg., University Park, PA 16802; email: [mshields@psu.edu](mailto:mshields@psu.edu).

<sup>1</sup> This article is a transcript of the Presidential Symposium. As such it presents a descriptive narrative of each presenter’s comments. Linda Kline’s work in transcribing the videotaped presentation was Herculean, and is greatly appreciated.

local development agents as essential growth engines. Ann Markusen's work on defense conversion has had substantial influence in a number of states. Further, regional scientists have developed and implemented a number of tools, such as the REMI and IMPLAN models, to analyze and inform policy at the local, regional and state levels. There are many successes to be proud of.

Yet despite our revealed interest in policy, and the widespread adoption of some of our work, I still sense a growing gap between regional science research and the policymaking process. As a community of scholars, we continue to publish high quality theoretical and applied research. While I have only been a card carrying regional scientist since 1998, I have gotten the feeling that we are increasingly talking only among ourselves, rather than engaging in meaningful discourse with elected decision makers. Some of us are getting an audience with policymakers, but not enough of us.

For example, in my own state, though I am sometimes asked to comment on a proposed piece of legislation, there are numerous policy decisions made where the knowledge of regional scientists could have been truly useful, but was not tapped. More widespread of an example is that nearly all states engage in a war among themselves in their efforts to attract major employers, such as car manufacturers, despite the body of empirical evidence that suggests this is not usually an effective development strategy. Similarly, states and municipalities continue to tout income and property tax abatements as a panacea; yet the empirical evidence from our community shows that this approach is seldom beneficial. The continued implementation of potentially dubious policies suggests that our work is not always having an effect.

Instead, it increasingly seems to me that regional policy often seems to flow straight out of think tanks, often with a political agenda; rather than from either the academe or state and regional research centers. Simply put, researchers and practitioners in our field are often bypassed as a resource. My goal in this Presidential Symposium was to initiate a dialog about how regional scientists can be reintegrated into the policy process.

The real challenge to us, then, is that if we have something of value to offer, then why don't the policymakers listen to us? What can we do differently to really have an influence in terms of how the policy discussion and debate takes place? In answering these and related questions, it is useful to examine the three policy levels that we tend to work at: local, state and federal. The panelists in this symposium have extensive experience at each of these levels, and have, by any measure, successfully straddled the research and political arenas. We can learn much from each of them.

Don Macke talked about the role of regional scientists at the local level. Macke is Co-Director of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, a RUPRI National Research and Policy Center. He has nearly 25 years of experience working in the field of community and economic development and his current work focuses on entrepreneurship in Rural America. He can be reached

at don@ruraleship.org. In his talk, Macke argues that building local decision making capacity is just as important as informing the policy debate, and he provided a model for building this capacity.

Don Hirasuna talked about the role regional scientists can play in state level policymaking. Hirasuna is a legislative analyst working in the Research Department of the Minnesota House of Representatives. He can be reached at Donald.Hirasuna@house.mn. Hirasuna describes some of the barriers that prevent the passage of legislation in accordance with regional science research. He then offers some reflective comments with the hope of starting a discussion on ways that might increase our effectiveness.

Chuck Fluharty talked about the role of regional scientists in national policy. Fluharty is Director of the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), the only policy institute in the U.S. solely dedicated to assessing the rural impacts of public policies. He can be reached at cfluharty@rupri.org. In his talk, Fluharty argued that national policy was moving to a “place-base” and he urged us to begin to incorporate the notions of place in our models of space.

## **2. The Role of Regional Scientists in Policymaking at the Local Level**

Macke focused his comments on community capacity building. He suggests that regional scientists are influencing local policy in many ways by building a decision-making infrastructure through our day-to-day community work. Indeed, he thinks that capacity building allows for greater local impact than does dealing with specific policy issues. He acknowledges that working in individual communities can be time-intensive, and argues for the need to develop an inter-local approach that allows some spreading of fixed costs. He then outlines the steps necessary to build such a framework.

Macke begins his discussion by defining local, noting that one of the challenges is rooted in the idea that there is no such thing as a “typical” community. Because of the variability from place to place, local policymaking presents sort of a quandary for regional scientists. He suggests that because many of us work closely with communities on a daily basis, this is the level where we possibly have had our greatest impact. In this regard, then, the ongoing invitation to conduct hands-on work implies that we are being listened to at the local level. And, because of the visibility of our results, we tend to feel good about the community work we do, a personal reward that helps reinforce our commitment to work at the local level.

