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Government Looks into Health of Federal Science Collections

HOLLY MENNINGER

Researchers at university-based natural science collections have long known that their institutions face daunting budgetary and infrastructure challenges. It is becoming equally apparent that federal collections face comparable challenges.

Recent circumstances at the Smithsonian Institution (SI), the flagship for federal research collections, illustrate some of those challenges. For example, the US Government Accountability Office has reported that a number of buildings within the SI museum complex have deteriorated to the point that some buildings have been closed to the public. And just a few miles from Washington, DC, the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) houses much of one of the largest entomology collections in the world in the basement of a building constructed in the 1930s. Although BARC is charged with protecting the nation's agricultural enterprise from invasive species, among other endeavors, the facilities for BARC collections lack appropriate ventilation and humidity- and temperature-control systems.

Congress has acknowledged the need for new investments in research infrastructure. The America COMPETES (America Creating Opportunities to Meaningfully Promote Excellence in Technology, Education, and Science) Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush in August, instructs the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) to review federal research infrastructure annually and to coordinate an acquisition, refurbishment, and maintenance plan to address deficiencies.

Also buoying up the natural science collections community are statements from the OSTP that reflect the im-

portance of federal collections to the nation. Since 2005, the White House's Office of Management and Budget and the OSTP have included this language about collections in their annual budget guidance to federal agencies: "Object-based collections provide the fundamental infrastructure for contemporary and future scientific advancements." This guidance has produced a new National Science and Technology Council working group—the Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections (IWGSC)—to assess the state of the federal government's vast object-based scientific collections, which include physical, chemical, and biological specimens.

The IWGSC recently completed a survey of object-based scientific collections held by federal agencies, note IWGSC cochairs Scott Miller, who is with the SI, and Phyllis Johnson, of the US Department of Agriculture. Survey results will be the basis for an IWGSC report, which many familiar with federal collections hope will include strong recommendations to improve the federal infrastructure. The IWGSC cochairs hope to issue the group's recommendations in March or April of 2008, which would allow ample lead time to influence the fiscal year 2010 budget.

In the meantime, the status of non-federal collections, including state and local collections and university-based collections, gives cause for concern. "Nonfederal natural history collections are really struggling. They are not receiving the support they need," warns Alan Prather, director of the Michigan State University Herbarium. In response to community pressure, the IWGSC asked the National Science

Foundation (NSF) to conduct a complementary survey of nonfederal collections. Prather worries, however, that the survey will exclude the vast majority of collections, because federal rules prevent the NSF from soliciting responses from institutions that have not recently received an NSF grant.

Ultimately, Miller hopes that the efforts of the IWGSC, including the complementary NSF survey, will contribute to a better appreciation of collections' value on the part of agency managers and the public. "Collections are not recognized as long-term assets and largely do not get recognized in agency budgets as needing that kind of care," Miller said. With the exception of the SI, no federal agency has specific budget lines for collections and the support staff necessary to maintain them. Consequently, collections management has suffered, Miller added.

Not surprisingly, improving the conditions and research opportunities associated with federal collections will require a sustained commitment from federal decisionmakers, an effort that has been difficult to secure because "the natural science collections community is so fractured that we haven't been able to articulate our concerns," admits Hank Bart, of the Tulane University Museum of Natural History. Bart and many of his colleagues are optimistic, however, that the results from the IWGSC and NSF reports will enable the community to coalesce around the common goal of refurbishing infrastructure for natural science collections.

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