

Imagine turning in your PhD dissertation and one month later starting kindergarten again. That's what it felt like as I left the comfortable expertise of my narrow subject area and plunged into the vast jungle of the policy world. I encountered a new alphabet (CREP, EQIP, WRDA, SCHIP, FISA), "new" numbers (all those zeros come *before* the decimal point?!), new vocabulary (baseline, PAYGO, suspension), and new rules ("recess" doesn't mean that we get to go outside and play). My daily commute to "school" is a field trip in itself: every day I walk past the Capitol building, the Supreme Court, and the Library of Congress.

I am very blessed to be working for Congressman Adrian Smith from Nebraska's Third District. The Third District, which comprises about three-fourths of Nebraska's geography, is an Animal Science Fellow's dream. It is home to the USDA Meat Animal Research Center (MARC) at Clay Center, numerous cattle enterprises from cow-calf operations to packing plants, and more ethanol plants than any other Congressional district in the United States. Congressman Smith serves on four House committees: Agriculture, Budget, Natural Resources, and Science and Technology. These jurisdictions are a great match for his District, and for my interests as well. The issue areas that I handle for the Congressman are agriculture (including renewable energy and conservation), science research and education, and climate change. I have also worked on energy issues in general, and have done a little Budget work when it meshed with my other issues.

Congressman Smith's staff members are sharp, young, and motivated. They have been patiently teaching this political tyro the finer points of policy work and have made me feel very welcome. The office environment is similar to that of a graduate student office. There are seven desks in one room, with a smattering of filing cabinets, bookshelves, and a printer. One major difference is the televisions at almost every desk—all tuned to C-SPAN.

Highlights of my job include staffing the Congressman at hearings, meeting and talking with Nebraska constituents, and meeting other scientists working in the policy realm. It's especially fun when animal agriculture groups come in and we establish a connection based on common interests. I've also enjoyed learning more about the policy issues and developing my own educated opinions in areas in which I had only a rudimentary understanding before. I'm learning all the time and loving it. The job is constantly forward-looking, which matches my personality. Some of the rewards of working in a Congressional office include seeing my boss on C-SPAN delivering a speech that I wrote and hearing positive feedback from constituents on specific bills or issues on which I have worked.

When Congress is in session, everything is fast-paced. Multitasking has taken on a whole new dimension for me. There is no time for scientific rumination. Accuracy is still important, but information must be gleaned, decisions made, and conclusions disseminated on the spot. Information abounds on The Hill, but not all information is created equal (as any scientist knows). The snowstorm of e-mails and papers that crosses my desktop daily becomes a blizzard when major legislation looms. Decisiveness is the only remedy for this information overload, but it's taken me a while to learn what is relevant and what is not. The pace can be frenetic at times, but I really do enjoy it!

As a Congressional staffer, I depend on many people and sources for answers and information. PubMed and Scopus literature searches are a thing of the past. There is no time to peruse scientific documents and fish out pertinent information. Most of what I read now are short summaries written by experts who compile information from many sources. If a document is longer than three to five pages, I probably won't have time to read it—I'll look for another source of information. One of the best and quickest sources of information is the House committee staff—they know the issues backward and forward and are willing and able to explain them to a neophyte. The Congressional Research Service, a division of the Library of Congress, is an amazing resource for locating obscure information, random statistics, and details on policy issues. They have experts in every field imaginable and can turn around a request within the hour if necessary. I've also gathered information from government agencies, think tanks, interest groups, and yes, even lobbyists.

My year in Washington, DC is flying by—I'm past the halfway point. I know that I still have a lot to learn in the policy realm, but it's hard to imagine going back to what I knew before I came here. Thank you all for the opportunity to experience federal policy in action. It has been a great experience, and I would encourage each of you (early-, mid-, and late-career scientists) to consider the FASS Congressional Science Fellowship in your future.