2013–2014 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow Final Report

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Getting Science into the Hands of Policymakers

My year in Congress has officially come to a close. It was an incredible time, chock full of new experiences and knowledge. As I reflect back on this truly unique and transformative experience, I find myself thinking a lot about communication and its relationship to the role science plays in policymaking. Before I took the fellowship, I was frustrated with how science was used, or rather not used, by policymakers. I felt that the work I had done in graduate school was several stages removed from any policy influence, and I was at a loss for how to change this. I hoped that the fellowship would give me tools to help ensure that science influences policymaking in a concrete and comprehensive way.

So, what have I learned after a year? It turns out that scientists can do a lot to better facilitate the incorporation of science into the public-policy scene simply by changing their strategies for communication. Based on what I learned over the last year, let me humbly offer some suggestions for those who want to get science into policymaking. Of course, the best suggestion I can give is to apply for the fellowship program, no matter where you are in your career, and get the hands-on experience yourself! If that is not an option for you right now, here are a few suggestions.

First of all, do not be afraid to **reach out.** Unfortunately, many scientists seem to steer clear of direct interaction with the policy realm. This is a missed opportunity. If you want to impact policy, you should take the initiative to reach out to your members of Congress and request a meeting with their staff. And remember, sharing your research with congressional staff not only helps science to more strongly influence policy, it can promote science more directly. When you demonstrate the value of scientific research to your members of Congress, you can also influence funding levels for that research. If you have the opportunity, I would suggest participating in the annual Geosciences Congressional Visit Day (www.geosociety.org/geopolicy/CVD/). If you can't make the next CVD, GSA may still be able to help set up visits whenever you're in D.C., and you can also reach out directly to your members' offices in D.C. or in your state or district.

During your meetings, **be direct and to the point.** As I learned during some professional development sessions, scientists often try to communicate to the public in the same structure that we write papers and give presentations. We start with the background, then describe our methods, and finally end with our conclusions. Unfortunately, non-scientists often find the background boring or the methods confusing and are lost or disinterested by the time you get to the meaty conclusions. In a meeting with Congressional staff, you typically have a half-hour or less to identify your "ask" (i.e., what you want the office to do, such as vote a particular way on some legislation or write a letter in support of a program) and make your case as to why they should do it. If you spend the first fifteen minutes on detailed background, you may well lose their interest.

The key to making the most of your time is to identify your ask, as well as a few (three or four) clear and compelling takeaway points that support your request. Supporting background and details should come up only if they show interest in diving a little more deeply. Remember, the office has limited time and energy, and your ask is one among many, so your case needs to be strong and clear.

When discussing your research, also make sure you **communicate the value of your work.** Aside from the handful of current and former scientists floating around the Hill, most staffers are not very interested in what you do for its own sake. They are interested in what it means for their boss, the country, and the office's constituents. Policymakers have a finite amount of funding to distribute to several very deserving programs and a limited amount of time to put into supportive activities. "Knowledge for the sake of knowledge" is not as compelling as "my research has a direct effect on your constituents."

In fact, it can be extremely helpful to **identify what motivates policymakers** more broadly. Some useful questions to think about when shaping the case for your ask might include the following: Are there any positive or negative impacts on their constituents? What will their voters think about it? How can I describe my ask so that it is consistent with their previously established positions? Does it give them a good press opportunity? If you can make an argument for your ask that plays into their other priorities, you have a better chance of convincing them to take action.

Finally, if you want to offer yourself as a resource, and you actually want them to use you as one, make sure you demonstrate that you are **credible and reliable.** Sometimes congressional offices may just have an hour—or less—to put something together, so they turn to people whom they know will quickly get them good information that is ready to be used. If you want them to turn to you more often, make sure you respond quickly

and with information in a useful form (e.g., punchy, short sentences with a clear point that aren't polluted with qualifiers or figures that are simple and clear and express a single message). While you may regret the additional work, you will certainly have a significant opportunity to influence policy.

Now that the fellowship is over, I have begun a slow transition to the next stage of my career. I have moved back to the San Francisco area and am taking some much-needed vacation after several exhausting years of work. After that, I have some temporary work lined up and plan to take my time investigating different career options and finding a position that is truly a good fit. Wherever I end up, I am sure my fellowship experience will continue to help me facilitate the use of science in policymaking.

I strongly suggest that anyone interested in learning more about the political system and science policy consider the fellowship program, regardless of your career stage. If you have any questions about the fellowship program or science policy, I encourage you to contact me via e-mail at annamebust@gmail.com. With that, I sign off as the 2013–2014 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow and welcome Susanna Blair, whom I expect will do a fantastic job over the coming year as the next fellow.

This manuscript is submitted for publication by Anna K. Mebust, 2013–2014 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, with the understanding that the U.S. government is authorized to reproduce and distribute reprints for governmental use. The one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and by the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award No. G13AP00095. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government. Anna worked in the office of Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT).

GSA Member in the News

GSA Fellow and Executive Director **John W. "Jack" Hess** has been named an Honorary Fellow of the Geological Society (GSL; London, UK). GSL notes that "during Jack's tenure [at GSA], collaboration between our Societies has developed dramatically in terms of co-sponsored meetings and marketing, and as a joint influence in international geopolitics."