

Activities of the FASEB Science Policy Committee
Summary of SPC Face to Face Meeting on September 26-27, 2004
Report from Dr. Thomas Spencer

I attended my second FASEB SPC Meeting on September 26-27, 2004 at FASEB headquarters in Bethesda, MD. Many issues pertinent to our scientific society were discussed at the meeting.

The main speaker at the dinner meeting was Special Agent Philip Celestini who is the head of the FBI Domestic Terrorism Unit in Washington, DC. He updated us on the status of Animal Rights Terrorism in the USA. The presentation began with a discussion of the organizational nature of current domestic terror groups focused on preventing the use of animals in biomedical research and agriculture. In essence, these groups are not organized and operate as an insurgency rather than an organized group. Indeed, most of their phenotype is similar, if not identical, to the current insurgency movement in Iraq. As one might imagine, these groups are difficult to infiltrate and gain good intelligence on their members, motives, and targets. Nevertheless, they are being actively pursued by the FBI.

The FBI predicts that these groups will become stronger over the next few years and adopt more European tactics. The European tactics include direct intimidation of target organizational leaders and personnel as well as their associates. This intimidation ranges from harassment and destruction of property to website damage and communications shutdown to public embarrassment by exposure of damaging facts, i.e. skeletons in the closet. Mr. Celestini indicated that most facilities on university research campuses are woefully insecure and very good soft targets for animal rights organizations. The FASEB is actively working through the SPC as well as with other organizations to inform the public of how animal research provides tangible benefits to human health. In addition, FASEB and other societies, such as NAABR, are working to combat legal strategies of certain animal rights groups that are seeking legal status for certain types of animals such as non-human primates.

On Monday morning, the first session was devoted to Patents and Technology Transfer. The speakers were James Severson of the University of Washington and Mark Rohrbraugh of the NIH. The essence of these talks is that everyone is now pursuing the protection of technology for monetary benefit to the institutions of grant recipients as well as the granting agency. Forty (40) or more states are now targeting commercialization of bioscience, even though the number of jobs generated by biosciences in a particular state is much lower than other job sectors. One important point is that most technology transfer entities at Universities do not generate enough commercialization monies to pay for their offices. For instance, only 1 of 1,000 disclosure filings ever generate sponsored research dollars from the private sector. As one can imagine, these figures are about 1 in 10,000 when one considers the success rate of research ideas that are disclosed and eventually yield royalty dollars.

Dr. Rohrbraugh is the OTC director at NIH. He discussed how the NIH is protecting intellectual property. A very useful one-page Materials Transfer Agreement is available at www.nih.gov/science/models. The NIH is actively pursuing protecting all generated IP, but is working hard to ensure that resource sharing and availability is maintained. Websites of interest are: www.pipra.org and ott.nod.nih.gov.

The second morning session was devoted to discussion of the proposed NIH policy on access to NIH research information. The main speaker was Dr. Norika Ruiz Bravo who is the Deputy Director of the Office of Extramural Research at the NIH. The NIH is currently forming a policy on access to NIH research information to address the assessment of Congress that the public needs access to peer-reviewed research publications. The draft policy has been posted and can be commented on (http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/public_access). The basic proposal is that all NIH-funded investigators will have to submit a draft of their accepted papers within 6 months to a central archive maintained by PubMed Central. These drafts will provide public access as well as create an internal NIH archive that can be used for portfolio review and management as well as assessment of performance. This proposed policy by the NIH is very controversial. The positions of several scientific societies were relayed at the meeting, and none were favorable of the NIH proposed policy. Most societies view this proposed policy as an instrument of the Public Library of Science (PLoS). Further, the NIH archive would only duplicate the services of HighWire and not be as good. Concern was also noted that this policy may represent an integral move for the NIH to take over archiving and perhaps peer review of scientific publications; a situation that is a conflict of interest for the NIH and would be very costly. Finally, member societies are worried that adoption of this policy will represent undue government interference in a publishing system that has worked well for over a century.

At this point, the proposed policy can receive comments until November 16, 2004. The FASEB President will generate a questionnaire for each member society to answer before generating a recommendation for this proposed policy. One might look at the following websites for information: www.dcpinciples.org and www.asbmb.org/asbmb/site.nsf/news/. I recommend that the Society complete the questionnaire and then wait for a draft of the FASEB position statement before individually acting or preparing a response to the NIH proposed policy.

The afternoon session was devoted to reports of the subcommittees of the FASEB SPC. Information on the activities of the SPC can be found at www.faseb.org. This website has excellent information on many topics of interest to SSR, including animal use in biomedical research and public science education as well as information on postdoctoral trainees.

FASEB continues to work hard to increase the budgets of major research granting agencies, including the NIH, NSF and USDA. Major concern was noted over the drastic cut in the NSF budget as well as minor increases in the NIH and USDA National Research Initiative. We have transitioned from a budget surplus to an environment of deficit and budget cuts. The question is not what to fund more, but what to cut less. The election will have a major impact on the ability of the federal government to support biomedical and agricultural research programs.

Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,
Thomas E. Spencer, Ph.D.
SSR Representative to the FASEB Science and Policy Committee