ASA President’s Message

Having a Seat at the Table: The Importance of Having a Washington, DC Presence

My dad came from a family of eight, and my mother’s brother had 10 children, so as you can image, this could be a rather raucous group. When I was growing up, we often had dinner with my aunts, uncles, and cousins, with all of the cousins sitting at a (rather large) kid’s table. One of the things we were always careful about was being a straggler at the dinner time…latecomers had little choice.

ASA, CSSA, and SSSA have been stridently working on science policy in Washington, DC for the past 14 years with Karl Glasener. Two years ago, Karl Anderson was added to the staff, and last year, the Societies added Julie McClure as our science policy associate. In addition, we have had 18 interns serve in the Science Policy Office since 2000. On 18–19 March, the three Societies will be in Washington for congressional visits. In addition to the executive boards of the Societies, about a dozen student members (selected from more than 90 applicants) and CCAs will also participate. The purpose of the visit is to make sure that our congressional delegations understand that agronomic, crop, and soils research continues to be important to keep food, feed, fiber, and fuel produced in a sustainable manner.

One question that is often asked by members is, “Does having a presence in Washington really pay off?” Last spring, because of the Societies’ presence, the Washington delegation was asked to put forward names of people to serve as a working group to help prepare a report for the president. The report, Agricultural Preparedness and the United States Agricultural Research Enterprise,1 prepared by PCAST (Presidential Council of Advisors on Science and Technology) was released on 7 Dec. 2012. Three ASA members served on this group, Molly Jahn from the University of Wisconsin, Tom Sinclair from North Carolina State University, and myself. The report explores past, current, and future funding by both government and the private sector for research, examines future workforce preparedness, highlights the necessity for long-term research commitments, and recommends future action. Quoting directly from the PCAST overview:

“Our most important conclusion is that our Nation’s agricultural research enterprise is not prepared to meet the challenges that U.S. agriculture faces in the 21st century for two major reasons. First, PCAST finds that the proportion of Federal funding for agricultural research allocated through competitive mechanisms is far below the proportion in other agencies, which fails to adequately encourage innovation. Second, PCAST finds that the current agricultural research portfolio is not optimally balanced; it overlaps with private-sector activities in several significant areas, while underfunding other important areas that are not addressed through private efforts. PCAST recommends the creation of a new innovation ecosystem for agriculture that leverages the best from different parts of the broad U.S. science and technology enterprise, focusing public investment on challenges that enhance the public good and are not readily done by the private sector alone. PCAST calls for a strategic investment that will create the path toward an improved innovation ecosystem for the U.S. heartland, enhancing the economy and harnessing the power of U.S. innovation in science and technology to address this set of great challenges to the Nation. A new agricultural research enterprise should be centered on competitive intramural and extramural research efforts that bring together scientists from traditional agricultural fields and those from the biological and physical sciences. A focused public investment would not only invigorate agricultural research and create opportunities for new business ventures funded by the private sector, but also provide the means to train the next generation of farmers and agricultural researchers to meet the workforce demands of U.S. agriculture in the 21st century.”

In addition, the report recommends that the U.S. increase the investment in agriculture by $700 million per year to focus on the challenges outlined in the report. The challenges include (1) managing new pests, pathogens, and invasive plants; (2) increasing the efficiency of water use; (3) reducing the environmental footprint of agriculture; (4) growing food in a changing climate; (5) managing the production of bioenergy; (6) producing safe and nutritious food; (7) assisting with global food security and maintaining abundant yields; and (8) providing the training for the next generation of the agricultural workforce from farmers to researchers.

This is the first time a PCAST group has focused its efforts on the agricultural sciences. Was it important to have a Washington presence? It definitely helped in placing people on the working group to participate in preparing this important report. Being at the table or being outside? Getting "slim pickins" or a slice of my mother’s much sought after cheesecake or Aunt Stella’s famous toffee? Yes, it makes a difference…Washington contingent keep up the good work!

Please contact me at sharon.clay@sdstate.edu if you have comments, suggestions, or questions.

1 See www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/pcast_agriculture_20121207.pdf