I arrived in Washington, DC last September with a newly minted dissertation and an enthusiasm for connecting science and policy. As a Congressional Science Fellow sponsored by ASA, CSSA, and SSSA, my first stop was the two-week orientation hosted by AAAS for science and technology policy fellows. The orientation consisted of long days of presentations and activities in a hotel ballroom, with back-to-back visits from science policy all-stars like the White House Office of Science and Technology Director, John Holdren. Throughout it all, I kept returning to a few main questions: What is the day-to-day experience of a Congressional Science Fellow? What do I, an Arctic soil and ecosystem scientist, actually have to offer to an office in Congress? What would I learn and take away from a year experience in Congress?

Following the orientation, I interviewed at 20 congressional offices and chose a position in the Office of Sen. Ron Wyden, the senior senator from Oregon, a member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee and ranking member of the Finance Committee. I have had the interesting and exciting opportunity of working on energy, climate, and environmental policy issues. While every office and fellowship experience is unique, I now have some responses to my questions from orientation.

Day-to-Day Experience as a Congressional Science Fellow

Work in Congress is a big change of pace from life as a graduate student. Congress is busy, interactive, and dynamic. On any given day, I usually have a number of meetings scheduled and projects to work on. Meetings can be with Oregon constituents and national organizations who want to speak to the senator about specific issues or other staff to coordinate policy efforts. In addition, fellows are encouraged to arrange informal meetings with other professionals, to learn about other people’s work and expand one’s professional network.

Flexibility and adaptability are critical traits in a congressional office. Unlike the more predictable rhythms of graduate school, my plan for a workday in the Senate can change quickly if something urgent and unexpected comes up. For instance, a constituent request, an event scheduled with short notice, or current events can entirely shift the priorities for the day.

On a daily basis, I spend a fair amount of time writing—emailing, writing memos to summarize issues, drafting letters to be sent on behalf of the senator, working on letters with other offices on issues of shared interest, and working on legislative text, such as bills or amendments. It has been fun to develop my writing in these formats.

In the next issue of CSA News...

Translating Research into Practice

It can be challenging for researchers to make recommendations about nitrogen fertilization rates to practitioners or for practitioners to determine optimal nitrogen fertilization rates from the literature. This is because results are often specific to a site or influenced by annual weather patterns. Using a meta-analysis approach, researchers have determined what variables are most important for determining nitrogen uptake by corn and built a model that can make individualized recommendations of nitrogen fertilization rate to farmers. With this site-specific information, farmers can avoid over- or underapplying nitrogen, which can lead to increased profits and decreased nitrogen runoff into local watersheds.

Grow With It! A New Book from ASA for Middle School Students

Aimed at middle school students, the new ASA book Grow With It! explains the science of agronomy using examples from current science in the field, including climate change and GMOs.