Yet the uniqueness of places in some ways mitigates the transferability of our methods. Because all communities are different, we need to spend substantial time working with local groups and citizens in order to better understand their needs. Similarly, there is typically not some common template of

policy choices. As a result, many of the costs of working at the local level are both high and sunk. Still, Macke argues that many of the lessons learned from one community can be used across places. Recognizing this as an opportunity, he laid out the issues and a framework for what he calls inter-local policy development challenges.

Macke sets the stage by arguing that the real challenge is the diversity of places, with three unique “sets” of issues challenging decision-makers. The first set is the issues facing the wealthy and growing suburbs; the second set is the issues associated with rebuilding core cities; the third set is the issues of struggling rural places. Acknowledging that there are some cross-cutting issues among the three geographies, Macke focuses on rural, identifying a series of policy challenges affecting small communities today. These include the urban rural interface, high-growth amenity areas, and bifurcation.

Macke argues that in this environment, the real challenge to regional scientists is to move place-based considerations to a state- or national-level, thus encouraging a transition from a sectoral approach to a spatial approach. Macke argues that implementing our tools of process-enhancement and quantitative analysis gets us partially there, but urges us to work at least as much on the often-neglected art of relationship building. With this in mind, he offers a list of important considerations and strategies.

The first challenge is to build capacity, not dependency. By this, Macke urges us to go beyond our traditional roles in community advising (i.e., ad hoc, one-on-one issue response) by enhancing the internal capacity for decision making by existing units of government or NGOs. He notes that this is becoming increasingly important given the current state and local budget crises that are leading to inter-agency and inter-governmental conflicts. In an era of declining resources, local governments need to rethink their budgeting policies. Macke argues that our work can be influential not so much in helping governments with their allocation decisions, but in building the capacity to make these decisions.

Macke’s second challenge is for regional scientists to become predictable partners. He noted that there are many cases where committed scholars have toiled to strengthen local capacity only to see their work suffer from some upheaval; perhaps the governor or maybe a dean changed, or there was a change in the affiliated organization’s direction. The unfortunate consequence of such a change is often a significant breach of the trust relationship between the scholarly community and the affected community organization. He pointed out that the loss of this trust not only affects our work with a particular organization, but our overall reputation as well. Macke encouraged us to recognize that we need to continually nurture our relationships, especially in times of institutional change, by showing a commitment to these relationships over the long-term. Macke does recognize that this is both an individual and an organizational issue, and urges us to educate new administrators about on-going activities.

Building on this, Macke's third challenge is for regional scientists to begin constructing "learning networks" around our work with these organizations. By this, he means to increase the collaborative capacity of individual organizations and local government. According to Macke, the current capacity of organizations to work together is less than what is needed for partnerships to be productive. Macke notes that this should not be unexpected, given what is essentially a new model of local development, where coalitions, rather than individual agencies, are expected to lead the charge. He suggests that there is a great opportunity for regional scientists interested in local development issues to provide programming that assists not only in the formation of coalitions, but also in their operation. He calls for new tools in this effort because the decision making process within a coalition can be quite unique from the process undertaken by individual organizations.

The fourth challenge is to *engage* local expertise. Macke reminds us that the "expert model" does not sustain communities. He argues that the steps that are necessary for us to actively translate knowledge require that we have a local understanding, including a culture and place perspective. But he acknowledges that it is costly for us to acquire this understanding. Thus Macke encourages us to fully partner with local experts who can facilitate our work by reducing transactions costs.

Somewhat related, Macke urges us to *leverage* local private expertise. He points out that most communities have a stock of professionals who tend to be compartmentalized according to a very specific function by an organization. As a result, the only time that their expertise is tapped by that community is when information is needed on a specific issue. But these individuals probably are underutilized when viewed in such a limited capacity. Instead, he urges that the private sector should be engaged in the process of the public sector's decision-making process. He uses four main groups as an example: accountants, attorneys, engineers, and broad organizational development practitioners. Of course, a critical part of this reliance is nurturing the expertise, returning us to the earlier challenges of capacity building.

