

An Aggie Ecologist Goes to Washington

About one month has passed since I participated in the Biological Ecological Sciences Coalition (BESC) Congressional Visits Day. Receiving the Ecological Society of America's Graduate Student Policy Award afforded tremendous opportunities to talk about the great work being done at Texas A&M University. Since many of you provided talking points to discuss science investment at the federal level, I wanted to provide a brief report on my experience.

The first scheduled event was hosted at ESA headquarters and introduced participants to professionals walking the line between science and policy. High-ranking representatives of NSF, USGS, NOAA, and the U.S. Botanical Gardens discussed how their careers evolved to include a major policy component. This served as a great forum to discuss career opportunities as well as the challenges faced by ecologists in explaining the public importance of their work.

After a business lunch with ESA staff, American Institute of Biological Sciences staff briefed participants on the current federal budget situation, highlighting research items (or lack thereof). This served to provide great fodder for the Congressional visits. Following a brief introduction to meeting dynamics, geographically-focused teams were assembled with participants from the broader BESC event to strategize for individual meetings. As I was the only participant from Texas, I was lumped in with researchers from New Mexico and Arizona.



With other GPSA awardees at ESA headquarters (left) and discussing the importance of science to the Bryan-College Station community as well as to the state and nation as a whole with Representative Bill Flores's legislative assistant.

On the steps of the U.S. Capitol (top) and in the chambers of the House Agriculture Committee (bottom).



On the day of the meetings, I attended a morning session with the New Mexico team, led by then-ESA President Scott Collins, as they met with one of their Congressmen. Feeling up to the challenge, I split off and headed to the offices of the Texas delegates. Being the lone Texas constituent, I was accompanied by the ESA Director of Public Affairs, presumably to ensure I didn't make a mess or stick my foot in my mouth too many times!

After working the Aggie connection in the office of Representative Flores, I followed with meetings with the offices of Senators Cornyn and Cruz. In each meeting, I pointed to the incredible importance of federal investment in science through NSF, USDA, NOAA, EPA, and other programs, tailoring the message from local to national scope and including examples from the delegate's hometown depending on the office I was in at the time. I was surprised at how open the delegates were to discussing science. However, I did maintain a very high-level view and did not walk too far down the trails of topics that unfortunately have become political hot button issues. The focus of these meetings was to promote federal investment in science, with the agencies receiving funding free to allocate monies as they see fit.

I would love to have had the time to discuss biodiversity, climate change, and other important concerns, but I ended up going for the low-hanging fruit of issues that are embraced by our Texas delegation. There was plenty of openness to science in general, but I was pressed on what some staff members considered "frivolous" research. In this I saw both a challenge and an opportunity for each of us to tell the story of our work. Not just to peers. Not just to students. But to friends, neighbors, local officials, school classes, and local media. There is a segment of the population that will never accept the endeavor of science, but the vast majority simply have little awareness of its importance and the significant discoveries and contributions made by us and others, simply because they do not spend time in the peer-reviewed literature or at professional society meetings. I encourage you to polish that "elevator speech" of the high-points of your work in very accessible layman's terms. Future investment of the scientific enterprise depends on the public connecting the dots, and we can all be better ambassadors for our fields; myself included!

Finally, following the Congressional visits, I met with a friend of mine who serves as the Chief Economist for the House Agriculture Committee and is very influential in the development of the Farm Bill. I emphasized the importance of water use efficiency, continued research initiatives, and improving federal conservation programs.

Overall, the trip was a terrific experience. I got to interact with much of the ESA staff and was able to brag a lot on the strength of our Aggie research programs. Thanks so much for your help in preparing me and being a part of the team. As a final bright spot, though it was impossible to know in advance, my visit to Washington, D.C. ended up being perfectly timed to coincide with the peak bloom of the famous cherry blossoms.