

MAR16-2015-001448

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the MAR16 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

How to interact with Congress about Science

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The role of Congress is critical to the success of the scientific enterprise, both in terms of authorization and appropriation. As a consequence, it is very important to make the case for science directly with Congress. Every scientist has a representative in the House of Representatives in whose district he/she lives, and in the Senate. Constituents are especially welcomed in their offices. A personal visit is the most effective means for transmitting the importance of science in general, and physics in particular. The AAAS website lists the “Top Ten Rules for Working With Congress.” They are: (1) Know your goal; (2) Understand how Congress works; (3) Conduct detailed background research; (4) Determine the timing of your course of action; (5) Be clear and succinct; (6) Understand Congressional staff and their influence; (7) Provide concrete suggestions; (8) Present support of science as a means to meet national and local goals, not as an entitlement; (9) Be willing to say “I don’t know”; and (10) Follow up appropriately. Each of these will be described in more detail during the presentation. The March Meeting is an example of a particularly important time period for meeting with representatives (Rule #4). The President’s Budget Request has been submitted to Congress, and the individual appropriation subcommittees are in the process of developing their respective “mark ups.” Appointments with members or their staff is now timely, and urgent. Authorization bills are also in play, and can have significant impact on the scientific community. Paying attention to their development in key committees (e.g. the Science, Space, and Technology Committee of the House of Representatives), and providing appropriate and timely input, is the responsibility of every scientist.