

AIBS news

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AIBS *news*

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Action Alert: Help Defend Peer Review

Representative Adrian Smith (RNE) recently launched a campaign to have the public weigh in on “wasteful” research grants funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The initiative, which is part of the House GOP’s “You Cut” initiative, calls into question the value of some grants funded by the NSF.

“Help us identify grants which do not support the hard sciences or which you don’t think are a good use of taxpayer dollars,” Smith says, in a video promoting the initiative. The public is asked to search NSF’s grant database for “questionable” research grants and to submit the grants for inclusion in a report on wasteful government spending.

As reported in an article published by *USA Today* on the campaign: “Since 1950, when NSF was founded, a tension has existed between the decision made then that peer review—scientists scoring each other’s work to fund the most worthy efforts—would be the way to fund research, rather than doling it out as earmarks from politicians, which was the other big idea favored by some then.”

Polymakers and the public need to understand that research proposals funded by the NSF have been carefully screened and selected through the peer-review process and that successful proposals have been judged based on the merit of their science.

Help to defend the NSF’s peer-review system by writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. You can send one of our prewritten letters or write your own at <http://capwiz.com/aibs/issues/alert/?alertid=20649876>.

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Call for Nominations: NABT Evolution Education Award

The NABT Evolution Education Award, sponsored by AIBS and the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS), recognizes innovative classroom teaching and community education efforts to promote the accurate understanding of biological evolution. The award includes a combined \$1000 cash prize (from AIBS and BSCS), a recognition plaque to be presented at the NABT Professional Development Conference, and a one-year complimentary NABT membership. The application deadline is 15 March 2011. Nominate someone using the online form at www.nabt.org/websites/institution/index.php?p=631.

Public Policy Report for 3 January 2011

- **UN Approves Scientific Panel on Biodiversity.** Nations will soon have access to expert advice on science and policy issues related to biological diversity. The United Nations General Assembly recently gave final approval for the creation of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. The panel is charged with evaluating the causes and effects of, and policy solutions to, the loss of biodiversity. Although details regarding the new panel have yet to emerge, it is expected to be modeled after the International Panel on Climate Change.
- **Survey of States Finds Continuing Budget Concerns.** The National Governors Association and the National Association of State Budget Officers recently released the fall 2010 *Fiscal Survey of the States*. As described in the report, the survey “presents aggregate and individual data on the states’ general

fund receipts, expenditures, and balances. Although not the totality of state spending, these funds are used to finance most broad-based state services and are the most important elements in determining the fiscal health of the states.”

- **Legislative Update: Plant Genetic Resources Treaty.** On 14 December 2010, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations approved the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. The treaty, which went into effect in 2004, aims to ensure food security throughout the world through the conservation, exchange, and sustainable use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. According to the letter of transmittal from President George W. Bush to the US Senate in 2008: “The centerpiece of the treaty is the establishment of a multilateral system under which a party provides access to other parties, upon request, to listed plant genetic resources held in national genebanks. These resources are to be used solely for purposes of research, breeding, and training in agriculture.” Unfortunately, the Senate failed to act on the treaty prior to its adjournment for the year, so the Committee on Foreign Relations must pass the treaty again in the next session of Congress before it can be considered by the full Senate. The United States signed the treaty when it was drafted nearly 10 years ago, but the treaty has not yet been ratified.

Public Policy Report for 20 December 2010

- **Senate Passes America COMPETES Reauthorization.** On 17 December,

the United States Senate unanimously passed legislation to reauthorize the America COMPETES Act. The measure represents a compromise reached between the two chambers of Congress. Although the House of Representatives passed the legislation last May, the bill stalled in the Senate as a result of concerns raised by some Republicans over the cost of the plan.

- **White House Issues Scientific Integrity Policy.** The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy issued guidelines on 17 December to ensure that research conducted by government scientists is not altered for political purposes. The new policy was released 18 months after the initial deadline set by President Obama.
- **American Students' Science Scores Rank Average on International Tests.** Recently released results of an international effort to evaluate and compare student performance in math, reading, and science found that students in the United States have significant room for improvement. The study was conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and evaluated students from 65 countries.
- **AIBS Criticizes FCC Net Neutrality Proposal.** On 13 December 2010, AIBS sent a letter (www.aibs.org/public-policy/news/aibsexpress-esconcernstofccregardingnet_neutrality.html#029862) to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regarding its proposed Open Internet initiative. The proposal, which the FCC is expected to vote on this month, is intended to prevent Internet service providers from discriminating against online content provided by competing companies. Some experts, however, fear that the proposal does not provide sufficient protections for Internet users, application developers, and content providers.

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- **A Victory for Supporters of Evolution Education in Louisiana.** The Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education recently approved new high-school biology textbooks that include the topic of evolution, despite the objections of some creationists. The 8-2 vote means that the state will purchase textbooks that do not mention creationism or intelligent design.

Public Policy Report for 6 December 2010

- **Budget Cutting Plan Could Influence Science, Education Program Funding.** On 18 February 2010, President Obama signed a presidential executive order establishing the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. The commission was charged with "identifying policies to improve the fiscal situation in the medium term and to achieve fiscal sustainability over the long run." According to the establishing order, the commission was specifically charged with proposing "recommendations designed to balance the budget, excluding interest payments on the debt, by 2015...[and] that meaningfully improve the long-run fiscal outlook, including changes to address the growth of entitlement spending and the gap between the projected revenues and expenditures of the federal government." The 18-member commission, which was cochaired by former US Senator Alan Simpson (R-WY), and Erskine Bowles, a former chief of staff to President Clinton, released its final report, *Moment of Truth*, on 1 December 2010.
- **Congress Still Working to Finalize FY 2011 Funding.** Congress has once again postponed its work on fiscal year (FY) 2011 appropriations. Despite the start of FY 2011 more than two months ago, Congress has yet to enact any of the 12 appropriations bills that fund the federal government. Congress recently gave

itself a few additional weeks to finish its appropriations work. In the meantime, a “continuing resolution” maintained the 2010 level of funding for government programs through 18 December.

- **House to Discontinue Climate Panel.** Republicans will not take control of the House of Representatives until January, but they are already making plans for how they will govern the chamber. In December, Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) announced that the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming would not be continued in the 112th Congress.
- **GAO Recommends Changes for Forest Service Scientific Communications.** A review of the US Forest Service’s (USFS) research and development programs by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified a major area for

improvement in the agency’s activities: the delivery of scientific information to end users. GAO found that the USFS’s communication system is segmented and sometimes inconsistent. Additionally, some sources told GAO that the USFS places more emphasis on disseminating research results in peer-reviewed journals than through other media, such as workshops, which can be more useful to end users of data. The GAO found that “[w]ithout improved delivery of research results, land managers and others may be unable to fully benefit from the agency’s work.”

- **China Aims to Boost Investments in Basic Research.** Research and development (R&D) investments in China have been growing at an average rate of 23 percent per year over the past decade. However, most of these funds have been directed toward development. For instance, in 2009, basic and applied

research spending constituted 17 percent of total R&D expenditures in China, as compared with approximately 50 percent in the United States. The Chinese government is attempting to bring R&D spending more into balance by increasing funding for basic research to 15 percent of total science expenditures by 2020. This would nearly triple the proportion of R&D funding spent on basic research in China.

- **New Shipping Regulations to Ease Regulatory Burden for Scientific Collections.** Starting 1 January 2011, natural history specimens shipped by commercial air will no longer be classified as “dangerous goods.” The new policy, issued by the International Air Transport Association, also removes a requirement for shippers to be formally trained in how to package scientific specimens; instead, the shippers can train themselves.