Perhaps the stiffest challenge Macke offers is one of building the local "knowledge infrastructure." He notes that the public sector—especially NGOs and nonprofits—may be the best (only?) opportunity. He goes on that this may be the most critical for the sustainability of places as the current knowledge infrastructure is so uneven across places, and is not simply mitigated by the mobility of factors, as it is for goods that are traded in markets. Because of this, Macke urges our community of scholars to consciously nurture this area.

Macke concludes his remarks with a few comments about audience. First, Macke touts the emergence of "public entrepreneurship" as identifying a new local need. In particular, he stresses that public entrepreneurs need the same risk management tools that private entrepreneurs have at their dis-

posal. This indicates a need to develop appropriate decision support systems at the local level. For example, can we create a support base for the innovative rural decision maker? Or core urban or suburban decision maker? This is especially pertinent in under-resourced communities. This challenge arises from the obvious need to encourage some risk-taking at the local level; in essence helping local leaders establish some assurance that not all controversial decisions will lead to their ouster from political office. He suggests that our community of scholars can help in this, with the hope that we can begin to think a bit more systemically and structurally about how rural public entrepreneurs could be supported at the local level with the expertise and tools we can provide.

Macke then reminds us that we need local champions. He stresses that the important work we do is making the investment in local places--rather than completing the projects. Our mission at the local level should be one of working on building the capacity of local entrepreneurship. He concludes by encouraging us that we are being listened to at the local level. Yet we should not view our enduring impact as being any particular policy outcome; rather we should strive to create the local capacity that is so essential to addressing myriad policy issues. As one final challenge, Macke urges us to think structurally about how we can transfer this model across both space and level of government.

### **3. The Role of Regional Scientists in Policymaking at the State Level**

Hirasuna describes the policymaking environment at the state level. He starts out by describing a model of information exchange among legislators and researchers in a public goods framework. In this "ideal" model, both parties benefit, with researchers being rewarded for providing credible analysis that results in good public policy. He acknowledges, however, that sometimes this market fails, and describes instances where research results are ignored, and offers reasons as to why. Still, he notes that regional research can inform the policy debate, and cites two examples. He concludes by offering a series of suggestions for regional scientists wanting increased involvement in the policy process.

Hirasuna began by positing that legislators and regional scientists exchange information in a public goods setting. He forwards a model for legislative policymaking as an informal market in which regional scientists exchange policy relevant research with legislators. In this model legislative staff sometimes serve as middlemen, reducing transactions costs by taking research and summarizing it and offering information or policy recommendations.

He notes that this is not a "traditional market" where money is exchanged for goods or services. Instead, he argues that policy relevant re-

search has two public goods elements to it. First, excepting the work of consultants, regional science research cannot be excluded. Second, consumption by one legislator does not diminish consumption by another.

He then comments that the market is one where both legislators and regional scientists find it to their advantage to achieve the “ideal.” In this ideal world regional scientists benefit by producing credible, reliable research. This in turn helps them gain authority and funding. Legislators find it to their advantage for their proposals to be supported by “neutral” experts and as a useful by-product they appear as knowledgeable legislators. This helps them gain influence with other legislators and to win elections.

Hirasuna, however, admits that regional science research rarely achieves the ideal state. In some cases, legislators feel the need to act, but there is little research available. For example, he points out that many local living wage laws were passed before much research was available. Or, in some instances legislators discuss aspects of a policy much too detailed for guidance from most regional scientists.

But Hirasuna identifies other failures besides instances where credible and quality social science research is not available, citing cases when legislators appear not to be listening. For example, he comments that legislators continue to fund light rail projects despite the fact that most empirical findings that find it is neither cost effective nor able to significantly reduce traffic congestion. Similarly, Hirasuna says our research shows sports stadiums rarely increase jobs or income, but public dollars are still used to finance these expensive structures.

Hirasuna observes that this apparent disconnect can lead some to conclude that regional science policy analysis is of little value to the policymaking process. He also acknowledges that some may suggest that politics makes it difficult if not impossible to achieve any influence in state legislatures. Still, he argues that rational self-interest dictates that legislators are indeed interested in regional science. For example, to effectively represent their district, they need to know something about their constituents; they need to know their district’s economic conditions, political affiliations, demographic characteristics and cultural values. Moreover, legislators find it useful to understand issues beyond those that affect their districts. To gain authority with other legislators, they must be able to effectively debate issues that affect the entire state.

