



AAG

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
of GEOGRAPHERS

January 20, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

First and foremost, we'd like to offer our congratulations on this, your first week in office. The American Association of Geographers (AAG) and our 9,000 members stand ready to offer our support and expertise as you begin your ambitious agenda to "Build Back Better." We recognize the inherited challenges you face starting your term in the midst of the COVID-19 national health crisis, along with meeting demands for racial and social justice, aiding a struggling economy and confronting the worsening threats of climate change. But with the strong team of appointees you have assembled thus far, and the energy of the new 117th Congress, we are filled with a renewed sense of optimism and look forward to the consequential work ahead.

As a thriving and engaged body of geographers, spatial data scientists, academics and professionals, we'd like to bring your attention to our highest policy priorities for the coming years:

Importance of Federal Geospatial Data

In 2018 the Geospatial Data Act (GDA) was passed into law with bipartisan support, serving to strengthen our national geospatial data and coordinate its acquisition and utilization across the federal government. The AAG and our partner organizations continue as stakeholders in the implementation of the GDA, specifically in regards to the National Geospatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) strategic plan. It is vital that federal procurement of geospatial data and services remain open to all qualified geographers across the spectrum of our dynamic community.

National Science Foundation (NSF) and Research Funding

A large share of geographers conduct their critical research thanks to grants primarily from the National Science Foundation (NSF), as well as the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and others. Full funding of these agencies, and subsequent funding of grants from across geography's many subdisciplines, advances the spatial sciences and contributes to the versatile makeup of U.S. research and development. Only through the increased and reliable funding of this diverse research community can our nation remain on the cutting edge of scientific progress, and our universities remain destinations for top minds from around the world.

Prioritizing Geography in K-12 Education

Within the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), geography is listed as a "core academic subject" and is defined specifically as part of a "well-rounded education" for K-12 students. We urge this administration to consider the importance of geography with the full weight implied by ESSA's standalone definitions, and we support funding that bolsters geography educational programs, resources and assessments. A comprehensive education must include the study of geography in order for students to understand their changing world, and to prepare them for future civic engagement. Students with a strong K-12 geography background are not only primed for pathways in higher education, they are equipped with basic skills needed to join the rapidly growing geospatial industry.

Using Geography to Promote Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The AAG supports recent movements demanding social justice and renewed effort to raise the voices and participation of underrepresented geographers. The last several months have illuminated where our efforts, and those of the entire scientific community, have come up short. Acknowledging that there is much work to still be done within our community and throughout the nation, we encourage this administration to take advantage of the insight offered by geospatial thinkers. Geographers have long been at the forefront of scholarship on the social and spatial elements of racism, violence, and inequality. Our nation's history with race is intertwined with geography at every chapter, and geographic context must be considered in order to rectify deep-seated injustice. For example, federal geographic place names that perpetuate racist legacies must be examined and revised. In order to ensure more racially equitable representation and appropriately distributed resources, geographic principles of fair mapping must be utilized throughout 2021 redistricting. These are among the many prominent causes in which the talents of geographers can bring about a more inclusive world, and we invite this administration to utilize our community as a resource.

Restoring Trust in Science

The strained, and at times mistrusting, relationship between the government, the general public and the scientific community is particularly troubling. Geographers have seen their work censored by the federal government because of references to human-induced climate change, or have been terminated from a state health department for reporting truthful but unfavorable data on the rise of COVID-19 cases. Some of these anti-science sentiments were codified in harmful executive orders and agency regulations that sought to undercut the use of legitimate scientific findings for policy making. Government agencies and their appointed leadership have an obligation to scientific integrity, and the political interference seen in the last year at the Census Bureau alone exemplifies the ongoing threats to the data upon which geographers depend. Likewise, geographers and the broader scientific community play an integral role in navigating our nation's gravest challenges, and have the capacity to bolster a robust and coordinated government response. We urge your administration to take deliberate steps to re-establish the federal government's relationship with the scientific community, protect academic freedom and human rights at home and abroad, and restore the public's trust in scientific integrity, which has suffered significant erosion over the last four years.

We know this administration appreciates the value of science, as demonstrated by your campaign's central platforms, the priorities you've set for your first 100 days in office and, most recently, by the announcement of your highly respected and qualified White House Science Team. In addition to restoring best practices for science-based policy development, we encourage you to prioritize care for the fragile state of our nation. Extremist ideologies will not soon disappear, and the potential remains for more violent demonstrations from those who question the legitimacy of our institutions.

We look to you for character and leadership during this time of transition, and we appreciate your attention to the wellbeing of the geography community.

Most respectfully,



Gary M. Langham
Executive Director
American Association of Geographers