

Framework for Government Interactions

(Endorsed by AMS Council, 27 September 2005, updated 28 September 2018)

Introduction

Many organizations have “government relations” programs that carry out education, advocacy, and lobbying activities. As an educational nonprofit [covered by the 501(c)(3) code of the IRS], the AMS is restricted in the level of advocacy or lobbying that can be carried out, but the Society has always worked to maintain a significant presence in an educational role with government officials. This document provides the framework for these activities, the goals of which support the mission of the Society as a whole. They include:

- Working to ensure that policy is built on a foundation of science;
- Fostering an environment in which the government, academic, and private sectors in the atmospheric and related sciences and services work cooperatively to serve the public good;
- Broadening the appreciation of the advances that have been made in the atmospheric and related sciences and the value those advances can provide to the nation and the world; and
- Speaking out on the importance of scientific integrity and the value of using science for societal benefit.

These goals are addressed through both proactive and reactive activities of the Society as outlined here.

1. Proactive initiatives

a) Statements

In addition to the AMS statements working through the normal committee structure on scientific issues, effort should be made to identify topics that should have AMS statements in order to provide policy guidance. The AMS staff will work with the Executive Committee (EC), Council, and AMS committees to create an environment in which potential topics for statements are identified regularly and considered by the EC, which will play an oversight role in this process.

The Guidelines for Statements and Best Practices identifies “Policy Statements” as being directed at policy makers. Those statements, once approved, can serve as the basis for direct interaction with those on the Hill and in the agencies. Statements that provide the state of the science (referred to in the Guidelines for Statements and Best Practices as “Information Statements”) can also be useful in some contexts to support Society comments on policy issues related to the science.

The Council can vote to “endorse” a statement from another organization as outlined in the Guidelines for Statements and Best Practices. It may also be useful for the Council to be in a position to “endorse” a report (such as a report from the National Academies) in full or in part (such as selected recommendations from such a report). The Council can also formally endorse recommendations coming from AMS activities, such as in reports generated by the Policy Program or from other meetings (such as those of the Commission on the Weather, Water, and Climate Enterprise). These activities, however, are generally independent. The Society sanctions the efforts being undertaken but the results do not speak for AMS unless the Council explicitly endorses them.

The staff will work to monitor potential reports and statements that might be suitable for endorsement. (We envision that such an endorsement could be a relatively fast process.)

b) Hill Briefings and Memos

This represents a proactive effort to inform policy deliberations before policy decisions are made. The goal is to present information that is policy relevant without being policy prescriptive. Topics are selected based on their relevance, salience, timeliness, feasibility, and appropriateness to the Society and the nation. Topics that meet stated needs from legislative or executive branch staff are particularly valuable.

c) Hill and agency visits

There are two primary reasons for Hill visits: 1) to help members of the AMS community better understand the policy process, and 2) to maintain or create relationships. In this process, there is an information exchange between AMS members and Hill staff. AMS will provide general information regarding the policy and education programs and AMS, very broadly. This information can include a description of upcoming briefings, seminars, or workshop, and may also include copies of recent AMS statements, letters, reports, and memos. The Hill staff, like AMS, will give their Member’s point of view on issues of importance to us. With this knowledge, AMS can then determine how we could work with them on these issues.

We also meet with agency leadership to understand executive branch priorities, raise awareness of AMS capabilities and needs, and to identify opportunities to work together constructively.

d) Policy information on the AMS Web site

The AMS staff, at the level possible with current resources, will maintain pages on the website with information on current legislative issues of relevance to our community. These pages will not promote an advocacy stance on these issues, but will encourage AMS members to become informed on and involved in issues impacting the community. While maintenance of these web pages will be a staff function coordinated through the AMS Policy Program, the EC will serve in an oversight capacity. The site will also include a mechanism for feedback to the AMS staff on ways to make it more effective.

Efforts will include ways to allow those interested to be made aware of this type of information. The Society's outreach channels, including member engagement tools and social media, will include information on government interaction activities. These channels will also be used to notify members when a drafting committee is being formed for a new statement (as called for in the Guidelines for Statements and Best Practices) or when a draft statement has been posted for member comment, with links to the statement comment pages (as well as to the statements in force).

e) Capacity building

The centerpiece of AMS capacity building efforts for policy is the AMS Summer Policy Colloquium, which is a 10-day intensive introduction to the federal policy process for Earth scientists that occurs every June. Through this effort, we are helping to develop a new group of leaders within our community.

2. Reaction to requests on legislation or policy issues

As the premier society serving the atmospheric and related sciences, it is important for the AMS to provide input into policy issues related to those sciences, and it is a testament to the respect gained for the Society on the Hill and within agencies that requests for input on draft legislation and other policies are regularly received. In addition, it is common for other organizations or groups of organizations to ask AMS to sign onto a letter addressing legislation or policy issues. In these procedures, signing onto a letter prepared by others is treated the same as if the letter were created by AMS. A final case is when AMS chooses to prepare a letter that addresses a policy issue or that reacts to an issue of scientific integrity that has arisen. Responding to each case requires an approach that carefully balances a number of issues.