Hirasuna suggests that there administrative agencies have a dramatic need for regional analysis as well. For example, the federal workforce investment act requires the creation of sub-state workforce investment boards, formerly known as industry councils under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). These councils help formulate job training plans appropriate for their region. County human service agencies must administer welfare programs

specific to their areas. The economic development agency must balance initiatives between rural and urban areas.

Despite the need for regional science work, Hirasuna admits that there are many reasons why, in the end, legislators do not always act in accordance with our research. He outlines three primary reasons.

His first reason is that our research may be dissonant with legislators' values. He observes that each legislator possesses a set of values and opinions regarding the root causes of many problems, which may be conservative or liberal, libertarian or communitarian, and consistent or inconsistent with their party affiliation. He notes that sometimes the conclusions of a policy analysis may fall dissonant with some legislator's experiences or values. In such cases, legislators may choose not to act in accordance with that research.

The second reason Hirasuna cites is that legislators may not care enough about the issue to act. He points out that legislators keep busy schedules, with tasks including committee hearings, constituent meetings and party caucuses. Because it takes time to research an issue, author a bill and then prepare for a debate on that bill, significant opportunity costs arise when addressing an issue. He goes on that, in order for something to happen, legislators must want to overcome these costs. For example, they may find some issues interesting because it affects a large population of constituents, or because it affects a vulnerable or valued group of constituents. Regardless, they must motivate themselves enough to spend the time to carry out a legislative effort.

Hirasuna adds that in seeking motivation, regional science research may not be directly related to a bill. Sometimes, legislators may be motivated by research on an issue that might allow them to create their own proposals to help solve the problem. An example is rising wage inequality, which may provide reason for legislators to authorize funding for job training, or to construct an earned income tax credit.

Hirasuna's third reason is that regional scientists may have less influence than other members in the policy arena. He describes the legislative policy arena as a hierarchy of horizontal networks. In the upper tier are legislators, who communicate with one another and try to garner votes for or against a bill. This communication may be within party caucuses, or it may be on an individual basis. He notes that within this network, legislators possess unequal authority. The speaker of the House may determine whether a bill gets heard on the floor. The committee chair can decide whether to hear a bill. The author of the bill gets to write the first version and can state whether an amendment is a friendly one. The influence of each of these members may be such that regional science research may not be accordingly incorporated.

Hirasuna also defines a lower hierarchy, which includes non-profits, business associations, unions, lobbyists, church groups, private businesses, state agencies, legislative staff, consultants, constituents and all others who communicate directly with legislators. Some of these groups, according to

Hirasuna, may conduct their own research. For example, in Minnesota, non-profits, state agencies and the University all conduct research on affordable housing. Thus, it is important to realize that regional scientists are only one small part of this hierarchy, and research and communications from other members of this hierarchy may bear more weight in legislators' minds.

Despite these barriers, Hirasuna notes that regional science research can indeed influence legislation, and offers two examples of success in the network framework. In his first example he examines the stadium issue, demonstrating how a basic literature review on the impact of sports stadiums may have influenced legislation in Minnesota. He sets the stage by noting that in 1997, the Minnesota legislature deliberated for the second year in a row funding for the construction of a new professional sports stadium. Hirasuna helped produce an information brief that summarized previous studies on the economic impact of sports stadiums, noting that most statistical studies found little impact and sometimes even showed a loss in employment and income with the construction of a stadium. The brief was effective in that its conclusions were mentioned several times during the debate in the Minnesota House of Representatives. (Hirasuna attributes the ultimate failure of the 1997 bill to a large outpouring of public objection, and funding for the stadium has yet to be approved.)

The second example Hirasuna cited is the use of Basic Needs Budgets to estimate the wage needed to pay for basic necessities like food, clothing and shelter. This was used as part of the living wage debate. Here, Hirasuna helped build family budgets which were used to help legislators and others understand how the complex system of taxes, tax credits and government benefits fit together. The budgets were first constructed during a period of rising wage inequality, living wage proposals and welfare reform. They were communicated to legislators and other members of the policy arena through testimony in committee and through publication.

