Coburn Amendment Defeated; Repercussions for NSF Research?

For years, research advocates toiling on Capitol Hill have made the argument to members of Congress that decisions about which research projects to fund should be left to the expert review panels at the scientific agencies – including the National Science Foundation (NSF), the United States Geological Survey, and the National Institutes of Health, among others. This argument, however, has often failed to stop attempted mischief by a member or a group of members of Congress – and it seems that every few years battles have to be fought to preserve the right of the agencies to fund research as they best see fit.

This year, a more disturbing clash took place – one that pitted Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) against NSF advocates and supporters of political science. Coburn proposed an amendment to the NSF’s Fiscal Year 2010 appropriations bill that would have blocked the Foundation from using any funds to support its Political Science program. The battle was a return of sorts to the early 1980s – when Reagan Republicans attacked social science funding throughout the government.

Ultimately the amendment was defeated by a vote of 36-62 – and Coburn had even admitted before the vote that he stood no chance of winning. But the vote was nonetheless disconcerting to research advocates in Washington, and especially those supportive of the social sciences. Much credit for the outcome goes to the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) – who led the way in opposition to Coburn’s proposal. The AAG is a member of COSSA.

Five Democrats joined 31 Republicans in supporting the Amendment. Eight Republicans, conversely, voted with 54 Democrats to defeat the proposal. The Democrats voting “yes” were Max Baucus (MT), Evan Bayh (IN), Claire McCaskill (MO), Ben Nelson (NE), and Jim Webb (VA); and the Republicans voting no were Kit Bond (MO), Richard Burr (NC), Thad Cochran (MS), Susan Collins (ME), John Cornyn (TX), Judd Gregg (NH), Mike Johanns (NE), and Olympia Snowe (ME).

While the amendment was ultimately defeated handily, supporters of government funding for science will have to remain vigilant to beat back similar attacks in the future.

Also worth noting is that during the same debate, the Senate ruled an amendment by David Vitter (R-LA) on the 2010 Census non-germane – and refused to vote on it. Vitter’s proposal would have forced the Census Bureau to add a question to the 2010 form about citizenship status – and it would have blocked states from counting non-citizens when determining population levels. It was unclear whether Vitter would attempt to add the proposal to different legislation.

AmericaView Update

Following my article on the USGS AmericaView program, which ran in the October edition of this column, Dr. Rick Landenberger, AmericaView Executive Director, West Virginia University, contacted me to ask if he could provide an update. I am grateful for his contribution. Dr. Landenberger’s comments follow below.

As noted in the October “Washington Monitor,” legislation has been introduced in the U.S. Senate that would authorize 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 – known as AmericaView – would operate through grant-funded, state-level entities known as StateView programs. Senators Tim Johnson (D-SD) and George Voinovich (R-OH) are the original sponsor and co-sponsor of the bill – S. 1078. The House companion bill, H.R. 2489, is entitled “The National Land Remote Sensing Outreach Act” and is sponsored by Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (D-SD) and co-sponsored by Rep. Steven LaTourette (R-OH). The legislation passed in the House on October 27 by a vote of 379-33. While the language is somewhat different from S. 1078, both bills are bipartisan.

I am contributing this article to share the fact that AmericaView has already existed in a non-profit capacity since 2003 and has been effectively pursuing a joint mission in concert with the USGS during the last six years. Thus, enactment of the House and Senate legislation would not create AmericaView per se. We are here now, and are here to stay. Indeed, despite the fact that our funding has declined dramatically over the past six years, we now have over 350 academic, federal and state agency, commercial sector, and non-profit partners in 36 member states.

The AmericaView mission has been and continues to be focused on promoting the civilian uses of remotely-sensed imagery at the state and local level throughout the U.S. – through support of geospatial K-16 education, remote sensing professional development, training, data archiving and distribution; and applied environmental research.

The key point of S. 1078 and H.R. 2489 is that they would establish a Congressionally-authorized program to continue this important work, rather than an ad-hoc program whose funding has been unpredictable from year to year. In doing so, the bills recognize and codify the value of state-based efforts as integral within the broader USGS mission. Passage would help ensure adequate funding and significantly advance the benefits of geospatial technologies throughout the United States, including expansion of the existing program to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories.

The AAG is organizing several high-level Congressional panels for the upcoming Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. I look forward to seeing you there!

John Wertman
jwertman@aag.org