AAG Panel on Elementary and Secondary Education Act

At this time of year, I always look forward to the AAG Annual Meeting as a great opportunity to reconnect with the many friends I’ve made over the years amongst the association’s membership. I hope to see as many of you as possible in Seattle – and if we have never had the pleasure of meeting, please try to find me to say hello at some point during the gathering.

In Seattle, I will be leading a panel on K-12 geography education and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Fellow AAG staff member Susan Gallagher will also take part, and we will be joined by representatives from the offices of U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), Congressman Dave Reichert (R-WA), and the Superintendent for Public Instruction for the State of Washington. It should be an interesting and wide-ranging discussion that will center on the likelihood of Congressional action on the ESEA in 2011 and the policy goals for the reauthorization from the perspective of federal and state-level political leaders. The panel will take place at 10:00 a.m. on Friday, April 15 in Room 612 of the Washington State Convention Center. We hope to see you there.

Administration Budget Proposal Favorable for Science

On February 14, the Obama Administration released its federal budget document for Fiscal Year 2012. The proposal is favorable for most research agencies, but the budget landscape is clouded by the ongoing political debate on federal spending.

President Obama called for a renewed focus on American innovation and science education in his State of the Union address earlier this year. He followed up on this message by proposing a non-defense FY 2012 research and development budget of $66.8 billion, up $4.1 billion (6.5 percent) from the last enacted budget in FY 2010. The budget also contains $3.4 billion for the Administration’s focus on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education, $100 million of which would serve as a down payment for an initiative to train 100,000 new and “highly-effective” STEM teachers during the next decade.

The budget is quite positive for the National Science Foundation (NSF), which is the leading sponsor of federally-funded geography research. The proposal requests $7.767 billion for NSF in FY 2012, which would be an increase of $894.49 million (13 percent) above the current enacted number. The Administration points out that this would keep the NSF on a doubling path – an effort that began late in President Bush’s term.

The Foundation’s Geography and Spatial Sciences (GSS) Program is part of the Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences (BCS) Division, which in turn falls under the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences (SBE) Directorate. While exact appropriation amounts for the GSS program will not be known until Congress and the President agree on FY 2012 spending, the Administration’s budget proposal seeks $105.9 million for BCS. This would be an $11.32 million increase (12 percent) over the enacted level.

The budget proposal for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), meanwhile, was released shortly after the Department of the Interior’s five-year strategic plan was published, and it reflects the Department’s focus on science as a key mission area. The Administration has requested $1.12 billion for USGS in FY 2012, which includes a $28.8 million increase for programmatic activities. The Landsat program, a series of Earth-observing satellite missions jointly managed by NASA and the USGS, is a big winner in the budget request and would receive a $48 million increase over the current level if the proposal is fully enacted. The additional funding would support the development of Landsats 9 and 10 and would allow for the creation of a new program to ensure data continuity in the future.

All of these numbers, of course, hinge on the budget debate that is dominating the 112th Congress. And while the continuous threat of government shutdowns has forced a series of stopgap spending measures, it could be months before any sort of agreement is reached on FY 2012 spending levels.

Commerce Secretary Locke Tapped as Next Ambassador to China

Word leaked in Washington in early March that President Obama will nominate Commerce Secretary Gary Locke to be the next U.S. Ambassador to China. Locke, a Democrat, previously served as Governor of Washington and was the first Chinese American to serve as governor of a U.S. state. The China post opened when the incumbent, former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman, resigned earlier this year with many political pundits suggesting he will run for the Republican nomination for president in 2012.

Mr. Obama’s nomination of Locke for the job in Beijing will leave a vacancy at the Commerce Department, which is one of the key executive departments for geographers. The Census Bureau and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), two of the leading agencies for employing geographers in government positions, are both part of the Department of Commerce – and NOAA is a source of research funding for several important topics being studied by geographers, including climate change.

Administration insiders have suggested that Ambassador Ron Kirk, the U.S. trade representative, is Locke’s most likely successor. Kirk is a former Mayor of Dallas and Texas secretary of state. Other candidates include Jeff Zients, a Deputy Director at the Office of Management and Budget, Tom Nides, deputy secretary of state for management and resources, and Neil Wolin, deputy secretary of the treasury.

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Annual Meeting Geograms

Look for conference schedule updates and late-breaking additions in daily “geograms” – sent to AAG members as emails and also available in hardcopy at the AAG Registration Desk. Conference geograms will be posted online at www.aag.org/geograms.