The analysis found substantial differences in wages, which depend upon the family's situation. For example, a single parent with two children without child support, who required full-time childcare, did not receive subsidized childcare and lived in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, needed in excess of \$15 per hour. In other cases, where child support was received, child care subsidies were provided and the family lived in rural areas, the family might be able to meet their basic needs with a minimum wage job. According to Hirasuna, the study seemed to be accepted by the policy community, and they receive requests to update the budgets to reflect more recent expenses and state laws.

Hirasuna wraps-up his remarks by offering six suggestions to improve our effectiveness with legislators and members of the policy arena. He prefaces these suggestions by observing that much of the problem facing legislators can be framed as a persuasion problem. In effect, regional scientists are

trying to persuade legislators that their research conclusions are correct. This is not persuasion in the sense of selling bad information; instead, it is persuasion in the sense of trying to convince legislators and other policy groups of the truth.

Hirasuna's first suggestion is to articulate the issue in a way that motivates others to act. He notes that sometimes legislators or other policy analysts may not be interested in the defined issue, giving legislators no reason to act. Or, legislators may not understand the issue. Hirasuna suggests it may help to state the underlying tension of the issue in a way that legislators see how it might affect their constituents. He argues that legislators will be better able to defend an issue if they can articulate it in a way that motivates others.

His second suggestion is to know your audience and relevant policy groups. If your work is meant for a specific legislature, find out which legislators would be interested in the topic. Or, if you want to reach a wider audience, it may help to keep a few legislators in mind when producing your work. If there are organized non-profits, state agencies, or other policy groups interested in the issue, find out their opinions and if they have formed coalitions with other non-profits. He notes that it is also necessary to find out if there are competing organizations taking an opposing stance.

Hirasuna says knowing your audience will also help in choosing how to communicate your research. For example, in writing to legislators it will help to recognize they have very little time, and that they will want to read through a document quickly. And, because most legislators are not experts in regional science, it is important to make your work easy to read and understandable.

Hirasuna's third suggestion is to develop credibility. He notes that trust in your work and your opinion matter in whether your policy suggestions are heard. If legislators perceive your work is credible (e.g., as a result of your professional reputation), they are more likely to believe the results of a specific research project.

According to Hirasuna, one way to cultivate credibility is to conduct good and believable analyses. Regional scientists should choose methods that answer the question in the most direct and simplest fashion. The methods should be clearly stated: while legislators may be less likely to read the methodology in a report, there are other analysts who will. If that research is clearly understood and it is believable, then it may be more likely trusted by these groups.

Also, prepare to defend your work. Members of policy groups may have questions. They may know of research with conflicting conclusions; or they may have an agenda that is discordant with your conclusions. If there is legitimate research with competing conclusions, then credibility may be sacrificed if your conclusions do not fairly take this research into account.

If there is some institutional credibility, that may help in persuading legislators. For example, the National Conference of State Legislatures provides

information to legislators across the country. Within Minnesota, the Office of the Legislative Auditor provides nonpartisan policy analyses. Both sources may be considered credible in that they serve as a source of fairly reliable information.

Another way to cultivate credibility is to develop relationships with legislators and policy groups. These groups may be more likely to trust your analyses if they know something about you. If they can trust your work, they may be less likely to form competitive stances on an issue. They will see for themselves that you are taking a nonpartisan stance.

Hirasuna's fourth suggestion is to choose the appropriate communication tool. He points out the importance of "knowing your audience," as such awareness will help in figuring out how to communicate with them. For example, some legislators may have analysts who read a few academic journals, whereas others may read more accessible materials. Sometimes, it may make sense to communicate in person with the legislator. Sometimes a memo with short bulleted statements may help legislators quickly scan through your document.

Choosing the right mode of communication may increase the chances that a legislator will remember your policy conclusions.

The fifth suggestion is to get help. Hirasuna notes that communicating with legislators, developing credibility and analyzing audiences can take time. Because of this, it might be necessary to enlist some outside help. For example, some might consider getting project assistants, or research associates to work on communicating with legislators. There may be non-profits or other agencies that might help in communication. Also, an editor might help with writing products more accessible to legislators and legislative staff.

Finally, Hirasuna suggests that regional scientists should start from the inside. He notes that a fundamental part of conducting policy oriented research is to adopt the right priorities. In other words, the research must begin with a policy emphasis, and researchers have to want to make a difference in policy.

