

Public Policy Update

Public Policy Board Represents APS in Washington, DC, Meetings

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The APS PPB met on Capitol Hill with Senator Kit Bond and his staff to discuss funding for genomics of economically important plants.

The APS Public Policy Board (PPB) met in Washington, DC, March 2–6, for its annual meetings with congressional staff, agency administrators, and others. **Barb Christ, Bill Dolezal, Jacque Fletcher, Scott Gold, Scot Hulbert, Jim MacDonald, Ray Martyn, Jim Moyer, Jim Steadman,** and PPB's Early Career Intern **Angela Records** joined APS's Washington liaison **Kellye Eversole** and **Lori Leach** of Eversole Associates and APS staff member **Michelle Bjerkness** in a series of meetings with agency and program administrators to continue to build cooperative relationships and to address issues of common interest.

PPB members met on Capitol Hill with Senator **Kit Bond** and with key staff members of Senators **Chambliss, Cochran, and Harkin**. The PPB also met with representatives of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA; the Office of the Secretary, the Office of Homeland Security, APHIS, ARS, CSREES, and the National Plant Disease Recovery System). In addition, we met with **Gale Buchanan**, USDA under secretary for Research, Education, and Economics, and his staff members. Other agency visits included the Department of Homeland Security (National Bioforensic Analysis Center), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Energy, and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Several points of common interest were also discussed with representatives of the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA).

PPB members prepared and distributed seven white papers highlighting current public policy-related priorities of APS and of the

board, including the future of education in plant pathology and the agricultural sciences, plant biosecurity, culture resource systems for the future, genomics of plant-associated microbes, food safety, and industry issues (white papers have been posted at www.apsnet.org/members/ppb). Agency representation at the meetings ranged in size from one to five people. In each meeting, two to three issues selected by PPB

as being the highest priorities for that agency were discussed and action items agreed upon. Most agencies also updated us on their priorities and identified areas in which APS could be helpful to their work. Key initiatives and future actions determined included the following.

1. Education. An APS ad hoc committee is assessing the need for broadly trained plant pathologists for future positions in extension, industry, biosecurity, plant breeding, diagnostics, and international centers. Surveys of academic institutions, current students, and potential employers, conducted over the past several months, have highlighted specific educational goals. Funding is being sought to support a national workshop to bring together representatives from APS, EPA, USDA, NSF, and others for cooperative strategic planning and to seek creative, new ways to share resources, leverage funding, and partner in implementing solutions.

2. Genomics. A high-priority PPB focus this year was to voice support for the continuation of funding programs for sequencing agriculturally relevant plants and plant-associated genomes. A plan to redirect NSF funds away from the Joint NSF-USDA Microbial Genomics Program could reduce the amount of funding by two-thirds. Another proposal by the NSF to open up the National Plant Genome Research Program to noneconomically important plants would further reduce the amount of funding for agriculturally relevant genomics research, including plant-microbe interactions. To review the continued needs for the sequencing of microbes and the future possibilities for expanded functional genomics (e.g., how plant-

microbe interactions influence agriculture and our environment), PPB, with federal collaborators, will plan a second genomics workshop to be held in late 2008.

3. Industry issues. A specific area of concern this year was the plan for elimination of the National Agricultural Statistics Survey's Chemical Usage Surveys, which produce estimates of each state's actual usage of individual chemical active ingredients. An estimated \$8.4 million would be needed to continue the program, which provides critical data, not available from any other source, essential to support IPM program management and epidemiological impact assessments as well as EPA regulatory actions. PPB members also met with representatives of EPA to explore opportunities for enhancing the APS relationship with EPA. Plans are being made for a round table discussion, later in 2008, involving APS members from industry (the APS Office of Industry Relations, the APS Industry Committee, and PPB) with EPA.



In addition to roundtable meetings, APS PPB hosted a reception at USDA for an informal opportunity to connect with various agency and legislative staff, pictured here (l to r) are Kent Smith, John Sherwood, Gale Buchanan, and Ray Martyn.

