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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 Shares Benefits of Digitization with Congress

In a feature article in the September 2011 issue of the journal *BioScience*, freelance journalist Beth Baker chronicles recent efforts to digitize scientific collections in the United States. The article includes an interesting sidebar describing the recently announced National Science Foundation effort, Advancing Digitization of Biological Collections. The report concludes with a section describing how engineers are now collaborating with biologists to solve some long-standing technological challenges that have hindered efforts to cost-effectively digitize specimens.

The article is an excellent tool for educating policymakers about the importance of scientific collections, and how investments in this national resource help drive forward science, create new opportunities, and contribute to more efficient management of environmental issues and natural resources. On 28 September 2011, NSC Alliance director of public policy Dr. Robert Gropp sent a copy of the article to congressional committee staffers with an interest in science and natural resources policy.

To view the article, visit <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/bio.2011.61.9.4> (fee may apply).

Take Action: Contact Senators Today – Urge Them to Restore Funding for NSF

The United States Senate Appropriations Committee has approved legislation that would slash funding for the National Science Foundation (NSF). Under the Committee's proposal, the

Research and Related Activities account at NSF would be cut by \$120.9 million in the coming fiscal year. This is the account that provides funding for NSF's various research directorates, such as the Biological Sciences Directorate, Geosciences Directorate, and so forth.

Importantly, the Senate spending plan provides significantly less funding to NSF than the appropriations bill approved by the House Committee on Appropriations. Under the House plan, Research and Related Activities would receive roughly \$5.6 billion in the next fiscal year, about \$43 million above the current funding level.

Additionally, both the House and the Senate have developed appropriations legislation that would cut funding for Education and Human Resources programs at NSF, but the House would cut roughly \$6 million less than the Senate.

If enacted, these cuts would be damaging to NSF programs and counter to bipartisan pledges of support for scientific research and education.

If the Senate fails to increase funding for NSF, it is almost guaranteed that the agency will receive a significant budget cut in the coming fiscal year. It is important that Senators hear from their constituents.

Please contact both of your Senators today to urge them to oppose the Senate Appropriation Committee's proposed cuts to NSF. A prepared letter is available at <http://capwiz.com/aibs/issues/alert/?alertid=53834971> and a targeted letter for Maryland residents is available at <http://capwiz.com/aibs/issues/alert/?alertid=53867986>. If you have a working relationship with a Senate office, please consider calling or visiting the office to express your concerns.

NSF Announces New Workplace Flexibility Initiative

National Science Foundation (NSF) Director Subra Suresh recently announced the NSF Career-Life Balance Initiative, laying the groundwork for a ten-year plan to expand work-related flexibility to women and men in research careers. Partnering with the White House Council on Women and Girls, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, and First Lady Michelle Obama, this announcement signifies the first NSF-wide initiative to assist postdoctoral fellows and early-career faculty members in better caring for dependents while pursuing their careers.

“Too many young women scientists and engineers get sidetracked or drop their promising careers because they find it too difficult to balance the needs of those careers and the needs of their families,” says Suresh. “This new initiative aims to change that, so that the country can benefit from the full range and diversity of its talent.”

The initiative comes as part of a continuing effort to increase the number of women and girls employed in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. Women currently earn 41% of Ph.D.'s in STEM fields, but contribute only 28% of tenure-track faculty in those

positions. Council of Women and Girls Director Tina Tchen explains, “Jump-starting girls’ interest in science, technology, engineering, and math subjects, and boosting the percentage of women employed in science and engineering is not just the right thing to do but is also the smart thing to do for America’s future and the economy.” Mrs. Obama added, “We need all hands on deck, and that means clearing hurdles for women and girls as they navigate careers in science, technology, engineering, and math.”

NSF hopes the Career-Life Balance Initiative will become a successful model for new government-wide policy, and the agency is encouraging other universities and research institutions to adopt similar strategies. The new NSF guidelines include:

- Allow up to a year postponement of grants for childbirth or adoption.
- Allow grant suspension for parental leave.
- Provide supplements to fund research technicians while principal investigators are on family leave.
- Publicize the availability of family friendly opportunities.
- Promote virtual reviews, rather than having panel reviewers travel to a central location.

For more information pertaining to the Career-Life Balance Initiative please refer to http://www.nsf.gov/career-life-balance/brochure.pdf?WT.mc_id=USNSF_80.

NSF Funds Seed Bank for Evolutionary Research

A group of plant evolutionary biologists have been awarded \$1.2 million to create the nation’s first seed bank specifically designed to allow investigation of how plants respond to environmental change over long periods of time. The project, called Project Baseline, is funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) Division of Environmental Biology.

According to the award abstract: “This project will create a planned collection of seeds that will allow future studies of evolution in response to global change. With this project, we will create a seed ‘time capsule’ that will allow future biologists to dissect the genetic basis of evolutionary change.”

Unlike other seed repositories, Project Baseline will not be used to restore lost biodiversity in the future. Instead, the seeds will be collected along with environmental and climatic data, so that five, ten, or fifty years from now researchers will be able to study how these plant species have evolved in response to drought, climate change, and other factors.

Project Baseline will collect seeds from 80 plant species throughout the United States. These seeds will be stored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Center for Genetic Resources Preservation for use by future evolutionary biologists.

New NAS Report: Designing the Microbial Research Commons

The National Academies of Science Board on Research Data and Information has released a new report: “Designing the Microbial Research Commons: Proceedings of an International Workshop.” The report is a compilation of the edited presentations from a meeting by the same name. According to the project team, “although it uses microbiology as a focal point, it is analogous to the situation in many other life sciences and scientific disciplines, looking at new intellectual property, institutional, and governance mechanisms for broadening access and reuse of publicly-funded materials, data, and info.”

Download a free electronic copy of the report or order print copies at http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=13245. Additional information about the background of this project may be found on the Board’s website at www.nas.edu/brdi.

NSC Alliance Leadership Elections Underway

The NSC Alliance initiated its leadership elections this week. Ballots and voting instructions were sent to each individual eligible to vote. Election results will be announced via a future Washington Report and posted to the NSC Alliance website (www.nscalliance.org).

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.