He emphasizes that the issue must be the central focus, and researchers must address it as clearly and simply as possible. With that in mind, the appropriate methods will follow and the construction of reports will make more sense. Furthermore, choosing how best to communicate with different policy groups can be rationally discussed. The goal should be to decide on how to become effective and useful in the policymaking process.

#### **4. The Role of Regional Scientists in Policymaking at the Local Level**

Fluharty focuses his comments on the role of regions and places in the ongoing policy debate. After briefly describing the increased consideration of

place at the national level, he talks about the challenges that arise with respect to incorporating the notion of place in policy discussions. He then argues that regional scientists need to “put the place in space” in our efforts to develop a sustainable future.

Fluharty begins by talking about regions and places and what these notions may mean in national discussions. He first argues that the dialogue between district and constituency on national policy is being played out incrementally in the U.S. Congress through an emerging set of regional policy authorities. He cites several instances where regional authorities are taking on increased prominence, despite some of the challenges that are endemic to them. For example, he notes not only the reauthorization and funding of the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Delta Regional Authority, and the Denali Commission, but also the authorization of the Northern Great Plains Authority, and pending authorities including the Southeast Crescent Authority. Fluharty argues that this is evidence that regions that have been historically challenged - economic, socially, and geographically - are now integrated into a national framework.

Fluharty then discusses three fundamental shifts in how place and space are viewed at the national level. First he argues that the national policy framework is witnessing a movement from sector-based to place-based development. Second he notes a shift in federal flows, with money leaving subsidy and dependency programs to those that emphasize regional competitive advantage. The third shift Fluharty identifies is the creation of a government structure that allows regions to express themselves on the landscape. While this has been much easier said than done, he argues that the regional authorities have effectively evolved in this way.

Fluharty notes that regional policy approaches are starting to filter up through the system; many of which are constituency- or place-based. He uses the recent Farm Bill as an example, where regions and places are now often the starting point of implementation; in particular, he references the Rural Strategic Investment Program (RSIP). According to Fluharty this program provides \$100 million in an effort to create regional innovations in public and private entrepreneurship. Of particular interest is regional planning and plan implementation. This is an innovative place-based strategy in that it is self-expressed from the regions, with the federal government helping provide technical assistance up-front to build private entrepreneurial-based linkages. Fluharty notes that what the federal government is starting to see is what regional scientists do every day in trying to help communities engage in policy discussions.

Fluharty notes the importance of allowing regions to self-identify, rather than be defined by some mandated framework. And, by relying on a public-private partnership, it increases the likelihood that all affected groups have a seat at the table. By following this approach, he suggests that the RSIP will

manifest itself as a new innovation that does not exist in any current USDA program.

According to Fluharty, another important development is the emergence of place- or community-policy in the national framework. Noting the US population is now distributed 50 percent suburban, 30 percent central city, and 20 percent rural, he argues that this will play out in fascinating ways with respect to policy. In particular, the rural regions that are homogenous could survive, but they will be much larger, and therefore it will be more difficult for a constituency to be activated; they will also be much poorer and fewer in numbers.

Fluharty suggests that this will create an interesting dialogue with the states in the out-state/in-state dynamic. Fluharty predicts that this phenomenon will result in a new type of constituency that manifests itself with new place implications. In particular, he argues that there will be a “place consensus” that builds between remote-rural and central-city decisions.

As evidence, Fluharty cites two recent works of urban thinkers. First, he notes Doug Nelson’s *Essay* in the 2002 *Kids Count* book. (Nelson is President of the Annie Casey Foundation.) According to Fluharty, Nelson’s main point was that, contrary to the accepted arguments over the last 25 years, it is time to invest in places. To support this, Nelson notes that disadvantaged families with children happen to live in communities. And those communities looking for infrastructure must unite the public, private and philanthropic sectors *within a geographic landscape*.

Fluharty also notes the work of Bruce Katz and Katherine Allen of the Brookings Institute. According to Fluharty, their piece “Cities Matter: Shifting the Focus of Welfare Reform” says, essentially, that welfare reform can be honed to 30 cities. And in doing so, they note that it is time to recognize that place matters in welfare reform. Fluharty then points out that this is consistent with what regional scientists have been saying all along, namely that place, culture and geography matter. He thinks it significant that urban policy experts are starting to realize that, perhaps eight blocks in the Bronx are not very different from eight counties in Western Nebraska. He identifies this interesting dynamic as a tremendous opportunity for new coalitions among rural and urban scholars.

