Science Policy News

Geoscience Congressional Visits Day

by Matthew Polizzotto

This past September, I participated in the Geosciences Congressional Visits Day (Geo CVD) in Washington, DC, representing SSSA and partnering with other professional geoscience organizations. I spent the day meeting with congressional offices on Capitol Hill to advocate for federal funds supporting geoscience research and education. Following a day of training to build a team and craft a message, SSSA Science Policy Manager Julie McClure, Jessica Witt from Bechtel Corporation, and I met with staff for Sens. Richard Burr (NC), Thom Tillis (NC), and Ben Cardin (MD), and for Rep. John Delaney (MD), as well as Rep. David Price (NC) himself.

Few reading this article would dispute the importance of our sciences for addressing some of today’s biggest societal challenges. Indeed, understanding and applying soil, crop, and agronomic sciences is vital for improving global food security, providing access to safe drinking water and sanitation, developing robust energy portfolios, and combating climate change. Yet, scientists’ voices are just a few among many vying to be heard by our policymakers. When double-booked within one senate office, my team got rolled over by a half-dozen members of a national baker’s union (who admittedly smelled delicious); as the bakers met with a senior staff member, Julie, Jessica, and I were pinned to a corner table in the entry room to the busy office, striving to cook up a conversation with a member of the senator’s staff who was unexpectedly called to meet with us.

Expect the Unexpected

The Geo CVD organizers made sure we were prepared and understood that meetings would transpire in unexpected ways, and my experience underscores the importance of working with broader coalitions that speak with a unified voice. The Geo CVD brought together geoscientists from a range of related disciplines and from a variety of stages in our professional careers. Our broader group had soil scientists like me, climate modelers, and petroleum geologists; there were members from industry and academia; we had students, postdocs, and senior faculty, all talking to Congress about the importance of federally funded geoscience research and education. In times of shrinking budgets and increased competition for grants, we have to ensure that our political leaders are aware of our issues and needs. But more, as scientists, we can provide skills and a framework for addressing complex problems, and if we don’t represent ourselves, we risk being forgotten.

Through my career, I have become quite comfortable discussing the arcane details of my own research, and I even teach a science policy class that strives to build student skills in science communication. Still, while my congressional meetings felt productive and enlightening, they were also challenging and intimidating. By the end of my sixth meeting, I had crystallized my individual message, and my team had crafted a working routine for building to our “ask,” but I also stumbled in some answers to probing questions from the staff members, who were generally

Worth the Effort

In the end, I think I benefitted from my Geo CVD experience. Everyone professed a respect for science although some offices had more of an interest in agriculture, some in oceans, some in climate change, some in earthquakes—none of which was completely predictable by political affiliation or member websites. The meetings went quickly: we exchanged cards, we discussed the importance of federal support for the geosciences, I offered to be of assistance in the future, and after each one, I found myself wishing I said something or other a little differently. Even the formality of having to show up in a suit made me a little uncomfortable, which would not come as a surprise to most anyone who sees me in my typical ragtag work attire.

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