

APS Public Policy Visioning Task Force - Findings and Recommendations

APS Mission

Discover and disseminate new knowledge of plant systems worldwide to meet humanity's need for safe and nutritious food, affordable fiber, sustainable forests, and verdant landscapes; and promote the development and adoption of economically and environmentally sustainable practices to ensure plant health.

APS Public Policy Board Charge

The Public Policy Board (PPB) provides scientific input to the public policy-making process. It provides advice directly or through the APS President to different societies, organizations, and/or agencies on research funding needs and potential impacts of proposed rules and regulations in policy areas of relevance to plant pathology.

Background: The world's population is nearing 9 billion people and our climate continues to change. These concerns and others confront APS with significant challenges related to scientific literacy, acceptance of technology and an understanding of the demand for food, fuel, feed, and fiber. Plant pathologists study plant diseases, plant-microbe interactions, phytobiomes, and post-harvest losses that can limit critical resources, especially food. Many of our researchers address cutting-edge, visionary science, while others focus on education. Both elements are critical to the success of the greater global culture and address the wicked problems of today and tomorrow such as those outlined in the [United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals](#)¹, the recent consensus report of The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine entitled '[Science Breakthroughs to Advance Food and Agricultural Research by 2030](#)², and the [USDA Science Blueprint](#)³.

Task Force Charge: In August 2020, APS president Mark Gleason appointed an Ad Hoc Public Policy Visioning Task Force charged with providing recommendations to maximize the effectiveness of the APS Public Policy Board (PPB). Given a 50-year decrease in federal funding for research and development^{4,5}, the recent relocation of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the Economic Research Service (ERS) to Kansas City, and a change in the administration at the White House – along with corresponding shifts in priorities, the timing seemed ideal to take stock of PPB's past accomplishments and to assess its future role and opportunities in supporting APS' public policy efforts.

Members of the Public Policy Visioning Task Force met virtually several times between September 2020 and March 2021 to assess PPB's impactful contributions, reflect upon the changes that have taken place since PPB was launched in 1991. Their goal was to frame a set of recommendations that could enhance APS' voice on advancing science, policy, and funding decisions while increasing awareness of the relevance of plant pathology at the nexus of the global food, energy, water and societal systems.

Overarching Findings: The Task Force reaffirms the relevance of PPB and its mission within APS. Since its inception, PPB has significantly and positively advocated for the science of plant pathology, helped frame federal research and development priorities, influenced policy and funding decisions, and has developed and nurtured APS' trusted relationships and dialogue with federal agencies, Congressional staffers and allied professional and learned society partners – key prerequisites for effective advocacy. While these have been the core priorities for PPB, the Task Force also recognizes PPB's support of countless APS members by increasing their understanding of how the federal government and science agencies operate and how federal science priorities are established. PPB has hosted strategy sessions with funding agency partners to provide insights on how to more effectively compete for federal funds which helped our members appreciate that our voices matter and how to use them to advocate for issues that we care about. Indirectly, PPB through its actions and 'Can Do' attitude, professional approach and focus on science, has significantly contributed to the reputation of APS with key federal partners. While difficult to measure this impact, it is clear that APS' reputation in D.C. is in large part due to the advocacy and efforts of PPB.

Task Force Recommendations:

1) Increase engagement of APS members – 'In-reach'. PPB should consider an internal portfolio or "in-reach" effort by actively engaging the various boards and committees of APS to frame PPB's science advocacy/policy advocacy through an internal engagement strategy in which PPB members would seek input from the committees and boards in some kind of authentic, intentional, and metered way. PPB has a longstanding tradition of engaging APS members to help them understand policy-making. Yet, there are other ways for PPB to engage the membership of APS, especially early career members, to frame its science and policy advocacy efforts and to develop a greater sense of connection between PPB and the membership. This strategy would engage more of our subject matter experts, who can assist PPB in time or energy-intensive activities. In addition to creating useful products for PPB's advocacy efforts, this would engender shared 'ownership' of the work product and empower more APS members to help with advocacy and engagement.

