

Citizen scientists: efforts by the Tri-Societies to inject science into US policymaking

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Keywords: science policy, grassroots advocacy, political action committee (PAC)

Description of the societies The Tri-Societies (American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America and Soil Science Society of America), the largest life science professional societies in the United States (US) dedicated to the agronomic, crop and soil sciences, encompass approximately 18,000 members globally and include approximately 14,000 certified professionals who are a direct conduit to the farming communities across the US. The Tri-Societies' US-based federal science policy programmes have been active for decades. There is a Washington, DC-based Director of Science Policy, Congressional Science Fellows (CSF) and Science Policy Interns.

Highlights of actions to improve technology interaction Science policy activities encompass education and advocacy. Tools employed include media relations workshops and special sessions on how to communicate with policymakers, the development of Rapid Response Team electronic listserves and an internet-based Knowledge Database which together allow for rapid access to scientific expertise. Most recently, the Societies implemented an online grassroots advocacy programme that specifically utilises enhanced technology for rapid communication between targeted segments of our membership and their elected representatives. The Societies continue to survey the membership and certified professionals regarding issues of public importance. In addition, regular communications occur with all members via a monthly hard copy and online newsletter and a biweekly electronic newsletter.

Activities to influence policy/public perception In 1986, the Tri-Societies first became involved in the CSF programme. A total of 26 Fellows, supported by the Tri-Societies, have had the opportunity to work on science policy issues within the US Congress. Thirteen, or 50%, of the Tri-Societies' CSFs have remained very engaged in science policy in Washington, D.C., working in Congress as professional staff, with one of the federal agencies or as professional lobbyists. Semi-annually, society leadership and members travel to Washington, DC, to take part in congressional visits day (CVD) activities during which they are given a "hands on" orientation in how to interact with policy makers and meet with scientists from other disciplines. During CVD these scientists are afforded the opportunity to pay visits to their Congressional delegations at which they urge support for the agricultural sciences. In 2004, in order to tap into the more than 18,000 members and 14,000 certified professionals, the Societies developed the Science Policy Action Alert, an electronic grassroots advocacy resource that provides easy and quick online access for our members to contact their members of Congress about issues of critical importance to the societies. We continue to evaluate the effectiveness of this service.

Plans for future initiatives The Tri-Societies plan to identify and train a core group of citizen scientists, in the districts and states of key members of Congress, who can and will communicate rapidly and efficiently with policy makers and thus affect policy and funding for agricultural sciences. We are also considering development of a series of Congressional educational briefings at key districts/states and at the national level in order to ensure that legislation is based on sound science. The Tri-Societies and certified professionals continue to consider the potential of a Political Action Committee (PAC). PACs are utilised to raise funds, which are then used to support select campaigns and hence gain access to key members of Congress. Ideally, with time, the Tri-societies will develop a Congressional champion for the agricultural sciences who can promote their interests.

Ultimately, scientific societies need to highlight the priority of communicating science to the public as well as to policy makers. Scientists, as individuals, are not traditionally well-known for their ability to communicate and market the benefits of their research to lay audiences. It is critical for scientific societies to engage on issues of importance to the grassland community, as well as the broader scientific community and general public in order to be recognised and heard. Societies must train members to be effective communicators, as well as to understand the value of such communications, in order for members to continue to be active and effective participants at the grassroots level of advocacy.