Biologists snub 'kangaroo court' for Darwin

The efforts of the grassroots pro-science group Kansas Citizens for Science attracted international attention this week in the science press. The March 31, 2005, issue of Nature carries a news article, "Biologists snub 'kangaroo court' for Darwin" (subscription required). The article, by Geoff Brumfiel, discusses what Kansas scientists and educators are calling a "kangaroo court": a planned six days of hearings on evolution, with "intelligent design" (ID) proponents given equal time with scientists. The hearings are being organized by the conservative majority on the Kansas State Board of Education, at the suggestion of the Kansas-based Intelligent Design Network.

Background

In June 2004, the Kansas BoE appointed a committee of Kansas scientists and educators to revise the state's science standards. In early 2005, this committee approved a draft set of science standards that included evolution, but not ID. However, the Kansas Intelligent Design Network has been promoting the so-called minority report from the committee, which includes 23 pages of suggested revisions aimed at redefining science to allow the inclusion of supernatural ID explanations. The minority report was condemned by twelve external scientific peer-reviewers, and neither the Intelligent Design Network nor Bill Harris, the leading advocate of the minority report, has offered any reply.

However, the conservative majority on the state BoE is apparently bent on accommodating the minority report. In order to do so, they decided to hold six days of hearings "to investigate the merits of the two opposing views offered by the Kansas Science Curriculum Writing Committee," according to the resolution passed at the March 2005 board meeting. It has since emerged that the hearings will be based on the so-called Santorum language. The amendment text, written by ID advocate Phillip Johnson, singles out evolution as controversial, and has been widely promoted by creationism/ID advocates. The amendment was adopted by the U.S. Senate but was stripped from the NCLB in conference committee,
and does not have the force of law (see the NCSE compilation on the Santorum Amendment [8] for more information).

**Scientists refusing to participate**

The hearings are scheduled for May 5-7 and May 12-14. However, *Nature* reports that the Kansas BoE has so far failed to find any evolutionary biologists willing to participate in a grueling set of hearings, with no standards for what constitutes "expert testimony," and with an apparently predetermined result. Harry McDonald, president of Kansas Citizens for Science, was quoted in the *Nature* article as saying the Board is "just doing this as a political smokescreen." Kansas Citizens for Science has recommended a boycott [9] to scientists who might be invited to testify, and is planning to host alternative events in opposition to the hearings.

**Reaction to kangaroo court**

The Kansas "kangaroo court" for evolution has attracted considerable criticism in addition to that of Kansas Citizens for Science. People for the American Way called the idea a "Creationism Show Trial" [10]. On March 29, J. David McDonald, Chairman of Biological Sciences at Wichita State University, wrote in the *Wichita Eagle* [11], "Simply put, certain religious groups feel threatened by evolution and have thus set out to attack it in any way they can. They cannot threaten it scientifically, so they are using political power to do what they can to push it to the margins." He concluded by saying, "The science of evolution is about the how of life's origins. Religions are about the why. Both science and religion are overreaching when they extend into the other's domain."

The editorial board of the *Wichita Eagle* also spoke out against the hearings in a strongly-worded editorial entitled, "Sham: Scientists right to boycott evolution hearings" [12]. Randy Scholfield, writing for the newspaper's editorial board, quoted Diane DeBacker of the Kansas Department of Education regarding efforts to get scientists to participate in the hearings: "We're not getting any takers." The editorial continued, "They've also contacted all six Kansas regents universities. No takers. They've gone national, too, with similarly dismal results."

Scholfield noted that it wasn't "hard to understand scientists' reluctance." He explained:

> The format of the hearings --"experts" debating for and against evolution -- suggests a rough equivalence of legitimacy that simply doesn't exist. And what about credentials? What kind of standard will there be for ID witnesses? A science Ph.D.? Significant publications on evolution in mainstream science journals? As Steve Case, co-chair of the BOE science writing committee said in opposing the hearings, "This kind of forum has nothing in common with the way the science community advances scientific understanding."

For previous NCSE updates on events in Kansas, see NCSE's news page for Kansas [13].

**External Links**


URL: [http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v434/n7033/full/434550a.html](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v434/n7033/full/434550a.html) [5].
URL: http://www.kcfs.org/standards05/KCFS.resolution.html [9]

Kansas Draft Science Standards [14]. [Link is broken]


URL: http://www.ksde.org/outcomes/sciencedtreview.html [7] [Link is broken]


Note

[1] According to the minutes of the Kansas BoE's March 2005 meeting, John Calvert, the managing director of the Intelligent Design Network, suggested the idea of hearings to the Board chairman, young-earth creationist Steve Abrams: "Mrs. Gamble asked what part John Calvert had played in development of the resolution. Chairman Abrams said that Mr. Calvert had suggested it and that he agreed with Mr. Calvert that there should be hearings." (March 2005 Board Materials, http://www.ksde.org/commiss/bdmaterials.shtml [16] [Link is broken])

Source URL: https://ncse.com/news/2005/03/biologists-snub-kangaroo-court-darwin-00632#comment-0

Links
[1] https://ncse.com/printpdf/12776