2) Take a proactive focus. The PPB should clearly assess issues, concerns and interests of the APS membership in a regular cycle to assure a focus on PPB's core mission to identify critical science gaps important to our science and the systems which we study. The PPB should advocate for solutions that best address these gaps, working in partnership with granting agencies to frame new RFP's, etc. or working with like-minded scientific societies, organizations, and/or agencies on research funding needs and potential impacts of proposed rules and regulations in policy areas of relevance to plant pathology.

3) Increase partnering and alliance-building with like-minded scientific societies, organizations, and/or agencies for mutual benefit and increased impact. The PPB in partnership with APS Council should develop strategic partnerships to leverage our influence on shared advocacy goals in science, policy, agency engagement and legislative priorities. Given the complexities of the world in which we live, work, learn and discover, teamwork and

partnerships are key to success. Strategic partnerships will enhance our capacity to position plant health needs within the global challenges faced by humanity.

4) Provide financial support for PPB success.

- a. Operating budget.** Provide an annual budget to PPB that places a premium on supporting trusted relationships with key federal agency partners – both in Kansas City and Washington D.C. The Task Force understands the financial complexities faced by APS Council but relationships with our federal partners take a long time to build, and like trust, can be lost quickly. The relationships PPB has built with staff and administrators from the subset of federal agencies most critical to APS should be prioritized and nurtured. How should PPB nurture these relationships? How can PPB use the virtual tools developed and embraced during COVID to enhance its engagement efforts and reduce costs? How might it enlist APS’ geographically dispersed members to nurture these relationships and engage key legislative leaders and influencers when in their home districts on issues that matter to them? These are questions that represent multiple valuable opportunities, not the least of which is how PPB can increase its effectiveness in an economical manner.
- b. Engage an outside consultant to ensure the success of PPB advocacy and engagement efforts.** PPB will require outside representation which understands the dynamics and context on the Hill and the key agencies APS is targeting so that PPB members are prepared for interaction and success. PPB should identify the information, insights and professional assistance that is needed to carry out their task. A time-specific, limited services agreement with a DC-based government relations firm would serve as a conduit for PPB in government legislative affairs and help PPB keep abreast of the rapidly changing policy-driven landscape. This agreement should have a limited scope and duration to maximize PPB’s efforts within the constraints of the PPB budget.
- c. Create an ad hoc working group of APS members with experience in government affairs.** PPB should seek out and engage APS members who are serving, or that have recently served, in government, industry or higher education with experience in government affairs. These members and their established networks could enhance APS’ federal engagement efforts. Doing so might reveal information that is readily available but that has not been typically used by PPB in its advocacy efforts.

Respectfully submitted on March 31, 2021 by:

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References:

¹ [United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals](#) – 'The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the world's shared plan to end extreme poverty, reduce inequality, and protect the planet by 2030.'

² The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine – '[Science Breakthroughs to Advance Food and Agricultural Research by 2030](#)' identifies innovative, emerging scientific advances for making the U.S. food and agricultural system more efficient, resilient, and sustainable. This report explores the availability of relatively new scientific developments across all disciplines that could accelerate progress toward these goals. It identifies the most promising scientific breakthroughs that could have the greatest positive impact on food and agriculture, and that are possible to achieve in the next decade (by 2030).'

³ [USDA Science Blueprint](#) – 'The Science Blueprint guides USDA's science priorities for the next 5 years, building from past success. It is not, however, a catalog of every science activity or focus within the Department. Indeed, departing from past blueprints, it is intentionally concise in order to provide focused leadership and direction to the use of resources. It is also an invitation to partners throughout our Nation to propose innovative ideas to strengthen the themes provided here, which are essential to continuing U.S. leadership in the production of food, wood, and other agricultural products. This document outlines the implementation of this mission with a blueprint that outlines the following five overarching Program Themes: (1) Sustainable Ag Intensification; (2) Ag Climate Adaptation; (3) Food and Nutrition Translation; (4) Value-Added Innovations; and (5) Ag Science Policy Leadership.'

⁴ '[Fueling American Innovation and Recovery – The Federal Role in Research and Development.](#)' 2020. A report from the House Committee on the Budget.

⁵ '[R&D in the FY 2021 Omnibus: Review and Estimates.](#)' 2021. Hourihan, M. A report of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.