



Kirstin L. Neff

Dr. Smith Goes to Washington

As the 2016–2017 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, I arrived in D.C. for orientation and placement in September 2016, just two short months before the presidential election that took most of America and the world by surprise. I began my placement in the office of Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM), where I am working on water, space, science, and technology issues, at a time when many staffers had taken leave to go work on campaigns across the country. With the national focus on the campaign, I had ample time to settle into the process and culture of “the Hill.” After the election, congressional offices quickly filled with staffers returning to a very different political reality than most had expected, and the final work period of the 114th Congress took on the high-strung nature of what is called a “lame duck session.”

It’s easy to arrive in D.C. with the optimism that your unique perspective can shake up the system, not unlike the titular character of the classic film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Instead, I’ve learned that an understanding of the system and how to operate within it is critical to getting anything accomplished in Washington, where process and procedure rule.

It didn’t take long for my own idealism to be confronted with a legislative moment seemingly perfectly designed to bring me down to reality. In December, in the last hours of the 114th Congress, the House of Representatives seemed poised to pass a version of the Water Resources Development Act of 2016 that represented years of bipartisan work and compromise, led by Senate Environment and Public Works Chairman James Inhofe (R-OK) and Ranking Member Barbara Boxer (D-CA). The bill would be Boxer’s final piece of legislation before retirement after 34 years in Congress, the last 24 of which were in the Senate. Assuming responsibility for the water portfolio in my office, I was excited to be involved in eleventh-hour, late-night votes so soon in my tenure. However, as the Senate prepared to vote on the House-passed legislation, renamed the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act, or WIIN Act, it became clear that Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) had inserted what Boxer called a “poison pill” rider that she argued would undermine protections for the Delta smelt, an endangered native fish species in the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta in California, which has long pitted environmentalists against Central Valley farmers in search of more water for irrigation during a historic drought.

Having moved to D.C. from California, I was well aware of this issue and was torn over the vote. Our office, along with a bipartisan coalition representing states along the San Juan River in the Four Corners region, had succeeded in lobbying for our bill to compensate communities along that river that had been affected by 2014’s Gold King Mine spill to be included in the WIIN Act. Our office wanted to make sure our constituents would get

compensation for the damages caused by the release of acid mine drainage into their river, and we therefore supported the bill. The WIIN Act passed after a 1:00 a.m. vote, and I returned home in the wee hours with a new appreciation for the difficult compromises necessary to pass legislation in this political climate.

While votes tend to make the headlines, I’ve found that a majority of the work I do as a legislative staffer never makes it to the Senate floor. This work includes meeting with constituents and interest groups who have a stake in federal programs or legislation, conducting oversight of the executive branch, and advocating for our constituents with federal agencies. In water resources, there is a complex web of interactions between federal, state, and local authorities. My work includes facilitating federal dam operations, tracking interstate water issues like the *Texas vs. New Mexico* Supreme Court case on the Rio Grande and the development of drought contingency plans along the Colorado River, as well as helping small water providers in rural New Mexico get the funding they need to comply with Safe Drinking Water Act regulations. Without a legislative win to point to, it can be hard to evaluate the job you are doing, but in the end what matters is serving the Senator’s constituents in whatever way you can.

One of the great strengths of the Congressional Science Fellowship is that the GSA-USGS Fellow receives training in science policy and communication along with other fellows, sponsored by a number of different scientific societies. Through the experiences of my fellow Fellows, I have gotten exposure to many different science policy avenues throughout Capitol Hill and the administration. My colleagues hosted in executive branch agencies have had a front seat to a presidential transition, and understanding that branch of government and its processes has helped me to be a more effective congressional staffer. The opportunities I’ve had to collaborate with my congressional colleagues, including recently on the Scientific Integrity Act, have shown me the power of having not just one, but a cadre, of scientists working on the Hill. As I sit here six months into my fellowship, I’m excited to continue developing my skills as a representative of the geosciences community and as an effective congressional staffer.

The manuscript is submitted for publication by Kirstin Neff, 2016–2017 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, with the understanding that the U.S. government is authorized to reproduce and distribute reprints for governmental use. The one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award Number G16AP00179. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government. Neff works in the office of Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) and can be contacted by e-mail at Kirstin_Neff@heinrich.senate.gov.

