The Keystone Center
Science and Technology Advice for Decision Makers
Congressional Briefing
May 20, 2009

"There is a critical need for better, more focused research on complex science and technology issues that Congress and the Administration can use as they consider how best to protect and serve society."

Welcome and Introduction

The Keystone Center, along with the Consensus Building Institute, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the Bipartisan Policy Center, held a panel discussion on Science and Technology Advice for Decision Makers May 20, 2009 in the Russell Senate Building. The meeting was moderated by Jeremy Kranowitz, a Keystone Center Senior Associate.

Peter Adler, President of The Keystone Center and Dave Rejeski of the Woodrow Wilson Center, welcomed the panel and audience members. In his welcome, Dr. Adler noted that The Keystone Center works to push people in achieving consensus when faced with challenging environmental, energy and public health issues.

Dr. Rejeski provided an additional commentary, noting The Woodrow Wilson Center's report "OSTP 2.0: Critical Upgrade". This report focuses on the need for the Administration to make the Science Advisor appointment at the Office of Science & Technology Policy (OSTP) a priority. The OSTP needs to develop a strong relationship with the Office of Management and Budget, as well as other Executive Branch offices. These relationships become extremely important when attempting to reestablish the integrity of science in policy making.

The panel included:

- Peter Blair, National Academies of Science (NAS)
- Jack Gibbons, former Director, Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), and former Science Advisor, Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP)
- David Goldston, Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC)
- Phil Sharp, Resources for the Future (RFF)

Moderated Questions

I. Question:
How should the new Administration tackle current science and technology policy issues?

Panel Responses:

Peter Blair described the role of NAS in producing specialized advice for Congress. NAS has 600 active committees, produces up to 200 reports every year, but only 25 of these reports are formally requested or mandated by Congress. However, the current study process is not equipped to go beyond the technical to attack broader policy actions. Essentially, the missing piece is a mechanism to inform Congress on both the science and technology and the broader policy implications.

Jack Gibbons followed up on Mr. Blair's comments, reviewing the history of the OTA, an office of the U.S. Congress from 1972 to 1995. Gibbons stated that it is unclear if the new Administration will ever restore the OTA and if so, in what form. Gibbons stated that as an Office of Congress, OTA had advantages of being held in high regard, having a voice of authority, and access to Congressional Members. Gibbons stressed that for effective communication of science and technology issues to policy makers, the message must be backed up by solid research and documentation, but distilled to a very concise form. He provided a story of a conversation with a past Senator who indicated that he appreciated the depth of the report, but could only focus on a summary that would fit on a 3" x 5" card. It illustrated a lesson in the tensions between compression of information, while still holding onto scientific validity and authority.

David Goldston summarized the objective of the Bipartisan Policy Center as that of bringing together experts who span the parties and ideological divide. Goldston reviewed the recommendations in the BPC's March 2009 interim report (Copies and full report will be out at end of June). The first recommendation is that the new Administration separate science from policy issues. When policy issues are cloaked with efforts to make them scientific, they are often overlooked. The second recommendation referred to the use of transparency. When appointing advice committees, it needs to be clear what kind of committee is being put together. For example, science committees should not be asked to make policy recommendations. Third, despite a push for transparency, for those advisory committees that are purely scientific, it is often better to have closed meetings to reduce stifling that can come from public conversations.

Phil Sharp spoke to the issues that RFF encounters when communicating within the public policy arena. It is necessary for both scientific and the policy communities to speak intelligently and without disdain, to speak with clarity and integrity. For example, this can happen when those in scientific arenas make policy recommendations without proper knowledge, and vice versa. Sharp also commented that scientific and academic professionals typically are rewarded for communicating among peers in scientific journals and need to recognize that policy makers are a different – but important – audience.

II. Question:
There are three big challenges when delivering science and technology information to Congress: How to make information timely, insuring that it is credible and not overly partisan, and making sure it is concise. Is one of these three challenges the most important to conquer?

And to follow up: What is the best mechanism to deliver to such information to Congress, from within the government or from an external body?

Panel Responses:

Jack Gibbons emphasized timeliness is very important. While controversial issues can be expected to take years to produce results, other studies only allow for a few weeks or even days. Second is credibility. Third, is keeping information short. Although a summary should be concise, it also must be a valid representation of the process.

David Goldston stated that there is not one correct answer to this. Congress shouldn't be getting information from just one place. Goldston stated that there are existing organizations that have retained their integrity and provide credible information. NAS; the Health Effects Institute and Congressional Research Service (CRS) were all examples of other research entities available. While NAS may be more useful for compiling and assessing existing data, OTA was better suited for forward looking issues that haven't yet materialized.

Peter Blair agreed with Goldston, stating that there is no one solution for all themes. In particular, a missing piece is a source of advice for Congress that is aware of the language of a Congressional debate. Timeliness also ranks in the importance table, yet Blair noted when you are given the chance to do things faster, better and cheaper; you can often only pick two. Congress wants to hear richness in the voices of debate over being handed recommendations.

Phil Sharp called for the need of an outside political force that will call to account actions of Presidents, heads of Agencies and Departments, heads of Congress, etc., when they engage in conversation without being fully knowledgeable. Sharp also stated that one option for consideration might be an entity internal to Congress that would serve as a clearinghouse for contacts to the best experts on the range of science issues and that could function as a screening body to set up good hearings.

III. Question:
Is there value in "cheat sheet" of sorts for freshmen members and new Administration members?

Panel Responses:

Blair noted that a rolodex of names could be put together to staff expert meetings. Also, a shared staff concept is always strength, where a resident staff member can become the source of expertise on particular subjects.

Goldston stated that such a cheat sheet would be insufficient, stating that "We need fundamental changes in thinking. You can lead a Member to information, but can't make them think".

Sharp was doubtful that a brief list of contacts could be put together and be authoritative, as there is a great diversity of issues to be discussed.

Audience Question and Answer

Question: What are the likely costs associated with re-establishing a functioning OTA?

Response: Various figures were discussed among the panelists. The OTA budget had been much smaller than that of the National Academies, and a tiny fraction of the overall Congressional budget. The panelists also emphasized that if OTA were to be brought back in some form, the role and organization would need to be evaluated, giving consideration to existing resources on Congressional committees and how the channels of communication have evolved in the 14 years since the OTA has been defunded.

Question: Who are the best people to communicate with policy makers -- scientists or lawyers -- as many well prepared reports by scientists are often ignored, but lawyers may over-simplify?

Response: The panelists again emphasized that everyone involved needs to acknowledge that science and the policy made in consideration of science are distinct; as long as people are clear about the role they are playing, scientists with strong public policy communication skills exist and can fill the role of communicator, as can others.

More information on these reports can be found at www.keystone.org, www.wilsoncenter.org, and www.bipartisanpolicy.org.