Communicating with Congress: Some first steps

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Congress develops legislation and allocates funding in ways that profoundly influence the direction and focus of agricultural research, extension, and education programs. In the “Contemporary Issues” section of the Vol. 1, No. 3 Journal of Production Agriculture, I argued that the agricultural community suffers not so much from hostile opposition as from diverse misperceptions of how our food and fiber production system operates. Policymakers and the general public have little understanding, and sometimes little interest, in acquiring a working knowledge of the social, economic, educational, and research infrastructures that nurture agricultural production.

There are a number of concerned organizations actively working to inform Congressional members and staff as they struggle with the issues that face agriculture. The National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), the Extension Service’s Committee on Policy (ECOP), the Experiment Station’s Committee on Policy (ES COP), the Joint Council on Food and Agricultural Sciences, the User’s Advisory Board, and the Council on Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) are but some of these groups. Their efforts are worthy and necessary, but I think they would be quick to point out that something is still amiss. We are not having the collective impact that we must.

In response to this sense that something is amiss, the leadership of the ASA-CSSA-SSSA initiated discussions on what might be done. Traditionally, agriculture’s professional research and education societies have not been actively engaged in identifying or responding to the political forces that affect them. We simply did not see this as being part of our purview. Growing concern about declining financial support for our communities, however, prompted the Society’s leadership to tentatively test the waters by establishing a Congressional Science Fellowship program. The first Fellow, Jonathan Haskett, served with Sen. Quentin N. Burdick (D-ND). I was the second Fellow and Robert Myers is the current Fellow. Dr. Myers and I have both worked with William “Skip” Stiles, staff director for the Subcommittee on Department Operations, Research, and Foreign Agriculture, within the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture. In this capacity we have worked for Rep. George E. Brown (D-CA), the chairman of the

Before creating the Fellowship program, we considered a number of courses of action. The program was finally chosen for several reasons. The Societies did not wish to “lobby,” since this might threaten their nonprofit status. Moreover, we have a mandate from their membership to provide “information,” and that a Fellow would be able to Congressional members and staff. This would ideally be able to come back to these some understanding of how the system works and what next steps might be needed.

In retrospect, their decision was perhaps wiser than any of us might have guessed. Washington is filled with lobbyists. One more lobbyist would have been one person banging on the door from the outside. Staff members develop a judicious interpretation of the information they receive from lobbyists. On the other hand, is there to help. Providing information may be the greatest service to an overworked Congressional staff that is trying to draft truly federal legislation.

As part of this continuing effort to better the ins and outs of Washington, the executive officers of the three Societies came to the capital in late January and met with USDA officials and key Congressional members and staff. The officers were seeking to establish “communication links” with the USDA and develop a better sense of what help might make it known that they, and their organizations, comprise an information resource that should be

Before the visit, the Executive Committee of the three Societies developed background statements on issues being debated in Congress. As they visited Congressional offices, they provided these brief, targeted statements, and discussed in varying detail the issues they addressed. These collected briefing statements comprise an introduction. The issues covered in this introduction. The issues covered in the next steps might be needed.