

Washington Monitor

With Kennedy's Passing, Harkin Takes Reins of HELP Committee

The late-August death of Ted Kennedy – while not unexpected – was a poignant moment for official Washington. In my many years of observing and participating in national politics, I cannot remember a non-presidential memorial that provoked as much grief and outpouring as that of Kennedy's.

While Kennedy – the Senate's "liberal lion" – will have a lasting legacy for his contributions to a range of key public policy issues, the work of the Senate must go on. At the time of his death, Kennedy was chairman of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee – though Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT) had been steering the committee through most of its work in 2009. Dodd was expected to take over the HELP chairmanship, but he opted to remain as chairman of the Senate Banking Committee – a decision likely driven in part by the tough reelection fight he is facing back home in Connecticut.

As a result, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) will move up to take the HELP gavel. Harkin has been in the Senate since 1984, and like Kennedy is strongly identified with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Harkin ran for president in 1992 and is probably best known for his work on behalf of people with disabilities – as well as his efforts to better fund researchers through increased appropriations for the National Institutes of Health.

Harkin now becomes a significant player for geography because of the HELP Committee's role as the oversight panel for K-12 and higher education issues. While education has taken a back seat to health care in 2009, it will return to the fore as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is long overdue for reauthorization. Unlike Kennedy, who was a co-sponsor of the Teaching Geography is Fundamental legislation and whose aides had met with me and others from the AAG Staff, Harkin has not been directly

exposed to key geography education issues. Accordingly, the AAG will work diligently in the coming months to respond to anticipated queries from Chairman Harkin and his committee regarding the importance of geography education and the glaring lack of funding for geography in the NCLB framework.

Bill Would Create USGS AmericaView Program

Bipartisan legislation has been introduced in the U.S. Senate that would create a program at the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) aimed at promoting "national remote sensing education, outreach, and research ... to advance the availability, timely distribution, and widespread use of geospatial imagery for education, research, assessment, and monitoring purposes in each state." The program – which would be known as AmericaView – would operate through grant-funded, state-level entities known as StateView programs.

Of note, the legislation includes Congressional findings that higher-ed institutions (along with state and local government agencies) use geospatial imagery for the following key purposes: monitoring the health of Federal and State land and forests; understanding ecosystems and predicting ecosystem change; mapping hydrologic systems and assessing water quality; monitoring crop productivity, assessing damage, and predicting crop yield; assisting with transportation and land-use planning in the urban areas of the United States; predicting and assisting with the management of human and wildlife disease outbreaks; and mapping natural hazards and assessing risk.

One of the key purposes of the AmericaView program would be to "increase accessibility to, and expand the use of, remote sensing data in a standard, easy-to-use format by Federal, State, local, and tribal governments, communities, educational institutions, and the commercial sector." The program would also

be aimed at aiding the StateView programs in establishing the "infrastructure necessary to increase access to geospatial imagery for research and educational purposes."

Under the bill, a Federal Partner Advisory Committee would be created to advise the USGS Director regarding AmericaView. Members would come from AmericaView, the USGS, the Department of Agriculture, and other representatives designated by the Secretary of the Interior.

The bill – S. 1078 – was introduced by Sen. Tim Johnson (D-SD), with Sen. George Voinovich (R-OH) serving as co-sponsor. The legislation has been referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. We will follow the progress of this legislation and report on any key developments.

New NEH Chairman Jim Leach

Sticking with the theme of Iowans taking on important new roles, on August 7 the Senate confirmed President Obama's nomination of Jim Leach to serve as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Leach previously served as a Republican Congressman from Iowa from 1977-2007 – but he broke ranks with his party and endorsed Obama for president during the 2008 campaign.

Leach now takes over an agency that oversees a rapidly-expanding source of humanities research and programmatic grants and has a proposed Fiscal Year 2010 budget of \$171.32 million – an increase of 10.5 percent over the FY 2009 appropriation. The AAG currently has a grant from the NEH to develop an online Historical GIS Research Clearinghouse and Archive (see Richardson, "Spatial Histories, Temporal Geographies," *AAG Newsletter*, June 2009). More information about NEH grant programs may be found at www.neh.gov. ■

John Wertman
jwertman@aag.org

See pages 16-17 for the 2010 AAG Annual Meeting Call for Papers.