How do you spread the word about your research to thousands of Alaskan visitors? In the case of EPSCoR’s Southeast Test Case, you reach out to their tour guides.

On May 1, 2015, test case researchers held a one-day “Stakeholder Engagement Workshop” at the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center at which they presented on their studies and findings to a crowd of local tour guides and interpreters, with a focus on helicopter tour operators. “I feel like it’s such an important group to outreach to, they’re a lot of bang for your buck,” said EPSCoR University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) Outreach Coordinator Suzie Teerlink, who organized the event. “They’re communicating with so many people.”

About 60 tour operators and interpreters attended the event, which was modeled on the Marine Naturalist Symposium, an annual science event for Juneau water-based tour operators. The day began with an overview of the Southeast Test Case, which focuses on glacial changes in Berners Bay near Juneau and the effects they have on the local icefield-to-estuary ecosystem and to downstream user groups. Researchers gave presentations on the likely effects of climate change on Juneau’s glaciers; the ways glacial runoff can change downstream freshwater systems, salmon run timing, and estuaries; and the resulting implications for marine and icefield tours. “It included EPSCoR and UAS scientists and the information was good, because it wasn’t stuff they could look up in a book. It was ‘this is what current research looks like, this is what we have the ability to do and this is what we are doing.’”

The morning’s program was followed by a roundtable discussion of ways that scientific information can better be communicated to tourists. “We set up this stakeholder workshop to have more back and forth and engage the audience more than just having them be talked at,” Teerlink noted. “So we had a panel discussion which was really great and lively, and we pulled in a lot of people on it.”

Teerlink said the attendees were keenly interested in the discussion, especially when the topic turned to climate change. “That actually ended up being the central point of our entire discussion, and that was the most fascinating part, was how do people deal with it,” Teerlink said. “Because they can’t do tours without talking about climate change, they’re on glaciers.”

The test case plans to follow up with operators to see if and how their materials and information have been expanded and improved as a result of the workshop. “Ultimately, if we can really understand what are the most important messages to share with the public and package these messages in simple and digestible ways, then we can reach out to an enormous audience,” Teerlink noted.