

14 September 2009

Dr. John Holdren, Director
Office of Science and Technology Policy
Executive Office of the President
725 17th Street Room 5228
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Dr. Holdren,

The Ornithological Council joins with the Natural Science Collections Alliance in encouraging President Obama to issue an Executive Order for the preservation and use of science collections and we fully endorse the model Executive Order recently sent to you by that organization. The proposed Executive Order would build on the work initiated by the Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections and would better enable federal agencies to improve access to government collections.

The Ornithological Council is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) scientific association comprised of eleven scientific societies of ornithologists throughout the Western Hemisphere. To this day, a very large amount of our knowledge about birds is built on scientific collections. For instance, our understanding of the role of DDT derived largely from the study of bird eggshells in museum collections. Bird strikes are studied by comparing bird remains found in airplane engines or on aircraft surfaces to study specimens at the Smithsonian. The law enforcement program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service depends on museum collections to identify imported materials and that same agency relies on museum collections to determine when a species or a population meets the legal standards for protection under the Endangered Species Act or the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Information from museum collections can help determine how disease such as avian influenza will move around the world; the geographical information associated with specimens can tell us about the distribution and migratory pathways of species that are capable of carrying and transmitting pathogens.

We are particularly interested in the provision of the proposed Executive Order that would provide that would constrain federal agencies from spending funds to develop new facilities and new collections and ongoing expenditures for curation and management, given that existing collections maintained by NSCA members serve those same needs with excellence and at no cost to the federal government. We hope that this Administration will do all it can to encourage federal agencies to improve their partnerships – which at present, provide little benefit to museum collections while imposing conditions that are deleterious to the use of these collections and to scientific research. This provision would be an important step in promoting more equitable partnerships.

For years, biological and environmental scientists have expressed concern about policies and practices that have led to reduced funding and staffing for the nation's scientific collections. This reduction in support has occurred at a time when new technology offers the potential to dramatically increase our access to and use of natural science collections specimens and data. Natural science collections are valuable national assets and are worthy of a national commitment.

Thus, we encourage the President to seize the current opportunity to build on the good work and momentum of the Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections by promulgating an Executive Order on science collections such as that proposed by the Natural Science Collections Alliance.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Ellen Paul
Executive Director