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Source: BioScience, 61(1) : 82-84

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2011.61.1.18

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AIBS*news*

JANUARY 2011 / VOLUME 61 NUMBER 1

Scientists Share Insights on Water, Agriculture, and Ecosystems with Policymakers

As water supplies become constrained, science can play an important role in managing water conflicts. Recognizing this, the Association of Ecosystem Research Centers (AERC) brought scientists, natural resource managers, and policymakers to Washington, DC, on 14 October for the organization's annual congressional briefing and science symposium. The theme for the 2010 program was: "Using Science to Balance Society's Needs for Water, Agriculture, and Ecosystems."

The AERC congressional briefing is held each year in conjunction with the organization's scientific meeting. Once again in 2010, interest in the briefing grew. Individuals representing House and Senate offices as well as federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations attended the briefing, where they heard from and asked question of individuals working at the nexus of science and public policy.

Lucinda Johnson, AERC past-president and director of the Center for Water and the Environment at the University of Minnesota at Duluth, moderated the one-hour Capitol Hill science briefing. Program speakers were Mark Walbridge, of the US Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service; Carol Couch, of the University of Georgia; Cliff Dahm, of the Delta Science Program and the University of New Mexico; and Paul Faeth, of CNA Corporation.

After the briefing in the Rayburn House Office Building, the group moved down the National Mall to the Smithsonian Institution, where AERC convened a half-day scientific symposium and reception.

doi:10.1525/bio.2011.61.1.18



A photograph from AERC Congressional briefing. Photograph: Julie Palakovich Carr.

As a member organization of AIBS and a contributor to the AIBS Public Policy Office, AERC received planning and logistical assistance for the congressional briefing from AIBS. For more information about AERC, please visit *www.ecosystemresearch.org*. For more information about the AIBS Public Policy Office and its services for AIBS members and contributing societies, please visit *www.aibs.org/public-policy*.

Public Policy Office Offers Opportunities for Graduate Students

The AIBS Public Policy Office is pleased to offer two unique opportunities for graduate students to experience first-hand how science policy is formulated in the nation's capital. Applications are currently being accepted for the 2011 AIBS Emerging Public Policy Leadership Award (EPPLA). The EPPLA program recognizes the leadership potential of graduate students in the biological sciences who have demonstrated an interest in working at the interface of science and public policy. Details about the program and the application process are available at *www.aibs.org/public-policy/student_opportunities.html*. Recipients of the 2011 award will receive an expenses-paid trip to Washington, DC, to participate in the 2011 Biological Sciences Congressional Visits event. Additionally, the 2011 EPPLA recipients will receive a one-year membership in AIBS, a one-year subscription to the journal *BioScience*, and a certificate.

In addition to the 2011 EPPLA program, AIBS and the American Society of Mammalogists are pleased to announce the availability of a three-month, paid internship in the Washington, DC, AIBS Public Policy Office. This exciting opportunity is open to graduate students studying mammalogy. For details about this opportunity, please visit the American Society of Mammalogy Web site (*www.mammalsociety.org*) or *www.aibs.org/public-policy/student_opportunities.html*.

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Biologists, Educators Recognize Excellence in Evolution Education

The National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) presented W. Jason Niedermeyer, a biology teacher at South Salem High School in Salem, Oregon, with the 2010 Evolution Education Award during the NABT annual professional development conference last November.

The Evolution Education Award is cosponsored by AIBS and the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study. The award is presented in recognition of innovative classroom teaching and community education efforts to promote the accurate understanding of biological evolution. Niedermeyer will receive a plaque, a $1000 cash prize, and a one-year membership in AIBS.

"I love to teach evolution," Niedermeyer said. "This is no secret to my students—I tell them at the beginning of the unit that it is my favorite thing to teach all year."

This passion for teaching evolution is displayed in the innovative lessons that Niedermeyer meticulously plans for his students. "Instead of telling students that we are going to be studying evolution immediately after genetics—and risk having some students immediately object—I provide students with opportunities to discover natural selection the same way Darwin did by taking them through the same paces," he said. His curriculum focuses on inquiry-based learning and uses a range of student activities, including hands-on labs, class discussion, reading articles about recent scientific discoveries, and watching videos.

Niedermeyer's creative approach to teaching evolution has opened the minds of students. "Teachers who can undertake such a charged topic while inviting this sort of confidence from their students are few and far between," said Niedermeyer's former student Marika Lou. "The passion and enthusiasm with which he would teach—especially when it came to evolution, which was quite obviously his favorite topic—made it difficult for any student not to feel the same way."

