Geographer Provides Congressional Testimony on Katrina Disaster

On November 10, former AAG President Susan Cutter, Carolina Distinguished Professor of Geography and Director, Hazards Research Lab at the University of South Carolina, joined three other distinguished social scientists in testifying at a House Science Research Subcommittee on “The Role of Social Science Research in Disaster Preparedness and Response.” The AAG worked with the committee and other organizations such as COSSA to ensure that geography would be represented at the hearing. The hearing was called to assess the federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina and other recent disasters.

At the outset, Cutter noted that “Starting with Gilbert White’s floodplain studies in the 1940s and continuing today, geographers have provided the scientific basis for disaster and hazard reduction policies and contributed to the nation’s understanding of the regional variability in hazardousness.” She added that “vulnerability science is an emergent multidisciplinary field that requires a place-based understanding of the interactions between natural systems, the built environment, and human systems.” She pointed to three examples of social science contributions to the understanding of vulnerability science, drawn largely from the field of geography: a) the improvement in the metrics, models, and methods for social vulnerability assessments; b) the area of integrated hazards assessment methodology; and c) the area of warnings and evacuation behavior.

The subcommittee’s ranking member, Rep. Diane Hooley (D-CA), picked up on Cutter’s testimony and that of the other panelists in noting: “We have good research in this area—our witnesses today are proof of that. Now, I want to enable the translation of that research into real-world practice. As a federal government, we must honestly assess what is working and what isn’t working. We must ask ourselves if there are impediments to applying the social and behavioral sciences research findings to the disaster planning, recovery, and response activities of the responsible public and private sector organizations. If there are barriers, we’ve got to knock them down and get to work.”

The full text of Cutter’s remarks and additional information about the hearing is available on the web at www.house.gov/science/hearings/research05/nov%2010/index.htm.

AAG Joins New Congressional Hazards Caucus

In related news, the AAG recently agreed to join and play a leadership role in the new Congressional Hazards Caucus. An original Hazards Caucus was created in 2000 by Sen. Ted Stevens (R-AK) and then Sen. John Edwards (D-NC) to provide ways for governments at all levels to better prepare for and help mitigate the costs of natural disasters. Today, the new caucus provides members of Congress with information and education on preparing for, mitigating against, responding to, and recovering from natural and man-made disasters. As a result of the AAG’s efforts, the mission of the new caucus also includes “demonstrating the ability of new technologies, such as geographic information systems, to address societal challenges faced by state and local government and the private sector and improving understanding of society’s need to prepare for disasters of all types.

The bipartisan, newly bicameral caucus is led by four co-chairs in the Senate: Stevens and Senators Mary Landrieu (D-LA), Jim DeMint (R-SC), and Ben Nelson (D-NE); and four co-chairs in the House: Reps. Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD), Dennis Moore (D-KS), Jo Bonner (R-AL), and Zoe Lofgren (D-CA). The caucus includes more than sixty organizational members, including professional, scientific, and engineering societies, relief organizations, higher education associations, institutions of higher learning, trade associations, and private companies.

Typical caucus events include Capitol Hill briefings, roundtable discussions, special forums, and receptions. The caucus is online at www.hazardscaucus.org/.

HEA Attached to Reconciliation Bill; Geo-Ed Bill Currently Stalled

The Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pension Committee’s reauthorization proposal for the Higher Education Act (HEA) has been attached to the Senate version of the reconciliation bill, which deals with federal spending measures. The House’s version of the budget reconciliation contains only the HEA’s student aid sections. While developments at the end of any congressional session are always fast moving and unpredictable, it’s possible the congressional leadership may seriously try to pass the HEA, using either the reconciliation bill or the Defense Department’s appropriation bill as a vehicle. Either way, the chambers would have to resolve the serious differences that still exist on the law’s Title VI (international studies), which may prove an insurmountable hurdle in such a short period of time. For more on the HEA, please refer to the October 2005 AAG Washington Monitor.

Meanwhile, supporters of the Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act (S. 1376), a bill aimed at expanding geographic literacy among students in kindergarten through grade twelve, decided against using the HEA as a vehicle for their legislation. Together with others led by the National Geographic Society, the AAG plans to renew the push for the act next year and are adding Senate sponsors in the meantime. For a full account of S. 1376, please see the September 2005 edition of the AAG Washington Monitor.

Torrieri Promoted at Census

AAG Member and geographer Nancy Torrieri has been appointed Chief of the American Community Survey (ACS) Outreach and Analysis Staff. She first joined the Census Bureau in 1986 and most recently led outreach and education initiatives for the ACS and has ably managed the Survey’s Federal Agency Information Program. Our congratulations to Nancy!

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