4. Culture resources system. An APS ad hoc committee, after examining the issue of the loss of valuable culture resources as plant pathologists retire, lose funding, or change positions, and PPB held an initial planning workshop in the fall of 2007 that included members of APS and other scientific societies, federal agencies, academic institutions, and industry to explore a new paradigm for the future that will combine the critical elements of live cultures with the power of informational database systems to provide a sustainable and cooperative system of microbial information and resources for the myriad needs of future research. A second, larger, workshop, currently in the planning stages, will allow strategic planning and international input for this systems-based approach.

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Ray Martyn presented the Friend of APS Award to Maryanna Henkart, thanking her for her strong support of plant pathology and microbial genomics research.

5. Food safety. Increased concern about contamination of plant foods by the human pathogens *Escherichia coli* and *Salmonella* spp. have highlighted the complex relationship between such pathogens and plants. Plant pathologists, with our knowledge and tools for investigating phytopathogen-plant interactions, have much to offer in advancing our understanding of the nature of human pathogen-plant interactions, how they are initiated, how they develop, and how they can be prevented. PPB's "Hot Topic" symposium at the APS meeting in San Diego, CA, has been followed by the appointment of a PPB member to lead planning for a national workshop to bring together plant pathologists and food scientists and to develop a coordinated strategy for addressing this critical need.

6. Biosecurity. Discussions related to plant biosecurity included APS's support for continued funding for the National Plant Diagnostic Network (NPDN), the National Plant Disease Recovery System (NPDRS), APHIS permitting and regulatory policies, issues related to DHS's Science and Technology Division and the National Biosecurity Assessment and Countermeasures Center, and the USDA's Office of Homeland Security were covered. APS has continued to participate in activities related to many of these programs and is recognized as uniquely qualified to align scientific expertise to find solutions.

7. Permitting. APS and USDA-APHIS continue to work together to identify and implement mechanisms for streamlining and increasing the effectiveness of the permitting system. The creation of the ePermit system, the formation of an Advisory Board on Permitting, and the development of Widely Prevalent Pathogen Lists for each state are examples of successful initiatives. A recent APS membership survey on APHIS permitting satisfaction showed significantly more positive perceptions of the process by APS members. Current discussions relate to the development of a pathogen risk system that would facilitate

interstate movement of pathogens and regulatory changes within PPQ.

8. General funding support. APS supports a general doubling of funding for agricultural research, with individual increases for specific funding programs such as the National Research Initiative and the NPDN at CSREES, the NPDRS at ARS, and the Biological Directorate at NSF. Support for research funding is a continuing activity for the board.

A very special event in the PPB's Washington schedule this year was the presentation of the Friend of APS Award to **Maryanna Henkart**, who retired recently from NSF after 23 years of service. For many of those years, Henkart served as division director, Division of Molecular and Cellular Biosciences, in which capacity she was a tremendous advocate for microbial genomics and microbial sciences. Her efforts were largely responsible for the 2001 establishment and subsequent success of the joint NSF-USDA Microbial Genome Sequencing Program and later the NSF-USDA Microbial Observatories program. APS President Ray Martyn presented the award and formally thanked Henkart at an evening dinner attended by PPB members and NSF colleagues.

The spring meetings also provided an exciting introduction for PPB Early Career Intern Angela Records to the world of public policy in the United States. Records took the lead in presenting APS's points of view in several of our meetings. Reflecting on this experience, Records states, "I learned how to converse with government decision-makers and to convey the importance of APS key priorities. I was impressed by how well the PPB was received by staff and administrators at all levels. It was exciting to be a part of the group."

The APS PPB represents our membership and our discipline, raising awareness, offering science-based information, and creating productive linkages between policymakers and APS members. Check out our monthly informational column in *Phytopathology News* and our Legislative Alerts in the online APS News Notes. Write to any of us with your suggestions, concerns, ideas, kudos, and interests. Let us know what we are doing well and what we can do better. ■

