Science Policy News

Grassroots Taking Hold

Ask anyone in a congressional office, and they’ll give you the same answer: face-to-face meetings with constituents are the most effective way to highlight an issue and influence policy. While most people think the only way to have an in-person meeting with a member of Congress is to come to Washington, DC, local meetings can be an equally effective way to engage in advocacy. It’s easy to forget that every member of Congress has at least one, if not several, district or state offices where they can meet with constituents. This summer, the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Science Policy Office launched a new initiative that urged Society members to take advantage of this powerful advocacy opportunity.

The inaugural August Challenge encouraged Society members to meet with their members of Congress during the month of August when they’ve returned home to their respective states and districts. The message for these meetings was simple: tell Congress about the valuable research being done right in their own backyards. By giving members of Congress a personal connection to research going on in their districts and states, we hope to increase awareness for food, agriculture, and natural resources research and foster new champions for our sciences.

Overwhelming Participant Feedback

The feedback from the August Challenge was overwhelmingly positive. Almost all of the participants were pleased with how interested members of Congress and their staffs were in their research. “I did not realize members of Congress would be so receptive and willing to listen to the concerns of a student,” says Kara Welch, a graduate student at the University of Arizona. “It was an encouraging experience for me as a student, citizen, and scientist to see democracy in action.”

Shannon Heuberger, an affiliate of the University of Arizona and former ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Congressional Science Fellow, understands how valuable it is for scientists to engage in advocacy. “Scientists often feel like they don’t have a voice in the policy-making process,” she says. The August Challenge enabled scientists to engage with their representatives and share the impact of their research.”

Top: l to r: Shannon Heuberger, affiliate of the University of Arizona (UA); Tim Vandervoet, graduate student at UA; Dennis Ray, Professor in the School of Plant Sciences at UA; Robert Orpet, graduate student at UA; Bob Brubaker, Congressman Jeff Flake’s Regional Representative; Raina Maier, Professor in the Soil, Water, and Environmental Science Department at UA; and Kara Welch, graduate student at UA. Bottom: l to r: Shannon Heuberger; Ian Pepper, Professor in the Soil, Water, and Environmental Science Department at UA; Dennis Ray; Corin Hammond, graduate student at UA; Raina Maier; Ursula Schuch, Professor in the School of Plant Sciences, UA; Congressman Raúl Grijalva; Jim Walworth, Professor in the School of Plant Sciences, UA; Kara Welch; and Robert Orpet.