Policy Leaders Implore Scientists to Speak Out

"Members of the OSA should be up to their ears in frustration," Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) told participants at OSA’s mid-February Leadership Conference. Pointing to a grim outlook for federal science and technology programs, Rockefeller urged OSA members to speak out. Policymakers and citizens are not well informed about science, he noted, so scientists must change their characteristic muteness and speak out both individually and as a group.

Rockefeller said that freshmen in the 104th Congress are pitifully uneducated about science. He supported this comment with the classic story of a new congressman who, when asked about how we’ll predict the weather without funding for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, replied, "We’ll just get the weather from the radio."

The days of a bipartisan, supportive environment for science policy vanished with the Republican takeover of Congress in ’94, Rockefeller asserted. "Sometimes you come to work and wonder if you’re in the same place," he said. Congress no longer discusses topics like finding venture capital for research. Instead, the senator said, we talk about balancing the budget in seven years and what needs to be cut.

During the Cold War, there was a clear rationale for an investment in R&D. Federal R&D budgets increased for five decades. Scientists didn’t have to get involved with public policy—they left the dirty work to political professionals. But times have changed, Rockefeller says. "The old mantra of ‘Publish or perish’ is now ‘Be passive and perish.’"

The senator pointed to the demise of the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) as an example. Despite bipartisan support and substantive evidence of effectiveness, OTA became a strawman for the crusade against big government. "OTA became a trophy of the new freshman members, showing they could get rid of a government program, because there was almost nothing there to stop them. We did not receive any letters regarding the shutdown of OTA. The next steps will be more dramatic," Rockefeller predicted.

There is bipartisan encouragement for speaking out. Rep. Robert Walker (R-Pa.), chairman of the House Science Committee, says that scientists can best insure that crucial projects continue to receive priority in the legislative process by actively uniting and promoting science issues with their congressional representatives and the general public. Walker mentions tours of research facilities as a particularly effective way of making an impression.

Getting the message out

Many scientific societies have taken steps to get their message out. Judith Franz, executive director of the American Physical Society, told the OSA leadership about APS efforts to communicate with Congress. They’ve hired a staffer to educate Congress about science issues. This includes carefully crafting letters to point out the public benefit of a scientific issue; these messages are timed to coincide with debate on Capitol Hill.

One recent success story involves voicing support for NIST labs. "They are something we can really rally around," says Franz. She attributes the continued debate over NIST—as opposed to its imminent demise—to the fact that APS and others made their support known.

In contrast to policymaker’s pleas, OSA has a historical reluctance to speak out on science policy. The topic generated spirited discussion at the February Board of Directors meeting, leading to a request that staff prepare an analysis of various options and their costs.

"The typical OSA member reflects the thoughts of most scientists: Influencing public policy is ‘dirty’ business and we are above that. With this attitude, it has been very difficult to build a vocal constituency to fight for science and engineering funding," says OSA President Duncan Moore.