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Biology and the Congressional Fellows Program

What constitutes effective social action? More than a decade has passed since a group of biologists at Cornell University, including faculty and students, contemplated that question during a time of growing environmental awareness and concern. As the contagious enthusiasm of a young and powerful political movement spurred groups into action throughout the nation, the Cornellians searched for that unique contribution that a scientific community might provide, and chose to offer a program by which biologists themselves were put into service. They decided to select and support young biology Ph.D.'s who would work on the staffs of congressional committees that were writing environmental legislation. From this effort, as from similar ones initiated elsewhere, grew programs that we see today.

The most prominent of these is the AAAS Congressional Fellows Program, which has evolved into a vehicle that each year allows a select group of scientists and engineers, sponsored by diverse professional societies, to contribute their talents to government and, in return, gain governmental experience.

Such admittedly political but clearly nonpartisan programs continue to provide trusted technical information and advice to decision-makers. One need only look at the 2 October issue of *Science* to appreciate the growth of the program. In 1973 there were only seven Congressional Fellows. There are now 34, sponsored by some 20 national organizations, including the AAAS, the American Chemical Society, American Geological Institute, American Geophysical Union, American Psychological Association, and several of the leading engineering societies. There is breadth to this roster of sponsors, which spans much of the spectrum of the American scientific community. But does it cover the spectrum in full? Examination of actual numbers reveals one disconcerting imbalance. Considering the pervasive and potential usefulness of the work of biologists in our lives, it is surprising that there should be only four biological societies that sponsor Fellows. And none of these societies are from that branch of the discipline that concerns itself primarily with whole-organism biology and ecology, in which the potential application of current research findings is so high.

We feel that this shortcoming should be remedied. There is in our judgment an increased rather than decreased need for biologists in legislative circles. Where issues are highly technical and clouded with ambiguity, where powerful economic interests argue against each other regarding the validity of interpretation of scientific data, and where the search for confident, deterministic answers to uncertain, stochastic questions reflects an understanding of science that remains naive, the input of the biologist continues to be essential.

While times have changed from the days of activist large-scale environmental reform, the legacy of that period is still very much with us. And while there has been a shift in approach, from simplistic idealism to concerned pragmatism, this shift has in no way lessened the potential usefulness of the biologist in government.

Organizations of biologists could make a lasting contribution to society by furthering programs that support the involvement of biologists in the legislative process. The Congressional Fellows Program provides an established means toward that end. We urge that an increased number of biological societies take on the sponsorship of Congressional Fellows, following the lead set by the American Society for Microbiology, the Biophysical Society, the American Society for Photobiology, and the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology.—THOMAS EISNER, *Jacob Gould Schurman Professor of Biology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853*, AND PETER JUTRO, *Adjunct Associate Professor of Public Policy and Management, Cornell University*