

AAG Washington Monitor

Wirth Addresses Energy Policy in Annual Meeting Keynote

One of the highlights of the 2005 AAG Annual Meeting, former U.S. Senator Timothy Wirth (D-CO) delivered a keynote address on energy policy. Senator Wirth, who had also previously served as U.S. Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs in the Clinton Administration, is now President of the United Nations Foundation and Better World Fund.

Wirth began his remarks by noting that “energy is a complex, exceedingly difficult, arcane issue that touches so many areas of policy—but the complexity keeps it off the top of many agendas.” He also asserted that we find ourselves at a major crossroad in 2005—energy is the linchpin of America’s economic future and much depends on how we meet our energy needs. There are two major challenges related to our current energy dependence: a) the national security challenge tied to relying on oil from the Persian Gulf, and b) global climate change. These challenges can be turned into opportunities for economic growth and job creation if America leads the way.

Wirth conceded that meeting the climate change challenge will be extremely difficult based on current trends and policy frameworks. He explained that “just to stabilize at a doubling of the level of carbon in the atmosphere, we will have to cut carbon emissions by 70 percent in a relatively short period of time.” To put this number in some context, Wirth noted that the extremely controversial and tough-to-negotiate Kyoto protocol on global climate change calls for merely a 4 percent reduction in carbon emissions.

On the security side, the Senator stated that we currently have “150,000 troops on the ground in the Middle East and are committed to spending approximately \$200 billion in the near future.” This commitment is due in large part to our dependence on oil and the fact that we import 50 percent of our oil from that part of the world. And too little is being done

to reduce our dependence—instead gas-guzzling SUVs are taking on a greater and greater role in automobile industry sales. Furthermore, Wirth blamed policymakers for being too reliant on minor fixes such as drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). He was also sharply critical of President Bush and Senator Kerry for not making a bigger issue of energy policy during last year’s campaign.

Despite its lack of billing during the campaign season, energy legislation has been a major focus in Washington of late. For several years running, the Bush administration and its allies in Congress have sought to pass measures that would allow the ANWR drilling and amend the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Clean Water Act. Until this year, these efforts had been rebuffed by Senate moderates, but in recent weeks the Senate passed a budget measure that would, for the first time, allow the ANWR drilling. This extremely close vote could foretell significant movement on energy policy in the coming months.

Panel Session Focuses on “Geography and the Congress”

Also at the annual meeting, an AAG-organized panel was convened on “Geography and the Congress” to discuss the recent work of our Association and others members of the geographic community in the public policy process. Douglas Richardson, AAG Executive Director, provided an overview of the AAG’s Public Policy office and its activities in the past year. The office was established a year ago with support from AAG Presidential Achievement Award recipient Alan Voorhees and the Geographical Education National Implementation Project (GENIP). The AAG’s Public Policy office is a collaborative effort involving numerous AAG staff and multiple programs at the AAG.

My comments centered on the importance we have placed on reaching out to the AAG membership through this column, by calling on the expertise of AAG

members as needed, and by asking members to reach out to their members of Congress as appropriate. (We have recently been augmenting our capability to contact all AAG members within certain congressional districts as legislative priorities arise.) I also discussed the key successes we have had in recent months, including our support for a substantial increase in the federal appropriation to the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey program and changes to the Defense Authorization Act dealing with public access to commercial satellite data. (Please see my columns from November 2004 and January 2005 for more detail.) Michael Solem followed me by explaining the importance of state education standards and how they relate to how geography is taught in schools.

Former Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer, now Director of Policy and Public Sector Strategies at ESRI, focused his remarks on how to work with members of Congress. He noted the importance of giving context to any argument made on behalf of the geographic discipline—lawmakers need to think about geography as more than just places and maps. Lanny Proffer, representing the National Geographic Society (NGS), talked about the NGS’s efforts to have Congress pass a geography education initiative to make up for the fact that geography is listed as a core discipline in the Federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, but has no associated funding. The NGS is hopeful that Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK) or a colleague will introduce the measure in the coming weeks. It eventually could end up as a legislative rider to either the Higher Education Act (see related article) or next year’s reauthorization of NCLB. Osa Brand of the National Council on Geographic Education closed the session by discussing the collaborative work of GENIP and the leadership role all of the member organizations have taken on behalf of geography education.