It is vitally important that the Society maintains, in both perception and reality, the ability to serve as a neutral host for discussions on, and a reliable source of information for, issues related to enterprise activities. This means that any position the Society takes on one of these issues must be based on a process that acknowledges the breadth of the Society and that is the result of a well-defined, consistent, open, and transparent process. The Society will always strive to respond to issues that affect our community, but a timely response may not always be possible, depending on the time available to develop a response and the nature of the issue.

It is also vitally important that government employees be in a position to serve on the Council because their presence represents an important component of balance in the Society's governance. Because of conflict-of-interest policies within Executive Branch agencies, it is clear that the Society should not formally comment on specific agency budgets at any stage. This does not preclude the Society from taking positions of supporting increased funding to science or from making recommendations on areas of research or applications that would benefit from increased resources.

The AMS Council represents the Society as a whole and is the decision-making body responsible for Society positions. Just as AMS statements require Council approval, letters representing the Society on policy issues must be vetted by the Council. The AMS Constitution and Bylaws provides for the EC to act on behalf of the Council in some situations, but where possible, the Council should be the approval body. The EC provides the top level guidance in this process with the Council providing oversight and final approval. In these procedures, reference to "AMS staff" indicates direct guidance by the Executive Director, who assumes ultimate responsibility for staff aspects of the Society's activities in these areas. Letters produced through this process will be signed by the Executive Director on behalf of the AMS Council.

Additional oversight is provided by the entire AMS membership. While the normal time constraints of this process preclude seeking broad input from the entire membership during the creation of each letter, all such letters will be archived and made available to the membership for review after the fact. This allows members to monitor the efforts being made on behalf of the community and to provide feedback to the EC and Council on these activities .

Requests of the type covered in these procedures are usually made to AMS staff (typically either the Executive Director or staff in the AMS Policy Program). The procedures outlined here assume that to be the case, but can be applied with minor modification in cases where the request is made to an elected official of the Society.

a) Comments or endorsement requested on a topic for which there is an AMS statement or endorsement

An existing AMS statement represents an official Council-approved position of the Society, and a written comment based directly and solely on the statement can be prepared by the AMS staff. Prior to sending the comment, it will be vetted by the EC on a “unanimous consent” basis. That is, the prepared comment will be sent electronically to the EC (excluding government employees) for review with a suggested date for delivery to Hill or agency staff that is no less than one day hence (and preferably longer if the situation allows). A cover memo will provide any additional pertinent information on the request and provide for any EC member to put a “hold” on the comment by return email. If such a hold is placed, the comment will not be delivered as planned and the EC will collectively decide the fate of the comment through a simple majority vote, which can include: sending after modification, not sending at all, or soliciting input from the Council or one or more Commissions before deciding what action is to be taken.

There may be situations in which a formal written response is not required. In those cases, the AMS can provide the appropriate AMS statement on the issue. The Executive Director is responsible for oversight in this situation and will report to the EC periodically on such interactions with Hill and agency staff.

b) Comments or endorsement requested on a topic that is not covered by an AMS statement or endorsement

In these cases, the AMS staff will work with the EC to identify one of the following paths:

1) No comment. If it seems clear that the Society does not have a majority position on the issue, the EC can decide to respond that the AMS does not intend to take a position on the issue.

2) Council vetted comment. If the EC feels a comment is appropriate, the AMS staff and EC will work together to prepare a draft comment. Prior to sending the comment, it will be vetted by the Council on a “unanimous consent” basis. That is, the prepared comment will be sent electronically to the Council (excluding government employees) for review with a suggested date for delivery to Hill or agency staff that is no less than two days hence (and preferably longer if the situation allows). A cover memo will provide any additional pertinent information on the request and provide for any Council member to put a “hold” on the comment by return email. If such a hold is placed, the comment will not be delivered as planned and the Council will collectively decide the fate of the comment through a formal, simple majority vote after additional discussion either online, via conference call, or at a regular meeting (if the schedule allows). Disposition of the comment by the Council as a result of the vote can include sending the comment as drafted or with modification or deciding to not send a comment at all. The Council can also agree in discussion to solicit additional input and guidance from one or more Commissions before deciding what action is to be taken. In some cases, as when it is deemed necessary for a more rapid response than the above process allows, the EC can approve a comment on behalf of the Council.

3) Seek additional input. The EC can request guidance on the issue from one or more Commissions of the Society. Once received, this guidance can be used to decide that no comment should be made or to help in the creation of a comment to be vetted through the Council as outlined under (2) above.

3. Affiliations with other organizations

The AMS will maintain formal affiliations (such as organizational membership) only with other educational nonprofit organizations that qualify under the 501(c)(3) code of the IRS. The Society will routinely work with coalitions and other organizations on specific activities, such as cosponsoring events or signing on to specific statements or letters, but will do so on a case-by-case basis. This policy helps ensure that positions taken by the Society have the maximum benefit of oversight by the AMS Council.

4. Publication of efforts

All letters sent on behalf of the Society through this process will be made available through the AMS website. This procedures document will also be available to members through the website.