

NSC ALLIANCE WASHINGTON REPORT

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Policy News from NSC Alliance

Through the NSC Alliance partnership with the American Institute of Biological Sciences, we are pleased to provide NSC Alliance members with the following public policy update. If you have any questions or require additional information regarding any of the following items, please contact NSC Alliance director of public policy Dr. Robert Gropp at 202-628-1500 x 250 or at rgropp@aibs.org

NSC Alliance Endorses Collections Digitization Plan

On 25 May 2010, the Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSC Alliance) submitted comments on the “Final Draft Strategic Plan for Establishing a National Digital Biological Collections Resource”. The strategic plan is a 10 year, national effort to digitize and mobilize images and data associated with biological research collections. It was drafted by workshop participants at the National Evolutionary Synthesis Center in February 2010.

In its endorsement letter, NSC Alliance cites the need to digitize the nation’s biological collections in order to protect the invaluable scientific knowledge contained within them. Natural and manmade disasters, such as the fire swept that recently swept through Brazil’s Butantan Institute, pose a real threat to collections. As media reports have chronicled, the fire destroyed one of the world’s largest collections of snakes, spiders, and scorpions. Although not a substitute for the original collections, digitized resources do provide a record of an institution’s holdings and data.

NSC Alliance also called for the support and participation, both financial and technical, of all federal agencies that maintain collections or have collections housed at non-federal facilities.

Members of the collections community who wish to submit comments on the digitization plan should visit <http://digbiocol.wordpress.com/full-strategic-plan-draft/>. The plan can also be downloaded from this site.

Register for the 2nd Annual Biological Sciences Congressional District Visits Event

Would you like to help inform the nation's science policy without trekking to Washington, DC? Why not meet with elected officials in your home state this August? Register now to participate in the *2nd Annual Biological Sciences Congressional District Visits* event. This national initiative is an opportunity for biologists across the country to meet with their members of Congress to showcase the people, facilities, and equipment that are required to support and conduct scientific research.

The *2nd Annual Biological Sciences Congressional District Visits* event will be held throughout the month of August 2010, when Representatives and Senators spend time in their Congressional districts and home states. This event is an opportunity for scientists and representatives of research facilities and institutions housing scientific collections to meet with their member of Congress to demonstrate how science is conducted and why a sustained investment in research and education programs must be a national priority. Participating scientists may invite their elected officials to visit their facility or can meet with them at a district office.

Participants will be prepared for their Congressional meetings through an interactive training webinar. Individuals participating in this event will receive information about federal appropriations for biological research, tips for scheduling and conducting a successful meeting with an elected official, and resources to craft and communicate an effective message.

This event is organized by the American Institute of Biological Sciences with the generous support of Event Sponsors Botanical Society of America, Genetics Society of America, Long Term Ecological Research Network, Society of Systematic Biologists, and University of Michigan Biological Station, and Event Supporter Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve—Stanford University.

Participation is free, but registration is required and space is limited. For more information and to register, visit http://www.aibs.org/public-policy/congressional_district_visits.html.

House Fails Twice to Pass COMPETES Act

The United States House of Representatives has failed twice in the past two weeks to pass legislation that would reauthorize the America COMPETES Act. The legislation, which proponents contend would stimulate innovation and improve science education by increasing funding authorizations for federal agencies that support basic research, was first brought to the House floor on 13 May 2010. After consideration of more than 50 amendments, Science Committee Ranking Member Ralph Hall (R-TX) moved to send the bill (HR 5116) back to the Science Committee. Halls' motion to recommit the legislation included instructions to cut \$47.5 billion in authorizations over the next five years for the National Science Foundation (NSF), Department of Energy Office of Science (DoE Science), and National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), and to completely eliminate funding for the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E). Additionally, Hall wanted to ban the use of funds to pay the salaries of federal employees who have been disciplined for viewing pornography at work. In recent years, at least seven NSF employees were fired or disciplined for watching pornography on government computers.

Hall's motion passed overwhelmingly in a 292-126 vote, which included the support of more than 120 Democrats. Only one Republican, Rep. Vernon Ehlers (R-MI), a physicist who is retiring from Congress at the end of this session, voted against the motion. Democratic leadership quickly pulled the bill from further consideration on the House floor, allowing them time to consider their next move.

A week later, the bill's sponsor, Science Committee Chairman Bart Gordon (D-TN), reintroduced the COMPETES Act, now numbered HR 5325, with two significant changes. Gordon cut the duration of research authorizations from five years to three years, although he left the funding levels unchanged, maintaining the doubling path established in the 2007 COMPETES Act. Additionally, HR 5325 includes an anti-pornography provision that would prevent funds authorized by the act to be used to pay the salary of any government employee caught watching porn at work. Despite these changes, the House once again failed to pass the bill on 19 May 2010 when it was considered on the Suspension Calendar, a move that requires that legislation be passed by a 2/3 majority. The final vote of 261 to 148 fell nearly thirty votes shy of the threshold for passage. Unlike the previous vote on COMPETES, Democrats stuck together, with no members of the majority party voting against the legislation. Additionally, 15 Republican members voted for passage of the bill.

"I'm disappointed, but not deterred," said Rep. Gordon. Gordon and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) said the bill will soon return to the House floor.

NAGPRA Official Responds to Scientific Criticism of New Rule

Recently, leading anthropologists and archaeologists sent a letter to Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar expressing deep concern with a recently implemented rule from the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) National Office in Washington, DC. NAGPRA is housed within the Department of the Interior's National Park Service.

According to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) website, *ScienceInsider*, the scientists sent the "letter of protest" to Secretary Salazar on May 17. The website further reports that the letter stated that the rule as written will cause "an incalculable loss to science" by permanently making such remains unavailable, and that the rule is "contrary to both the letter and the spirit of the law."

ScienceInsider reported on May 24, 2010, that Sherry Hutt, NAGPRA Program Manager, "responded to some of the scientific concerns in an e-mail to *ScienceInsider*, suggesting that the remains covered by the rule aren't likely to have much scientific value."

ScienceInsider also reported: The original NAGPRA statute strove to balance the interests of science and Native Americans, and has spurred cooperation between them, says lead author Bruce Smith of the Smithsonian Institution. NAGPRA requires that museums and other repositories repatriate culturally affiliated remains and draw up a list of unaffiliated remains, but it is silent on what to do with the unaffiliated remains. The new rule requiring their disposal is

"very bad news for science," Smith says. He adds that "the potential for overlapping and conflicting requests [for remains] is enormous."

The NSC Alliance has in recent years formally commented on the NAGPRA Office's efforts to craft and implement the latest rule. These comments are not reflected in the final rule. The new NAGPRA rule is at <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-5283.pdf>. The most recent NSC Alliance comments are available at <http://nscalliance.org/?p=277>.

The Natural Science Collections Alliance is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit association that serves as an advocate for natural science collections, the institutions that preserve them, and the research and education that extend from them for the benefit of science, society, and stewardship of the environment. NSC Alliance members are part of an international community of museums, botanical gardens, herbariums, universities, and other institutions that house natural science collections and utilize them in research, exhibitions, academic and informal science education, and outreach activities. Website: www.NSCAlliance.org

Note: You are receiving a copy of this electronic report as part of your membership in the NSC Alliance. Contact the Alliance office with any email address or member representative name changes send an email to spotter@aibs.org.