The Power of Local Advocacy

It’s true that sometimes scientists feel like the policy world doesn’t have anything to do with you. Maybe you feel discouraged or frustrated by the partisanship and inaction in Washington. Or you might think that engaging with members who don’t share your political views is a waste of time. If you have any of these opinions, I would encourage you to remember these famous words by Thomas Jefferson: “We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.”

That’s really the crux of advocacy. Groups who are out there making connections, establishing relationships, and engaging on the issues they care about are the groups who are influencing policy. Members of Congress who consistently hear about an issue from their constituents, take notice and act on it.

Ok, you might be thinking, so how do I establish a relationship with my members of Congress when they work in DC and I live in Kansas (or wherever you happen to live)? Well I’m glad you asked. Every August, members of Congress return to their home states and districts to meet with constituents. This “August recess” is the perfect opportunity to meet with your members of Congress LOCALLY. And that’s exactly what the Science Policy Office is asking Society members to do: schedule a local meeting with your members of Congress during the month of August.

The Science Policy Office has updated our Advocacy Toolkit (found at www.soils.org/science-policy/get-involved/toolkit) with step-by-step instructions on how to identify your members of Congress and schedule a local meeting. If you need more help or advice on scheduling a meeting, the Science Policy Office staff is just an email away (sciencepolicy@sciencesocieties.org) and can provide you with all the assistance you need to make the whole process as easy as possible.

The message for your meeting can be tailored to you. This summer would be a great time to talk about the International Year of Soils (IYS). A few weeks ago, the Senate passed a resolution designating 2015 as the International Year of Soils, but the House is still looking for more co-sponsors of the resolution. You could schedule a meeting with your representative to talk about the importance of soil as a natural resource and ask him or her to co-sponsor the IYS resolution.

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Maybe you want to talk about the importance of the USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) program. Our office has developed materials that highlight the impacts of AFRI funding in every state. These factsheets are a great way to illustrate the local impacts of federal programs. If you’re not funded by AFRI, no problem, we have information on other USDA research programs, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Energy–Office of Science.

But don’t feel like your meeting has to focus on the wonky details of budgets or policies. Your message can be as simple as introducing yourself and your research. In fact, informational meetings, where you let members and staff know that you are a local resource who is available to provide expertise on certain issues, can be extremely valuable.

The point of this initiative is put a face and a voice to the research community and show Congress what local scientists are doing. We hope you will take this opportunity to engage in local advocacy and reach out to your members of Congress today.

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