Washington Monitor

National Association of State Boards of Education Endorses AAG Resolution

As I mentioned in last month’s column, we at the AAG are hopeful that Congress will finally reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2011. Accordingly, we are planning to make a major push next year to convince the Obama Administration and members of Congress that K-12 geography education deserves dedicated funding as part of a new law.

We have developed a resolution that has been endorsed by the leading geography and GIS organizations as a central part of these efforts. The resolution:

- Urges the Obama Administration to include geography and geospatial education in its Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and ESEA Blueprint for Reform proposals;
- Urges Congress to include authorizations and appropriations for geography education consistent with other core academic subjects for K-12, as part of a reauthorized ESEA, and
- Urges Congress to enhance geography teacher training by passing legislation such as the Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act (H.R. 1240/S. 749).

This resolution recently received a major outside boost, as the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) endorsed it. Founded in 1958, NASBE serves as the voice in Washington for state and territorial boards of education. The association’s principal objectives are to strengthen state leadership in education policymaking, promote excellence in the education of all students, advocate equality of access to educational opportunity, and assure responsible lay governance of public education. Support from this association has the potential to impact state boards of education across the country.

We are grateful to NASBE for their support and hope to encourage other leading groups and individuals to support K-12 geography education at this key moment.

NSF Budget Targeted in 2011

As I am writing this column in early December, the White House and Congressional Republicans appear to be close to a deal that would fund the federal government through the end of Fiscal Year 2011 at or near current spending levels. The agreement sets the stage for what could be a tumultuous year for science in 2011.

Rep. Eric Cantor (R-VA), who is poised to become Majority Leader in the 112th Congress, launched a website in May called “You Cut,” which encourages Americans to submit ideas for specific spending cuts that the House of Representatives should enact. As part of this initiative, Cantor started “citizen reviews” of government agencies. The first agency targeted on the site is the NSF.

Congressman Adrian Smith (R-NE), a member of the House Science Committee, is featured in a video on the website in which he credits NSF and its grantees for many revolutionary discoveries and Nobel prize-winning research. But Smith goes on to question the logic of certain grants—specifically, two mid-sized computer science grants related to developing modeling technologies for sports or video gaming purposes. On the same page, the site asks viewers to search the NSF website for grants they find “wasteful” and to submit the award numbers for the grants in question. The site suggests certain search terms when looking for grants, including: “culture,” “media,” “social norm,” “museum,” and “leisure.”

It is not a stretch to assume that Cantor and his allies will likely target social and behavioral science funding as part of their attacks on the NSF’s budget. It has even been suggested that Cantor might push to cut the appropriation for the Social, Behavioral, and Economic (SBE) Sciences directorate by 50 percent. Such a move would obviously be devastating for the Geography and Spatial Sciences Program—which is located within SBE.

I have worked as a science advocate in Washington for about a decade and I am more concerned now than ever about the immediate future of NSF research funding. While the Democratically-controlled Senate and President Obama will likely provide some sort of backstop against the harshest attacks on NSF, my best guess is that the Foundation’s budget will face cuts in 2011. We at the AAG will work with our colleagues at other science organizations in Washington to try to minimize any reductions.

Legislative Action on Climate Change Likely Forestalled

In June 2009, the House narrowly passed a significant climate bill that would have curbed U.S. greenhouse gas emissions through a system known as cap-and-trade. (For more on the legislation, please see the July/August 2009 Monitor). The 219-212 vote included the support of only eight Republicans, so with the GOP coming to power in January, the chances for significant action on climate change in the 112th Congress appear all but dead.

This fact is no doubt of great frustration to the climate science community (including many geographers), which strongly supported passage of the 2009 legislation. The aim of the bill, which was never taken up in the Senate, was to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by over 80 percent by 2050, a target supported by many climate scientists.

While U.S. action on climate change in the next few years will likely be limited to executive actions by the Obama Administration, several AAG members have served as our Association’s official observers at the recent UN Framework Conventions on Climate Change. We are grateful for their efforts, and I wanted to share a blog on the topic maintained by geographers Mark Cowell and Mike Urban of the University of Missouri: http://aag-cop15.blogspot.com.

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See page 25 for your AAG Election Ballot. Return deadline is February 24, 2011.