

## 2014–2015 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow Report:



Susanna W. Blair

### A Geoscientist on “The Hill”

I am honored to serve as the 2014–2015 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow. I learned of this fellowship in 2013 via the Science Outside the Lab summer workshop offered by Arizona State University’s Consortium for Science Policy and Outcomes. During this “Orientation to Science Policy,” we were able to engage with people who regulate, critique, study, and lobby at the intersection of science and policy. Because of this orientation, or disorientation as it sometimes felt, I recognized that there was an intellectual and useful space for scientists at science policy institutions. Specifically as geoscientists, we bring an interesting perspective to this space—an understanding of both the long-term scale of earth-system functions and of the rapid alteration of this function by anthropogenic influences. My hope is that within science policy, both scales will be part of the conversation.

As this year’s GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, I join the group of American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Congressional Science and Technology Fellows. We began our year in D.C. at the beginning of September with an invaluable two-week orientation. Sessions during the orientation included networking, negotiation, the role of science in the three branches of government, and how the budget process works. One highlight of our two-week orientation was a lecture from the Honorable John Holdren, Assistant to the President for Science and Technology, who spoke about the President’s genuine interest in science and his commitment to young scientists.

Following this orientation, I took part in extensive interviews all over “The Hill” to determine my placement for the year. One of my key considerations in choosing a placement was the committees on which the senator or representative served, because this determines a large portion of the legislation introduced by the member and the primary work of the legislative team in that member’s office.

In early October, I was honored to accept a post with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), with a focus on environment and energy issues. Sen. Gillibrand is a member of the Environment and Public Works Committee and is very interested in the health of the Great Lakes and the resiliency of the Atlantic coastline. These, along with many other environment and energy concerns, make my background in geology, science education, and environmental consulting useful. My work began during the long pre-election recess, which gave me the chance to research energy and environment issues specific to New York and to review the energy and environment bills that were already introduced during the 113th Congress. Since the end of the recess, I have staffed the Senator at two oversight hearings: the Environmental Protection Agency’s ground level ozone

standards and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s safety recommendations and implementation post-Fukushima. I have also worked with constituent groups, researched potential legislative ideas, and written memos for the Senator concerning pending issues.

I would be remiss not to mention the November mid-term elections, which resulted in a change in Senate leadership and a concomitant change in Senate *committee* leadership. The chair of a committee has control over nearly every aspect of committee action, most notably what bills are introduced and debated. The Environment and Public Works Committee, on which Senator Gillibrand serves, was previously chaired by Senator Boxer (D-CA) and is now chaired by Senator Inhofe (R-OK), the author of the book, *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future*. As a Fellow working in Gillibrand’s office, I plan to support her in pursuing continued constructive science-based discussion within this committee and making gains where consensus can be found.

Among the many things I have been exposed to so far is the staggering amount of information available to staffers. It is clear a staffer could fill the majority of his or her time purely going to briefings. Briefings are offered on nearly every subject of legislative interest. Already I have attended briefings related to the Clean Power Plan, nuclear energy, ocean health, EPA rules, and climate change. Along with the briefings around the Hill, there are countless webinars and lectures around D.C. In addition, I have found the Congressional Research Service (CRS) to be one of the most remarkable services provided to Congress. This government entity works solely for Congress as its primary public policy and analysis support agency. With a staff of nearly 600 analysts, attorneys, informational professionals, and support personnel, they provide the most up-to-date, credible, and objective research and analysis possible in a very timely manner. What I cannot find, they already know. Thankfully, all of the correspondence with CRS is confidential, so the naive questions of new Fellows about the political process are off the record.

This year is off to a whirlwind start, and my learning curve is pretty much straight north. The 114th Congress is sure to be interesting, but potentially concerning to the scientific community. During the 113th Congress, the House of Representatives introduced hundreds of bills primarily designed to limit government, with a potential for detrimental effects for environmental protection. These have included bills to weaken and de-fund the Environmental Protection Agency and block funding for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It is expected that these bills will come up for a vote again this year and, with the change in leadership, may now be introduced and voted on in the Senate. On a slightly more positive note, the 114th Congress will likely bring a much needed discussion of national energy policy. Hopefully this will incorporate stronger environmental protection, along with securing energy supplies and keeping costs low. I look forward to reporting on these and other developments as my time on “The Hill” continues. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions.

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