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Higher Ed Act Still Stuck; Action Unlikely Soon

When the 109th Congress convened in January, the Republican leadership was hopeful that it would quickly be able to pick up where work left off last year on the Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization. However, amid a tsunami crisis, budget wrangling, the Teri Schiavo incident, controversy over judicial confirmations, and political and ethics attacks on House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX), Congress has been bogged down and unable to near completion of the HEA.

As was done last year, the House has split various components of the HEA into separate legislation and these bills are moving through the chamber separately. Some provisions have passed the full House, while others still await a hearing by Chairman John Boehner (R-OH) and

the Education and Workforce Committee. But key staff members have characterized the work on the HEA as bipartisan and they hope to get through the remaining issues in the coming weeks.

The Senate, meanwhile, has yet to take up the HEA in 2005, and future action is uncertain. Senators, including Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Michael Enzi (R-WY), have been tied up with presidential nominations and Enzi just specified that he will likely hold his first hearing on the HEA on April 28. Furthermore, key staffers have indicated that while they are closely monitoring the various House bills, the Senate will probably proceed on a different course. This could make the conference process quite lengthy and arduous. House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL), for one, has predicted that there would be few major legislative accomplishments in

2005, and as it concerns the HEA, at least, his prediction appears prophetic.

Thanks from the Meridian

As we wrap up the 2005 annual meeting, I wanted to personally note that it was great to meet so many of you in Denver for the first time. We at the AAG are grateful for the hard work everyone put into making the meeting and the sessions such a success. We also appreciate everyone's support for the first year of the Washington Monitor and look forward to continuing to work with all of you to advance geography through the public policy process. As always, please don't hesitate to contact us with any questions, comments, or concerns. Thanks! ■

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Award Deadlines

2005 MAY

15. SWG Pruitt National Minority Fellowship Program. Contact Ruth Shirey at rishirey@iup.edu.

SEPTEMBER

1. Geography Education National Implementation Project (GENIP). www.aag.org/Grantsawards/Genip.html.

OCTOBER

14. McColl Family Fellowship. www.ameergeog.org/scholarships_program.htm

15. Fulbright Teacher and Administrator Exchanges. www.fulbrightexchanges.org.

NOVEMBER

17. NSF's Biocomplexity in the Environment/Dynamics of Coupled Natural and Humans Systems. www.nsf.gov/geo/ere/ereweb/fun-biocomplex.cfm.

DECEMBER

1. James R. Anderson Medal of Honor. www.aag.org/grantsawards/anderson_medal.cfm.

31. AAG Glenda Laws Award. www.aag.org/grantsawards/glendalawsaward.html.

31. AAG Meredith F. Burrill Award. www.aag.org/grantsawards/burrill.html.

31. AAG George and Viola Hoffman Award. www.aag.org/grantsawards/hoffmanfund.html.

31. J.B. Jackson Prize. www.aag.org/grantsawards/jackson_prize.html.

31. AAG Globe and Meridian Book Awards. www.aag.org/grantsawards/index.cfm.

31. AAG Anne U. White Fund. www.aag.org/grantsawards/annewhitefund.html.

31. AAG Research Grants. www.aag.org/grantsawards/generalresearch.html.

31. AAG IGIF Student Travel Grant. www.aag.org/grantsawards/index.cfm.

31. AAG Dissertation Research Grants. www.aag.org/grantsawards/dissertationresearch.html.

Don't miss the 2006 AAG Annual Meeting, March 7-11 at the Palmer House Hilton Hotel in Chicago, Illinois.