Science Policy News

2016: More than Just the Election

From what you hear on the news or read in social media, it is easy to think that the presidential election is the only thing going on in politics this year. While the election is clearly an important issue, there is still the normal, everyday work of governing that needs to be done. Even during an election year, Congress needs to work through the appropriations process to fund the government for the upcoming fiscal year.

Even though the appropriations process is not a top news story, it is important to you because the process is how federal research-funding programs like USDA, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Energy, Office of Science receive support each year. Federal funding is a huge part of what supports members of the Societies and is one of the main issues the Science Policy Office focuses on.

The appropriations process for the upcoming fiscal year 2017 started off with early optimism. The president’s budget request provided an increase of $6.2 billion for all federal research and development programs. Great news, right? Well, sort of. A significant portion of the increase came in the form of mandatory money, which lies outside the normal appropriations process. Congress has overwhelmingly criticized the use of mandatory money, making funding increases through this mechanism unlikely. Despite the unusual technique, the president’s budget shows the administration’s strong support for research.

In one particularly bright spot, the USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) received a proposed increase of $350 million, bringing its funding to the fully authorized level of $700 million. Although the majority of this increase was allocated as mandatory funds, we saw this as a milestone victory for food, agriculture, and natural resources research as this was the first time the president has ever proposed that AFRI receive this level of funding. ASA, CSSA, and SSSA went into our spring advocacy efforts, specifically Congressional Visits Day, with a strong case for food, agriculture, and natural resources research.

There was reason to be hopeful on the congressional side as well. Overall discretionary spending was set last fall in the Bipartisan Budget Act, providing an opportunity to return to a regular order in the appropriations process. While the process has not exactly been smooth, both the House and Senate have been moving forward with their respective appropriations bills throughout the spring. The House and Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittees, which set the funding levels for USDA research programs including AFRI, both provided $375 million, an increase of $25 million, for AFRI in FY2017. While this is not the $700 million we had hoped for, it is still a significant victory for our community and shows how a continued effort of our engaged members can make an impact.

Now, that is not the end of the story. Remember the election I mentioned in the introduction? Well, it significantly impacts the congressional calendar. During election years, members of Congress are provided with more time to return to their home states and districts to campaign. That means there is less time than normal to work through the appropriations process before the beginning of the fiscal year on 1 October. At this point, most believe that a continuing resolution spending bill will likely be needed to hold current funding in place at least through the election.

What that means for members like you is that we will still need your help. We will likely be calling on you later this year to reach out to your members of Congress to share the importance of the research you do. While all eyes may be on the election now, be on the lookout for future opportunities to engage in advocacy on behalf of the Societies.

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Societies have made major strides in increasing women’s participation, gender equity deserves our due attention. This requires reflection on and revision of awards-related Society practices, with special attention to increasing committee diversity and disseminating solicitations in a range of ways to tap into a diverse pool of nominees. Implicit gender bias can further be counteracted by clearly defining the desired qualifications, formalizing the evaluations, and making committees accountable for the criteria used in the decision-making process (Reskin, 2000). Can we afford to ignore the innovation and dynamism that emerges from diversity?

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Editor’s note: The References section has been omitted here due to space constraints but can be viewed online at http://bit.ly/1Yq7POk.