Another major issue Fluharty identifies is the manner by which we deal with the urban-suburban-rural continuum. For instance, he suggests that there will be a major rethinking of the allocation of consolidated federal funds across space at the state level. He notes now that while rural per capita funding is 96 percent of the urban level; this seeming parity masks the fact that 70 percent of the rural funds are for transfer payments, compared to 48 percent in urban areas. The result is a 22 percent disadvantage in community capacity building for rural places, covering everything from criminal justice to safety to basic economic development.

Fluharty then notes a “place dynamic” based on both electoral cycles and redistricting politics. Drawing on his experience at recent Governors’ retreats for both Republicans and Democrats, Fluharty suggests that rural America is “in play,” and that some of the major issues in the Presidential electoral cycle will focus on rural *places*, as opposed to commodities or individuals. For example, he notes that the 2002 Farm Bill was not so much about commodity support—though that was the bulk of it—rather it was an altering of the flow of federal funds so as to increase support for rural places.

Other noted examples where place is emerging as important to the policy debate include the revisiting of the legislation for both workforce investment and welfare reform. With respect to workforce investment, he suggests that workforce investment boards are consolidating in the suburbs, moving away from rural areas, hence taking it further away from the people we want integrated into the place context. In regard to welfare reform, Fluharty notes that while poverty rates have declined in the cities and suburbs, they have remained flat in rural areas. This introduces a place dynamic into the issue.

The recent acknowledgment of the importance of place that most encourages Fluharty, however, is the “One Department Serving Rural America” initiative by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). According to the Executive Summary, this initiative “recognizes the unique characteristics and needs of rural America and the important role HHS plays in ensuring healthy rural communities”

(<http://ruralhealth.hrsa.gov/PublicReport.htm>). As Fluharty notes, this program takes the entire portfolio of HHS—from welfare reform to community access hospitals—and says, essentially, ‘we are the department that has the largest impact in rural America and we need to start thinking about community economic impact and community development in HSS programs.’

Finally, Fluharty asks us to consider how we, as a community of scholars, can optimize all that is going on. Echoing the theme in Tom Johnson’s Fellows Address to the Southern Regional Science Association—*Where is the Place in Space?* (<http://www.cpac.missouri.edu/library/papers/>) – Fluharty implores us to analyze the place aspects with as much thought and rigor as we did the issue of space itself. From a policymaking perspective, he stresses the importance of developing a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the place- or community-dynamics in spatial analysis. This is necessary, he says, because he feels that the days of commodity programs as *the* US rural development strategy are numbered. As evidence, he offers the fact that a number of important government associations, such as the National Conference of State Legislators, the Council of State Governments, and the National Governors Association have moved to a rural policy committee in the last six months; with the case of the first two organizations, transforming their “agriculture committees” to “rural policy committees.” Thus, he notes that if we

want to be involved in the future discussions, we need to think about culture and place, as that is where the body of politics is moving.

## 5. Discussion

After the presentations, the panelists fielded a number of questions, which in turn spurred a far-reaching discussion. One consistent theme throughout the session revolved around the diversity of the audiences with whom we work. For example, it was widely recognized that the level and breadth of knowledge and issues varies substantially both within and across levels of government. This suggests that we need to approach many policy-makers not as “problem solvers,” but as educators. For example, one audience member remarked that much of his time was spent either helping local leaders better formulate their questions, or helping them make sense out of the information that is available. Of course, this is much different than designing or reacting to a legislative proposal in that it engages decision makers early on in the process.

This bit of dialog led another audience member to remark on the dramatic differences between the academic and political worlds. The participant noted that in the academic world, we regional scientists establish our own rules and timetables; we identify our own sets of research issues; and then we publish the results in our own sets of journals. But the audience member noted that this world is a parallel universe, in many respects, from the policy world. In the academic world, we set the agenda. In the political world, we are trying to get on the agenda. In reality, the member notes, we cannot expect the policy world to adopt our model; instead, we must try to fit in with the policy model. Of course, that means we have to rethink how we do business, and how our institutions recognize this work, which may never end up in a journal.

The discussion then turned to identifying the steps regional scientists need to take in involving themselves in the policy process. The first point stressed was the need to get involved early on—commenting on legislation shortly before a vote, it was said, is not at all beneficial because it is much too late in the process.

