Science Policy News

The Role of Congressional Caucuses in Advocacy

In this era of partisan gridlock, 24-hour news channels, and Twitter hashtags, advocacy groups can have a hard time just breaking through all the “noise” to discuss their issue with policymakers. Fortunately, one way to bring attention to an issue on the Hill is through congressional caucuses. A congressional caucus is an informal group of congressmen and women, established to pursue or promote a shared interest. Caucuses can be large, with hundreds of members, or quite small, involving just a few members focused on a specific topic. While some caucuses are associated with a specific party, many are bipartisan. They can exist in the House or the Senate, but they are much more common in the House. While the number of caucuses fluctuates with each congressional cycle, at any time, there are literally hundreds of active caucuses focusing on almost any issue imaginable.

Caucuses have long been an effective advocacy tool used by outside groups to help highlight an issue. Since 2006, ASA, CSSA, and SSSA have worked with a congressional caucus to help educate policymakers and stakeholders about the importance of soils and soil science. The Congressional Soils Caucus (CSC) is bipartisan and is made up of nearly 50 House members representing districts from across the country—all interested in the issue of soil science.

How Can a Caucus Influence Policy?

So just how can a congressional caucus influence policy? While some caucuses are formed around a very specific political or legislative agenda, the CSC is an educational caucus that strives to educate members of Congress and their staff about the role that soil and soil science play in addressing some of the most pressing issues facing our nation and the world. By providing members of Congress with impartial and accurate information, we hope they will better understand the importance of soil science and thereby generate greater support for research.

The CSC works toward this goal, primarily through educational briefings on soil science-related topics. Besides providing information, these briefings have focused on bioenergy production, nutrient management, and agriculture adaptation to climate change. The topics for these briefings generally come from discussions with CSC members and their staff and are related to the districts they represent. While many of the members come from rural districts, increasingly, the caucus is gaining members who come from more urban areas.

Julie McClure
Science Policy Associate
jmcclure@sciencesocieties.org

Left: Art McCabe, Manager of the Community Development Department, City of Lawrence, MA, talking with a briefing attendee.
Below: Joe Schilling, Director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech University, speaking at a congressional briefing on brownfields.

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