
Public Affairs

Perspective

Informing Environmental Policy with Ecological Expertise: ESA's Rapid Response Teams Rise to the Challenge

One of the most important—and most challenging—tasks for an ecologist is to communicate his or her research to an audience beyond other scientists, especially to policy makers and decision-making managers. In the coming years, the need for ecologically informed policy decisions will be greater than ever as governments grapple with the need for national and global solutions to environmental problems.

The Ecological Society of America's (ESA) leadership has long recognized the value of engagement with a wider community. In fact, one of ESA's key missions is to inform environmental decisions with ecological knowledge. The Society strongly reaffirmed this focus in its 2004 committee report, *Ecological Science and Sustainability for a Crowded Planet: 21st Century Vision and Action Plan for the Ecological Society of America*. (<http://www.esa.org/ecovisions/ppfiles/EcologicalVisionsReport.pdf>)

As a core recommendation of the report, ESA has established a system of Rapid Response Teams (RRTs), comprising a cadre of scientists committed to supplying ecological expertise to U.S. decision makers at the highest levels. Each team consists of 3–6 members with expertise in a broad ecological area, including such fields as Forest Ecology, Agroecology, and Aquatic Ecology. Each member serves for a 2- or 3-year term, and is called upon an average of three times per year as relevant policy issues arise. While initially focused on U.S. policy, these teams will likely evolve and may come to address policy decisions beyond U.S. borders.

The establishment of RRTs formalizes the relationship between ESA's Public Affairs Office (PAO) in Washington, D.C., and ESA members' expertise. While the Public Affairs Office has brought ESA's expertise to bear upon federal environmental legislation since its creation in 1983, its capacity for infusing ecological science into policy decisions is greatly enhanced by the creation of a formal network of RRT scientists who are called upon regularly by the PAO to inform federal decision makers.

The RRTs sprang into action with the start of the 109th Congressional session in January 2005. Habitat Change and Conservation Biology RRT members John Wiens, Virginia Dale, and Stan Temple held a series of dialogues with Congressional staff over a 2-day period to discuss the relationship of ecological science to upcoming Endangered Species Act (E.S.A.) reforms. The scientists met with staff from the House Resources Committee and the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which have jurisdiction over the Act, as well as six other offices that have played important roles in E.S.A. legislation. Dialogues focused on current E.S.A. contributions to species conservation, the role of science in proposed reform legislation, and proactive, cost-effective strategies for conservation and recovery. At the request of several Congressional committees, the scientists also worked as a team to comment on endangered species draft legislation.

Their success as “honest brokers” of scientific expertise has led to an ongoing relationship with both Republican and Democratic staff. ESA has since been called upon by Congressional staff on several occasions to provide input on proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act. The PAO as well is developing a fruitful relationship with Congressional staff who craft endangered species legislation. The series

of collaborative, science-based dialogues initiated by this first RRT exercise promises to serve as a model for future RRT activities.

ESA's Rapid Response Teams have already become instrumental in shaping ESA's voice on environmental policy issues. ESA's Public Affairs Office has consulted the RRTs on locating a speaker with appropriate expertise for an ESA cosponsored Congressional briefing on the effects of mercury on wildlife, and collaborated with Invasive Species RRT member Richard Mack to update ESA's invasive species fact sheet. Additionally, Virginia Dale and Norm Christensen, serving on the Forest Ecology and Habitat Change RRTs, helped ESA's President and Public Affairs staff to craft a letter to the Forest Service regarding the Service's 2004 Final Planning Rule, which lays out a new strategic framework for managing the nation's forests and grasslands.

The Science Education RRT has also played an active role in writing letters and providing input to Congress. When one Congressional office requested comments within 3 days on a piece of draft legislation, the PAO quickly coordinated with Science Education RRT members Carol Brewer and Karen Hollweg to provide feedback.

Team members will continue to work closely with the Society's Public Affairs Office to:

- Review comment letters and position statements.
- Identify the potential ecological consequences of policy proposals.
- Gather existing scientific information (i.e., articles) relevant to legislation.
- Provide expert testimony to Congress.
- Coordinate letters to Congressional delegations and committees.
- Write editorials and letters to the editor for national and local media outlets.

In the coming years, ESA will integrate its network of RRTs to play a central role in the Society's public affairs, folding its RRT expertise into other ESA initiatives, such as the emerging Public Information Campaign, designed to increase public understanding of ecological sustainability. Working with the Public Affairs Office and ESA leadership, RRT scientists will become the chief architects of ESA's relationships with top decision makers.

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