SSSA President’s Message
Engaging with the Public on Policy Issues
by Jan Hopmans and Karl Anderson

California is experiencing the worst drought ever recorded. This crisis provides an opportunity for local and state agencies to change policies as the public immediately feels the impacts of the drought. However, if this winter season brings significantly higher-than-normal precipitation by the much-anticipated El Niño, much of today’s suffering will be quickly forgotten unless legislative action is taken soon. There is a tremendous opportunity for us scientists to elevate the dialogue among science experts, policymakers, and the public as people increasingly demand solutions to environmental crises such as the California drought. Too often, decisions are postponed because consequences are not immediately felt or are implemented with short-term stopgap measures while waiting for formal policies to be in place. We are hopeful that new legislation will be in place to protect California’s groundwater resource for future use before the next El Niño comes around.

Effective engagement with the public and government is necessary so that our scientific knowledge can be applied to informed decision-making. However, few of us have the skill set to communicate to a lay audience. Author Chris Mooney explained many possible reasons why it may be so difficult for us scientists to change public opinion. The findings are revealing. Rather than narrowing the knowledge deficit through communicating the fundamental scientific arguments, much of the difficulty of changing public opinion are caused by our misunderstanding of the public and their motivations to not accept scientific reasoning. The report concludes that gap bridging between the two communities is going to be much more successful if social scientists are engaged in the science-policy debate.

We do not pretend to have a solution; however, we can assure you that SSSA is committed to doing its part and connecting our soil science expertise with the public and government. We present some examples below, but we also ask for your suggestions to become better at engaging policymakers and the voting public.

Soil Science Society Policy Office
Together with our sister Societies of ASA and CSSA, we have a Science Policy Office in Washington, DC staffed by Karl Anderson, Bethany Johns, and Julie McClure. The office tracks all federal government activities that may help or hinder our science, such as creating pathways for federally funded research and opportunities for our members to engage in the policymaking process. They manage key relationships with staff and legislators on Capitol Hill, brief them on issues relevant to our science, and advocate for informed decision-making. The Science Policy Office maintains relationships within the White House and the Administration, government science and regulatory agencies such as USDA, NSF, and the Department of Energy. They also establish alliances with other scientific societies, industry partners, and research universities as part of many different coalitions to advocate for science and agriculture policy.

These relationships are critical to ensure our science informs policy and rectify policies that may impact our science.

The staff lead the Congressional Soils Caucus, which educates policymakers on the importance of soil science, holds educational briefings, and writes white papers on key challenges facing agriculture and the environment. On 23 July, we held a “Soils, Vines, and Wines” congressional briefing with a reception in Washington, DC to highlight the importance of soil science and graduate education. The event was co-sponsored by the University of California–Davis (UC-Davis), the Wine and Soils Caucuses, and the Wine Institute. The reception highlight was five soil science graduate students from UC-Davis who discussed the importance of soil science in agriculture, water and air quality, and climate change. The students met with more than 20 members of Congress and their staff at the reception.

The Science Policy Office hosts an annual Congressional Visits Day where graduate students, who are given the Future Leaders in Science award, and our leadership receive training on how to communicate with policymakers and meet with their congressional representatives on Capitol Hill. You can read about many of our Science Policy Office’s activities here.

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