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Recent Public Policy Reports Online at *www.aibs.org/public-policy-reports*

Public Policy Report for 25 October 2010

- **UN Report Informs Policymakers on Value of Ecosystem Services, Biodiversity.** The newly released United Nations (UN) report, *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity: Mainstreaming the Economics of Nature*, seeks to characterize the value of the environment. The document is the seventh and final report from the UN Environment Programme on the economic value of ecosystems and biodiversity. The report provides an economic valuation of the natural world that is intended to help policymakers make informed decisions about the environment.

- **IPCC to Reform How It Deals With Scientific Uncertainty and Errors.** The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has revised its guidelines for dealing with scientific uncertainty in its climate assessment reports. In the future, authors and reviewers of international climate reports will assess the quality of scientific information available to them, as well as the degree of uncertainty in the findings. According to Chris Field, cochair of the IPCC working group on impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability: "What I expect us to do is to use the uncertainty guidance very carefully so we can avoid problems where we seem to be asserting more confidence than the data will allow; but also provide value to a discussion where the confidence isn't necessarily very high."

- **OSTP Directs Agencies to Plan for the Management of Scientific Collections.** John Holdren, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), has directed all federal

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agencies to plan for the management of scientific collections. The 6 October directive was issued as agencies are working internally and with the White House Office of Management and Budget to develop the president's fiscal year 2012 budget request. The memorandum directs the implementation of several recommendations included in a 2009 report from the Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections. Within 12 months, agencies are directed to assess and realistically project budgets for collections care and maintenance. Additionally, agencies "are urged to share their scientific collections policies and procedures to help [other] agencies develop best practices." Lastly, agencies are directed to collaborate to document their collections holdings and to make this information available online to the public within 36 months.

- **Interior Inspector General Includes Scientific Collections Management as a Top Agency Priority.** A new report by the inspector general for the Department of the Interior calls for the prioritization of management of museum collections within the department. The report, which outlines major management and performance challenges facing the department, reflects "what the Office of Inspector General considers significant impediments to the Department's efforts to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in its bureaus' management and operations." Collections management is included within "resource protection and management," which is one of eight broad priorities outlined in the report.

- **NSF Fellowship to Recognize STEM Education as Valid Field of Study.** Starting in 2011, the National Science Foundation (NSF) will recognize science education as a valid field of study for its prestigious graduate research fellowship. Until now, the fellowship program did not formally recognize science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education as a topic that was eligible for support. Applicants for the fellowship had to choose "other" as their primary field of research, rather than selecting 1 of the nearly 150 fields that the NSF specified. Beginning with the 2011 application, candidates for the fellowship can select from among five fields of study in "STEM Education and Learning Research," including science education, technology education, engineering education, and math education. For more information about the graduate research fellowship, visit *www.nsfgrfp.org*.

Public Policy Report for 12 October 2010

- **Action Alert: Ask Your Senators to Reauthorize America COMPETES.** Developing a skilled workforce and stimulating economic growth requires investments in scientific research and education. Currently, many federal programs supported by the National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy Office of Science, and other federal agencies are in jeopardy because of the expiration of the authorization of the America COMPETES Act. Congress is considering legislation to reauthorize the act; legislation passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support in June, but the Senate has yet to act. It is important that the Senate pass its version of the legislation this year.

- **A New Director for the National Science Foundation.** The Senate has confirmed President Obama's nomination of Subra Suresh to the post of director of the National Science Foundation (NSF). Suresh most recently served as dean of the School of Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His research into the mechanical properties of engineered and biological materials has included studies of nanostructured materials and the exploration of connections between biological cell mechanics and human disease. The director of the NSF is appointed to a six-year term.

- **Census of Marine Life Releases Report.** A 10-year effort to explore and document the world's oceans has resulted in a treasure trove of scientific information. The Census of Marine Life, an international endeavor by 2700 scientists from 80 countries, has revealed what, where, and how much lives and hides in the world's oceans. The census has discovered close to 6000 new species and described 1200 of them. Thirty million observations of species and their distributions have been digitally archived and are now available in the Ocean Biogeographic Information System (*www.iobis.org*), an online, open-access, globally distributed network of systematic, ecological, and environmental information. The project also served to establish a baseline of human impacts on marine ecosystems.

- **BP Releases Plans for Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill Research Fund.** On 30 September, British Petroleum announced that a $500-million research fund to study the impacts of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill would be administered by the governors of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. The Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative will fund research over the next 10 years to study the environmental and human health impacts of the spill. Research will be focused in five areas: physical distribution and ultimate fate of contaminants; chemical and biological degradation of the contaminants; environmental impacts and ecosystem recovery; technology developments for oil spill detection, mitigation, and remediation; and human health.

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