AIBS Science Policy Highlights: 2011

January

- President Barack Obama signs into law a reauthorization of the America COMPETES Act.
- Leadership of House committees is announced. Freshmen lawmakers chair four of the five subcommittees on the House Science, Space and Technology Committee.
- President Obama outlines a vision to “out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world” in his State of the Union address.
- The National Science Foundation (NSF) unveils Science, Engineering, and Education for Sustainability (SEES), a new agency-wide program to further sustainability science.

February

- President Obama releases his budget for fiscal year (FY) 2012 and proposes increases (relative to FY 2010 enacted) for NSF (+13.0 percent), National Institutes of Health (NIH, +2.4 percent), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA, +15.8 percent), Department of Energy Office of Science (DoE Science, +9.1 percent), and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS, +0.5 percent), but spending reductions for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, -12.9 percent) and U.S. Department of Agriculture research (USDA, -7.4 percent). AIBS prepares a report analyzing the President’s budget proposal.
- The House of Representatives passes a budget for the remainder of FY 2011 that would slice $61 billion from the previous year’s spending totals.
- The Department of the Interior finalizes its scientific integrity policy, the first federal agency to do so under President Obama’s directive.

March

- Scientists travel to Washington, DC to express to members of Congress the importance of sustained federal investments in the biological sciences.
- Halfway through the fiscal year, Congress continues to bicker about the FY 2011 budget. Democrats and Republicans argue over how much to cut spending.

April

- Congress finally completes work on FY 2011 appropriations after a last minute deal is reached to avert a government shutdown. Budgets for NSF, NIH, and DoE Science are cut by 1 percent. Deeper cuts occur at EPA (-3.8 percent), USGS (-2.5 percent), and NOAA (-3.2 percent).
- AIBS appropriations testimony requests increased investments in biological research and education at NSF, USGS, and EPA.
The Tennessee House of Representatives approves a bill that would protect the ‘academic freedom’ of public school teachers, but critics say that the measure would allow the teaching of creationism.

May

- The National Research Council releases a report for policymakers on the need for U.S. action on climate change.
- NSF Division of Molecular and Cellular Bioscience announces new eight-month cycle for proposal submission.

June

- The National Science Board proposes new criteria for the review of NSF grant proposals.
- The House passes legislation that would cut funding for USDA research by 12 percent in FY 2012.
- The House Science Committee holds a hearing to examine the need for federal investments in social, behavioral, and economic sciences.
- The federal government finalizes a rule that will allow federal scientists to serve on the board of scientific societies in their official government capacity.

July

- The House Appropriations Committee approves two bills that would flat fund NSF, and cut funding for NOAA by 1 percent, EPA science by 7 percent, USGS by 3 percent, FWS by 21 percent, and Forest Service research by nearly 10 percent.
- A federal judge dismisses a case brought against the federal government that had previously halted federally funded research involving human embryonic stem cells.
- A new report by the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology urges the federal government to periodically assess the condition and value of the nation’s ecosystem services.
- A federal appeals court rules that genes are patentable, overturning a lower court ruling.
- After numerous political attacks, nearly 150 scientific organizations and universities, including AIBS, write to Congress in defense of peer review.

August

- After months of negotiations and political posturing by lawmakers over the national debt, President Obama signs into law legislation that sets discretionary spending caps through FY 2021. The law creates a ‘Super Committee’ to identify $1.2 trillion in spending reductions.
- The White House Office of Management and Budget issues a memo requiring agencies to cut their budgets by 5 percent in FY 2013 relative to FY 2011 funding levels.
- NSF announces a move to an annual funding cycle for environmental and organismal divisions. Grantees will now need to submit preproposals.
- NIH requires grantees to track and report financial conflicts of interest of $5,000 or more.
- Several Republican presidential candidates express doubt about the cause of climate change and the validity of the theory of evolution.
- AIBS expresses support for NOAA’s draft scientific integrity policy, while calling for clarification of certain aspects of the policy.
September

- Dr. John C. Wingfield is named the new Assistant Director for NSF’s Directorate for Biological Sciences.
- President Obama announces a plan to develop a National Bioeconomy Blueprint detailing steps to harness biological research innovations to address national challenges in health, food, energy, and the environment, while simultaneously stimulating job creation.
- Senate Appropriations Committee passes legislation to cut funding for NSF by $162 million in FY 2011. AIBS organizes a letter writing campaign in opposition that draws the participation of thousands of researchers and educators.
- More than 2,900 undergraduate and graduate students sign a petition, which was organized by AIBS and the Botanical Society of America, in support of sustained federal investments in scientific research, education, and training programs.
- USGS announces termination of the National Biological Information Infrastructure (NBii).
- AIBS comments on NSF’s and EPA’s draft scientific integrity policies, calling for stronger protections for researchers and their science.
- President Obama signs into law a bill to reform the U.S. patent system.

October

- Republican members of the House Science Committee recommend $1.5 billion in cuts to federal science programs in FY 2012.
- AIBS writes to the Super Committee urging lawmakers to take caution when considering cuts to research and science education.

November

- The Super Committee fails to reach a deal to reduce the nation’s deficit, triggering $1.2 trillion in automatic cuts to discretionary funding beginning in FY 2013.
- Congress passes the first appropriations bills for FY 2012. NSF receives a 2.5 percent increase. NOAA’s budget will increase by 6.6 percent. USDA’s intramural research program is cut, while the department’s competitive extramural research is flat-funded.
- House Science Committee holds a second hearing on EPA science, during which some Republican members criticize the agency’s scientific integrity.

December

- Congress reaches a compromise on the remaining appropriations bills required to fund government agencies in FY 2012. Final spending levels are better than anticipated for many science agencies. Two agencies, NIH and DoE Science, receive budget increases of 1 percent. Other biological and environmental science programs, including at EPA and Department of the Interior, receive budget cuts for the second consecutive year.
- NOAA finalizes its scientific integrity plan, which is praised by AIBS President Dr. James P. Collins as a “model” policy that will “provide a strong foundation for public trust in the agency’s science.”
- The National Science Board finalizes its recommendations regarding NSF’s merit review criteria. The existing two merit review criteria, which consider the intellectual merit and broader impacts of the proposed research, would be retained, but clarified.