

Answering Challenges to Biological Research and Education

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Source: BioScience, 56(1) : 3

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568\(2006\)056\[0003:ACTBRA\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2006)056[0003:ACTBRA]2.0.CO;2)

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BioScience

Organisms from Molecules to the Environment

American Institute of Biological Sciences

Answering Challenges to Biological Research and Education

On 2 November 2005, President Bush asked Congress for \$7.1 billion to prepare the United States for a global epidemic of influenza. On 6 November, Olivia Judson, writing in the *New York Times*, reminded us that because flu viruses evolve very rapidly, "we can use our knowledge of evolutionary processes in powerful and practical ways, potentially saving the lives of tens of millions of people." Never has it been clearer that understanding biology is essential to improve human health and welfare.

Yet a few days later, on 8 November, the Kansas State Board of Education voted to adopt curriculum standards suggesting that intelligent design be taught as a scientific alternative to evolution. Fortunately, voters in Dover, Pennsylvania, were wiser. On the same day, they voted to remove eight school board members who had instructed ninth-grade biology teachers to read a statement about intelligent design in biology classes, replacing them with members opposed to that statement.

As the only professional society representing all biologists, AIBS plays a pivotal role in ensuring that public policy is informed by the best available biological knowledge. On the day the Kansas board issued its decision, for example, AIBS released a statement (www.aibs.org/position-statements/051108_kansas_board_of_.html) expressing its concern. In addition to issuing statements, AIBS staff work with a host of scientific societies and meet regularly with policymakers—agency personnel, congressional staff, senators, and representatives—to find ways to improve the quality of science teaching and to build a scientifically literate populace.

In early November, as the events noted above were unfolding, House and Senate conferees voted to increase the appropriation to the National Science Foundation (NSF) to \$5.65 billion, a \$180 million boost over the fiscal year 2005 level. While increased funding for NSF is welcome news, the total appropriation for fiscal year 2006 is 20 percent less than what the president requested from Congress to prepare the nation for a single disease. Yet some of the greatest threats to human health and well-being come from the enormous impacts humans impose on the global ecosystem, and NSF supplies about 65 percent of extramural funds for research aimed at understanding ecosystems and meeting the challenges facing them (see www.aaas.org/spp/rd/04pch19.htm).

AIBS is in the forefront of multisociety efforts to boost funding for basic research in biology. AIBS staff lead informal coalitions, such as the Biological and Ecological Sciences Coalition, and are in direct contact with legislators and senior congressional staff to ensure that biology has a seat at the table when decisions are made about funding for research and education.

But for AIBS to remain effective, we must be our members' voice. That means we must hear from you. We must know what issues matter to you and what challenges you face, whether in finding ways to convey the wonder and fascination of biology more effectively in the classroom; in communicating the results of your research to policymakers or to the general public; in ensuring that people of many cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds choose careers in biology; or in enhancing funding for biological education and research. AIBS is *your* society. Let us hear from you.

KENT E. HOLSINGER
President, AIBS