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GSA National Leadership Initiative: GSA in Washington, D.C.

To enhance its capabilities in representing and serving the geoscience community, the Geological Society of America (GSA) is considering establishing an office in Washington, D.C. This office would provide a mechanism to strengthen and expand the Society's national leadership role by (1) providing timely information to policy makers on national issues of relevance to the geosciences, (2) allowing more effective participation in national coalitions, (3) facilitating work with the GSA community on geoscience initiatives, (4) encouraging federal funding agencies to support the geosciences and GSA's community, and (5) helping to foster collaborations with and among mission agencies and organizations, industry, and academia.

GSA's membership of more than 19,400 represents a broad spectrum of the geosciences community in the United States and worldwide. The Society's voice will carry more weight in Congress, the executive branch, and federal agencies if it is seen to have an ongoing presence in Washington, D.C. Many important issues facing both this country and the world are related to the geosciences, yet geoscientists have difficulty being heard. These issues include sustainable development as it relates to energy, water, and mineral resources; global and local environmental quality and health; and natural hazards. These issues are themselves intertwined and directly connected with global and national security. GSA's Washington, D.C., office would allow the Society to more effectively address these geoscience issues and issues that impact all of science, including funding for research and education, free exchange of science ideas, facilitation of the exchange of scientists and students, open access to science data, and the use of science in policy decisions.

The earth sciences, and the GSA community in particular, are suffering in the current political landscape. For example, the bold initiative to double NSF's budget has been sidetracked by other fiscal needs, thereby lessening the potential impact of NSF's current programs and potentially crippling emerging initiatives. NASA has been unable to fund high-priority projects in Earth observations that show great promise for applied and fundamental science. The USGS budget has not kept up with inflation, at a time when its information on natural resources, hazards, and other important issues is in great demand. The Department of Energy's programs in renewable and geothermal energy and fossil fuels have suffered significant cutbacks, even though energy is central to national security and environmental concerns. Some scientists fear that efforts to introduce intelligent design as a theory concerning the origin of life will undermine the teaching of science in primary and secondary schools and, ultimately, respect for science and critical thinking.

It is widely acknowledged that the earth sciences are not sufficiently visible in Washington, D.C., and the GSA community is among the least represented and visible component of the earth science community. There are only a handful of government affairs professionals working for the geoscience community. Most have distinct goals for their government affairs efforts, which link to their individual organizational missions.

Not Just A Government Affairs Office

The Washington office would be more than a government affairs office. Its staff would work with the GSA community as a liaison and communications center and provide timely identification of important issues and projects. The office would help to ensure that geoscience is an integral part of broader science initiatives in key funding agencies. The Washington office would work with the community on emerging initiatives and serve as a touch point for these initiatives. GSA's physical presence in D.C. would ensure a better flow of information to the Society membership about geo-issues and place the Society membership in a better position to respond in a timely manner to these issues. This would enable GSA to become a more proactive advocate for members' needs and concerns.

GSA Community Initiatives

Another way in which the GSA Washington, D.C., office would be more than a typical government affairs office is that it would work with the community on emerging initiatives and serve as a Washington, D.C., touch point for these initiatives—particularly in the early stages of their formation. Often, within GSA, such initiatives have been lead by energetic and dedicated people who have limited experience in working with federal agencies, and typically are unfamiliar with how to inform Congress and others about the importance of their proposed endeavor. Some programs, that started as such initiatives that are now established, and have established presences via their own project offices or through AGU or other D.C.-based organizations, may still benefit from another voice in D.C.

Relationship to Other Government and Public Policy Efforts

A Washington, D.C., GSA office, working in conjunction with AGI, AGU, AAPG and others, will significantly increase the capacity for representation of the geoscience community on Capitol Hill, with the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and with federal agencies. There will be some overlap among these society offices, but handled correctly this should greatly enhance the ability of the geoscience community to engage in the public policy dialog.

In particular, the office will need to work closely with AGI's Government Affairs Program (GAP) to coordinate activities and gain overall efficiency for the geoscience efforts. The focus of the AGI GAP is on ensuring that the Member Societies are informed about critical issues and that their voice can be heard on Capitol Hill and by the executive branch. This is primarily done through congressional workshops, testimony, letters, and meetings, and by informing member societies of key issues; these societies then inform their membership as they see fit. AGI also works to inform the general geoscience community on many issues. A GSA Washington, D.C., office would complement and aid such efforts. Because AGI is a federation of geoscientific and professional associations it does not advocate on behalf of individual member societies. Therefore, there may be issues that AGI does not want to address for a variety of reasons, but

that GSA may want to pursue. For example, AGI does not help individual community science research initiatives, which would be an important focus for the GSA office. AGI has an active role in various coalitions—often as organizer or co-organizer. It is expected that GSA would also have an active role in coalitions, typically be in partnership with AGI. Whereas AGI does help set up appointments for member societies and individual scientists, the GSA office would more directly target the needs of its members. Thus, the GSA office would be complementary to AGI's GAP, but at the same time provide services to its membership that AGI does not offer.

The American Association of Petroleum Geologists (AAPG) is just opening a Washington, D.C., office which will be housed at AGI. GSA generally represents a distinct community from that of AAPG. Although there is some overlap, a D.C., presence would enhance opportunities to work collaboratively. Because there is considerable overlap of membership between AGU and GSA, many activities of the GSA office will be complementary to those of AGU, and many will be collaborative. GSA's office would be adding additional personnel to the force already in place at AGI, AGU, and others but would be directly responsive to the mission of GSA.

The Washington office would be a resource for our Congressional Science Fellow. This is an exceptionally worthwhile program, because it provides the training ground for geoscientists who are likely to become more heavily involved in policy matters later in their careers. GSA and the U.S. Geological Survey currently share the cost of the Congressional Science Fellow.

The Office

The Washington, D.C., office may initially be co-located with another society. The staff of the office would be responsible for:

- Forging relationships with agencies that impact science, science research, science education, and science-related public policy, and tracking activities in these agencies.
- Tracking developments in targeted congressional committees and subcommittees.
- Informing agencies and congressional and executive branch entities of GSA's views on various subjects as appropriate.
- Preparing briefs and testimony for hearings, meetings, etc.
- Participating in coalitions and working groups relevant to GSA's mission and mandate and taking a leadership role as appropriate.
- Coordinating activities to complement work by other societies.
- Accompanying GSA members when they visit agencies or congressional offices as appropriate.

Measuring Success

Metrics to track success for the Washington, D.C., office must be established; however, the metrics of success are difficult to set quantitatively at this time. The Executive Director and a subcommittee of the GPPC will work to set the initial goals of the office and the metrics,

realizing that these may change over the course of the first few years of the office's existence. There will be regular reviews of the goals, metrics and an assessment of how well the office is meeting them.

Some potential metrics to measure success include:

- Number and type of community contacts, interactions with agencies, appointments for community members and initiatives, briefings, lectures given and papers published.
- Information requests, preparation, distribution
- Specific activities associated with and success in passage of legislation (authorization and appropriation) affecting the geoscience community.

Request for Community Input

The GSA Executive Director and the Geology and Public Policy Committee (GPPC) request community comment on the concept of the Washington, D.C., office. Please send comments to:

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