The “power of the purse” is one of the most important powers that Congress holds. Congress exercises this power through the two-step process of authorization and appropriation. Understanding how, when, and who sets spending for federal agencies is critical to effective advocacy. However, the first step to understanding this process is to understand the difference between authorization and appropriation.

Authorization is the legislative process by which federal programs are established, continued, or modified. Authorization bills provide oversight to federal agencies, putting in place the duties and functions of an agency or program, its organizational structure, and the responsibilities of agency or program officials.

In addition to laying out the framework for government agencies or programs, authorizing bills also provide guidance regarding funding for these programs. Authorizing bills can set funding recommendations, but they do not provide actual funds. The allocation of funds is the next step in the process—appropriations.

The appropriations process is the annual legislative process that allocates funding for discretionary federal programs. The House and Senate Appropriations Committee is divided into 12 subcommittees that each provide funding for specific federal programs. Appropriations bills provide funding for the upcoming fiscal year, which begins on 1 October. (See this open access article from the March 2017 issue of CSA News magazine for a more detailed description of the appropriations process: http://bit.ly/2z9yfO.)

Authorizing, Appropriations, and the Farm Bill

Now that we’ve established the definitions, perhaps the best way to visualize the whole process is with a specific example. We’ll take one that the Societies are actively engaged in—the farm bill. The farm bill is the colloquial name for the legislation written every four years which authorizes USDA programs. The current farm bill, The Agricultural Act of 2014, expires on 30 Sept. 2018, so the House and Senate Agriculture Committees are currently working to develop bill language for the next farm bill.

One example of how the farm bill shapes USDA programs can be seen in the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). The 2008 farm bill established the AFRI competitive grants program within the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). The purpose, scope, and recommended funding level for AFRI was outlined in this bill. While the 2008 farm bill authorized AFRI funding at $700 million, the farm bill didn’t have the power to actually provide any funding for the program. Funding authority would be carried out through the annual appropriations process.

The House and Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee decides how much funding AFRI and other USDA programs will receive in the upcoming fiscal year. Even though the farm bill authorizes $700 million in AFRI funding, the highest level of funding that has ever been appropriated is $375 million. This is a great example of how the authorization and appropriations processes impact each other. The authorizing legislation puts forth a funding recommendation that serves as a guide or goal that the relevant appropriations subcommittee uses when deciding on the annual funding amount for a program or agency. (See the figure below for the authorizing and appropriations committees of several research funding agencies.)

As advocates, it’s important that we engage in both the authorizing and appropriations process. Each year, the Societies work with the relevant appropriations subcommittees in both the House and Senate to make the case for federal research funding. We are also actively engaged in the various authorizing bills for research programs, such as the farm bill. During both processes, it is critical that ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members like you engage with your legislators and let them know the research priorities for our sciences.

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Authorizing and appropriations committees of several research funding agencies.

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