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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

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NSC Alliance Asks Senate to Expand Collections Provision in America COMPETES Act Reauthorization

On June 23, 2010, the NSC Alliance sent a letter to Senate committee staff working to develop the chamber's version of the reauthorization of the America COMPETES Act. In short, NSC Alliance requested that the Senate clarify and expand the provisions of Section 121 in the House-passed version of the legislation.

The complete letter is available at http://nscalliance.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/nsca_ltr_senate_collections_competes.pdf.

Plan Finalized for Digitization of Biological Collections

The biological collections community has finalized a strategic plan to digitize and mobilize images and data associated with biological research collections. The proposed ten year national effort is the product of two workshops held at the National Evolutionary Synthesis Center in 2010, as well as surveys of 291 federal and approximately 600 federally supported collections.

The plan outlines three key objectives: digitize data from all U.S. biological collections and make them available online in a standardized format; develop and make available new web interfaces, visualization and analysis tools, data mining, and georeferencing processes; and prevent future backlogs of digitized collections through the use of tools, training, and

infrastructure. These goals will be accomplished through the work of collections networks organized by region of the country or scientific theme, such as clade or a particular research question. A national digitization hub will serve as "the administrative home for the digitization effort, fostering partnerships and innovations, facilitating best practice standards and workflows, serving as a repository for data and techniques, and establishing cohesion and interconnectivity among digitization projects," according to the plan.

The final plan incorporates the comments of numerous stakeholders, including institutions holding collections, scientific societies, and others. On 25 May 2010, the NSC Alliance endorsed the "Final Draft Strategic Plan for Establishing a National Digital Biological Collections Resource." In its comments on the draft plan, NSC Alliance cited the need to digitize the nation's biological collections in order to protect the invaluable scientific knowledge contained within them. Moreover, NSC Alliance noted that the digitization effort would also drive innovation and increase access to important scientific specimens and data. NSC Alliance 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.

To read NSC Alliance's comment, go to http://nscalliance.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/nsca_digitization-letter.pdf. To read the final strategic plan, visit http://digbiocol.wordpress.com/2010/06/06/final-report-a-strategic-plan-for-establishing-a-network-integrated-collections-alliance/.

Collections Highlighted During House Hearing on Gulf Oil Leak

The House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife held a hearing on June 15, 2010, to consider the state of environmental science in the Gulf of Mexico. The Subcommittee heard testimony about scientific needs related to the BP oil spill response from representatives of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the Smithsonian Institution, and non-federal scientists.

Among the first panel of witnesses was Dr. Jonathan Coddington, associate director of research and collections at the National Museum of Natural History. Dr. Coddington testified about the value of biological collections in assessing the impacts of the oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem. Since 1979, the Smithsonian has curated biological specimens collected by the Minerals Management Service (MMS) during environmental assessments of the outer continental shelf. These assessments of the biological, sedimentary, physio-chemical, and oceanographic conditions of U.S. waters serve as pre-drilling environmental baselines.

In the wake of the BP spill, the more than 350,000 lots of biological specimens that are held by the National Museum of Natural History are invaluable. "Regarding the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, knowing what the conditions were like before the event is essential," Coddington noted in prepared remarks. "However, approximately one third of MMS collections deposited at the Smithsonian need further work in order to optimally support research related to the oil spill." This work ranges from identification of species to digitization of specimens. Subcommittee Chairwoman Madeleine Bordallo (D-GU) asked Dr. Coddington how much it would cost to

complete this work. Coddington estimated that it would cost $9 million over two years to make all relevant collections publically available.

Dr. Coddington's prepared remarks are available at http://nscalliance.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/house-natural-resources-testimony-coddington-6152010.pdf.

NSC Alliance Thanks Chairwoman Bordallo

On June 18, 2010, the NSC Alliance wrote to Representative Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam) to thank her for recognizing the importance of scientific collections to our capacity to understand how the Deepwater Horizon oil spill will influence the biological systems of the Gulf of Mexico. Bordallo is Chair of the House Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife. Her panel recently held a hearing during which Dr. Jonathan Coddington, associate director of research and collections at the National Museum of Natural History, testified about the importance of natural history collections to describing quantitatively the pre-spill Gulf of Mexico ecosystem. These collections document the biological diversity of the region prior to the oil spill, and will contribute to assessments of the spill's environmental impacts.

NSC Alliance also noted that science collections are equally important to basic science and to understanding or mitigating the effects of other environmental and public health problems. The letter drew attention to the NSC Alliance request that President Obama promulgate an Executive Order for the Preservation and Use of Science Collections.

The complete letter is available at http://nscalliance.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/nsca_bordalloletter.pdf.

UN To Create Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity

Delegates to the United Nations have given a green light to a plan to establish a new international panel to review the science underpinning policy decisions on biodiversity and ecosystem services. The Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) will be charged with "bridg[ing] the gulf between the wealth of scientific knowledge — documenting accelerating declines and degradation of the natural world — and the decisive government action required to reverse these damaging trends," according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The UNEP foresees the IPBES as an independent panel that will review science and synthesize it into reports for use by policymakers, much like the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These reports will cover the state, status, and trends of biodiversity and ecosystems, as well as outline policy options for reversing the loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation. Much of this work will involve prioritizing and synthesizing the numerous reports and assessments on biodiversity and ecosystem services conducted by United Nations, research centers, universities, and others.

The IPBES is expected to be formally approved by the United Nations™ environment ministers in February 2011.

President Requests Amendment to Proposed 2011 IMLS Budget

President Obama wrote to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on June 18 to request a number of changes to his administration's budget proposal for fiscal year (FY) 2011. Among the amendments was a request to increase the FY 2011 budget for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to $265,869,000, an increase of $313,000 over the amount in the President's budget. Apparently the original budget, sent to Congress in February, did not reflect the accurate funding level for the agency. If appropriated by Congress, the revised budget for IMLS would equal the amount appropriated to the agency in FY 2010.

Join Collection Colleagues on LinkedIn

A new online group has formed to encourage networking among natural science collections leaders. This group offers an opportunity for individuals from collections across the nation to identify and discuss common public policy issues, or other common challenges they face as natural science collections professionals.

To join this group you must first join LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com). There is no cost for creating a profile on this site. Once you have registered, simply search the Groups function for "Natural Science Collections Leadership." Membership in this group is limited to natural science collections professionals, but there is no cost to join or participate in group discussions or events.
