Science Policy News

Students, Members, and CCAs Advocate for Science Funding on Capitol Hill

On 19 March, 13 graduate students from across the country came to Washington, DC to meet with their congressional delegation to raise awareness and support for food, agriculture, and natural resources research funding during the fourth annual Congressional Visits Day (CVD). The students were joined by 21 members of Society leadership and staff, making the 2013 CVD the largest to date.

CVD participants met with 56 congressional offices, specifically focusing on USDA agriculture research programs—the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). The message centered on how the combination of intramural and extramural research programs allows USDA to manage a research portfolio that is both sustained and flexible.

Many of the participants expressed unfamiliarity with science policy and thought CVD would be a great way to learn more. “I was interested in learning more about the [legislative] process,” said University of Maryland student Kristin Fisher. “I also wanted to have the opportunity to make a personal connection, put a face on the [research] issue, and talk about something that’s important to me.”

Before going to the Hill, CVD participants received advocacy training and heard from congressional staff about what makes an effective meeting. A major topic of the training was the importance of science communication. Participants learned how to discuss their research in ways that congressional members and Hill staff, who usually do not have a scientific background, could understand and relate to.

“Scientists know that [research] is important, but sometimes it’s not always clear to everyone else,” said University of Arkansas student Ryan Van Roekel. “[We] come to share what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, and why it’s important, so other people, who might not be scientists, can get a little glimpse into our lives and help support us as we go forward.”

The timing of the 2013 CVD could not have been more critical. On 19 March, the Hill was abuzz with budget activity; the across-the-board budget cuts (known as sequestration) had just gone into effect, the fiscal year (FY) 2013 continuing resolution was about to expire, and budget hearings for FY 2014 had already begun. Even amongst all this activity, CVD participants had overwhelmingly positive and constructive meetings with congressional staff and even the members of Congress themselves.

University of North Dakota student Brandon Montgomery was particularly impressed with his experience in Hill meetings. “You … view these political leaders as kind of untouchable; you can’t meet them, and it’s really tough to talk to them, and as a young person, that’s something that we don’t do very often. Coming here … you realize that [members of Congress] are just people like you. This is their job, this is what they do for a living, and you have to make that connection.”

The 2013 CVD certainly gave ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members the opportunity to make that connection with their members of Congress and put a face to the research enterprise. While CVD was a resounding success, these Hill visits do not happen in a vacuum. “CVD is part of an ongoing advocacy strategy directed by our science policy office in Washington, DC, and participation by members is key to our efforts there;” said Ellen Bergfeld, CEO of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA. “So, I want to say a hearty ‘thank you’ to the all graduate students and others who gave their time to CVD this year, and I hope their example will inspire other ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members to get involved.”

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