President Bush Nominates Arden Bement, Jr., to Serve as National Science Foundation Director

On September 15, President Bush announced the nomination of Arden L. Bement, Jr., to serve as Director of the National Science Foundation. Bement has held the position in an acting capacity since February and will formally replace former Director Rita Colwell once he is confirmed by the Senate.

Bement first joined the federal government as Director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) in late 2001. He has kept his NIST appointment pending action on the NSF nomination. Prior to his service at NIST, Bement was the David A. Ross Distinguished Professor of Nuclear Engineering and Head of the School of Nuclear Engineering at Purdue University. He earned his masters and doctorate in metallurgical engineering from the University of Idaho and the University of Michigan respectively. He did his undergraduate work at the Colorado School of Mines.

Bement has served previously on several federal advisory panels, including the National Science Board. In a statement to NSF employees announcing his nomination, Bement asserted “Although NSF faces significant challenges in the near future due to Federal budget issues, I am committed to the policies and operations that have stood the test of time and have helped make NSF an extraordinary agency. Our pursuit of research and education at the frontiers of science and engineering, our commitment to broadening participation both within and without the Foundation, and our desire to ensure that we have the resources to carry out this vision will be among my top priorities.”

His nomination was approved by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee on September 22 and has been placed on the chamber’s executive calendar. It’s not clear when the full Senate will vote on the matter, but confirmation is expected.

AAG Urges Congress to Reconsider Satellite Imagery FOIA Exemption; Provision Altered

During its recent consideration of the Defense Authorization Act, Congress debated a provision in the bill that would have exempted commercial satellite data controlled by the government under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The Defense Department had requested the language because of homeland security concerns resulting from public disclosure and because they didn’t want to take the step of classifying the images.

On September 22, AAG Executive Director Doug Richardson wrote to the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees urging them to reconsider the provision, noting that “We must not let the terrorist threat impede the vital work being done by all those in fields who rely on access to Landsat images and data.” Richardson’s letters joined a chorus of opposition to the FOIA exemption – the American Library Association led a group of organizations objecting to the expansion of data precluded from public release. In response to these numerous concerns, the councils for the Armed Services Committees conceded that the language in the provision was poorly written and prohibits access counter to the original intent of the legislators.

On October 8, the House and Senate conferees charged with reconciling differences in the two chambers’ versions of the bill finished their work and agreed to revise the satellite imagery amendment. The final version of the bill, which will soon be signed into law by President Bush, would only exempt from FOIA imagery that is already prohibited “for reasons of national security.” This is a victory for the research community and should assure that most government-owned satellite data and images remain publicly available.

American Community Survey Funding in Jeopardy, Program Faces Elimination

As Congressional appropriators begin work on a final funding agreement for fiscal year 2005 programs, the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) is facing a make-or-break allocation. The ACS, which would replace the long form, is designed to provide year-by-year demographic data on communities of all sizes and is a critical part of the Bureau’s 2010 census plan.

The Bush Administration proposed ACS funding of $165 million for FY 2005, but the House and Senate versions of the appropriations legislation came in at $146 million and $65 million respectively. Generally, appropriators split the difference between the House and Senate numbers, but with implementation deadlines nearing, Census Director C. Louis Kincannon has asserted that a final number below $142 million would force him to eliminate the ACS and reinstate a long form for 2010.

The AAG has written to key appropriators urging them to provide adequate funding for the ACS in FY 2005.

Putnam Resigns Subcommittee Chairmanship

Last month, I reported that Rep. Adam Putnam (R-FL), chairman of the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census, was interested in crafting legislation that would create an official charged with oversight of federal GIS programs within the Office of Management and Budget. In an unexpected move, however, Putnam resigned his subcommittee chairmanship

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and seat on the Government Reform Panel on September 28th in order to accept an appointment by Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) to the powerful House Rules Committee.

No successor to Putnam has been announced as of yet, and it’s likely that no action on the vacancy will be taken until at least after the election. As for what Putnam’s departure will mean to the subcommittee’s agenda, that is unclear at this point. The panel’s staff has remained in place, so no drastic changes are likely to occur, and Putnam’s departure could be beneficial to GIS and Census issues over the long run. For starters, Putnam will bring his background and interest in geographic technologies and demographic data to the Rules Committee, which sets the debate structure for all bills considered by the House. In addition, the ascension of a new chairman will be an opportunity for the AAG to reach out to this individual and promote the value of geographic research and technologies to multiple aspects of the federal government.

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