Science Policy News

Congressional Science Fellows: A Voice for Our Sciences

by Julie McClure

Each year, ASA, CSSA, and SSSA sponsors a Congressional Science Fellow as part of the AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellowship program, which has placed over 2,400 Fellows during its more than 40-year existence. Fellows have the unique opportunity to spend a year working for a member of Congress or congressional committee of their choosing. They provide scientific expertise and analysis to support decision-makers confronting complex scientific and technological issues, thereby directly influencing and shaping public policy.

Public policy is becoming increasingly complex and is frequently informed by scientific and technical considerations. Regardless of the issue—environmental protection, energy, or food security—science plays a major role in the policy debate. Fellows make practical contributions to the more effective use of science and technical knowledge in the legislative process and help to show the value of such science–government interactions.

In addition to influencing science and technology policy, Fellows gain first-hand experience of the legislative process and develop their communication skills, sharing science to a wide audience.

Fellows participate in a wide variety of projects during their year on the Hill. During her Fellowship year, one of the projects Samantha Shoaf, the 2013 Fellow, worked on in Sen. John Thune’s (R-SD) office was the 2013 reauthorization of the farm bill. “There was a chance for me to specialize on the Nutrition Title,” Shoaf says. “Even though I previously studied food production and not food aid, I seized the opportunity.”

Shoaf had a front-row seat to the legislative process, attending stakeholder meetings, drafting amendments, participating in committee negotiations, and even writing a floor speech for Sen. Thune. In June, the farm bill passed the Senate and will hopefully make its way through the legislative process and become law later this year.

Showing the real-world implications of agronomic, crop, and soil science research is another benefit of the Fellowship. When considering what she would do after receiving her Ph.D., Jennifer Burks, the incoming 2014 Fellow, thought the Fellowship would be a great opportunity to learn more about the policy-making process and to see how basic research can be translated into the information that determines policy decisions.

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Meet the 2014 Fellow, Jennifer Burks

Jennifer Burks is the incoming 2014 Congressional Science Fellow. She completed her undergraduate degree at Earlham College where she majored in biology with a broad interest in environmental science. While applying to graduate degree programs, Purdue University’s Ecological Sciences and Engineering Program piqued her interest in its ability to provide her with the interdisciplinary opportunities she desired while enveloping the ecological research she was interested in pursuing for her doctoral degree. While at Purdue, Burks was housed within the Department of Agronomy where she assessed the growth patterns, nutrient cycling, and ethanol yields resulting from growth of native prairie grasses and Miscanthus for cellulosic ethanol production. Her research energy exposed her to how scientific research impacts policy and her interest in learning more about the science–policy relationship of her research. Burks also worked with other graduate students on the new AAAS ELISS program to Purdue. This is a program designed to encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration and communication among graduate and professional students to tackle complex societal issues. Throughout her time at Purdue, it became increasingly evident to her that there was a need for effective communication of science to society and an overwhelming need for science to be a part of the political conversation. This led Burks to apply for and enthusiastically accept the Congressional Science Fellowship. She is excited for her upcoming year as a Congressional Fellow where she intends to gain first-hand experience of the legislative process while using her understanding of agroecology to inform policymakers on Capitol Hill.