The conversation then talked about how to get involved at the beginning of the process. Fluharty noted that the community development model that many of us advocate is a good model for us to adopt. First, he talks about the need to build capacity, stressing the importance of building relationships with not only government officials, but NGOs as well. One important technique is conducting seminars and workshops to dialog on various issues, making sure to invite all of the relevant decision makers and constituents. In these seminars it is important for us to demonstrate that we are responsive

and provide good information. Fluharty views this as an investment, with the returns later including increased visibility for the scholar as a resource.

Fluharty admits that this approach can be difficult to adopt in the academic setting, as we regional scientists tend to have full plates, and the rules for success in the game have long been well-established. He suggests that our administrators and organizations need to do two things. First, they need to recognize alternative outputs, such as input into the policy process, just as they recognize publications. Second, they need to provide a supportive organizational framework. By this, Fluharty means that the organization itself should stand-by your work, offering it the necessary institutional cache, while managing some of the risk that accrues to individual researchers as they enter the political fray.

The importance of a champion was noted. Drawing once again from the community development model, it was argued that our work should be forwarded not only by ourselves, but our allies as well. Here, administrations and organizations were challenged to market our work under their large and respected umbrella. But it was deemed equally important to identify champions outside of our organization. One recommendation is to share our knowledge with other organizations in an intermediary framework in order to build champions in that sphere of influence.

The discussion then turned to timing. As mentioned above, regional scientists will have little influence by weighing in at the eleventh hour. As one participant noted:

By the time we, as academics, want to step in, it's always too late. The question has gone so far down the road, that the policymakers are unable to accept your information. I am reminded of a story of a colleague who wanted to have an impact on a vote in the state legislature on some aspect of education. He sent an e-mail to all the state legislatures about a day or so before the vote and expected that to have an effect - all it got was some very, very angry response from the legislature. Because at that point you can't make a difference.

The audience member then noted that this is a radical departure from how we typically do things. In the policy world, we need to do it on someone else's time. And the first step is creating relationships long before there is a question to be answered.

Following this thread, the discussion turned to potential steps. The first was to increase efforts to inform policymakers. But it was deemed as important to educate the policymakers' constituency so that they do a better job of creating the pressure or forces directly on their representatives. It was argued that if you do not have informed constituents making good choices

about candidates and so on, then it is very difficult to do anything else, including direct influence.

The audience member then forwarded the idea of a “policy chain,” where academics, rather than marching into the state or US capital to give them our best impressions of what policy should be, need to do a better job of strengthening the process. In particular, we are urged to form an integrated network of researchers, practitioners and policy shops and centers.

Fluharty picked up on this point, urging us to not forget the value of the NGOs. He remarked that there often is a network of individuals—often unelected—that typically make the critical decisions in a community, state or nation. The key is establishing relationships with the decision makers, as this is the heart of the process. And it is at this point that the information is the focal point. Fluharty suggests that because NGOs are often key actors at this stage of the process, our real influence can be felt at the policy development phase. Indeed, he argues that impacting the decision makers at this time is usually the only true opportunity, as once it gets down the trail, no amount of good knowledge will affect the decision—it is too late. Instead, the argument was to influence the communities that influence the legislature, rather than trying to influence the legislation itself.

Despite the positive model that was laid out by the panelists, there was a good deal of skepticism. For example, one audience member was concerned that policymakers are not really interested in hearing what we have to say unless it supports their position. Citing an example of a stadium impact study, the audience member noted that stadium proponents seized on the rosier projection among all scenarios considered, and presented it as the predicted outcome. This was done without the usual academic caveats that typically accompany such studies, and was touted under the university’s name. The audience member felt that they were taken advantage of in the situation, because they could not publicly criticize the proponents and hope to maintain the relationship.

Other participants stressed the difficulty of working in an era of increasing and mutual-suspicion between academics and lawmakers. While it was noted that the degree of mistrust can vary from state-to-state, there was concern that many regional scientists are not influential because lawmakers think of us as “pointy headed academics,” who are out of touch with the real world, whereas academics view the policymaking process with utter disdain. This creates an atmosphere in which policymakers really are not concerned with what we say, and academics are disillusioned because they feel that the ultimate decision will bear no semblance of what it is we recommend.