

# NEWS

## Interior Secretary Highlights Key Trends, Including Climate Change and Fiscal Constraint

Climate change is “the defining issue of our time,” Department of the Interior (DOI) Secretary Sally Jewell said during her 18 June keynote address at the AGU Science Policy Conference in Washington, D. C. The United States has to “lead by example. We can’t be the largest economy in the world and the second largest producer of carbon in the world”—after China—“and not take care of our own problems first to demonstrate to the world what needs to be done,” she said.

Stating that “there is a real sense of urgency” within the Obama administration to address climate change, Jewell noted that the White House’s release on 6 May of the third National Climate Assessment helps break down the issue into terms that are understandable in individual communities.

She said that report also ties in with a number of administration initiatives, including a 17 June DOI announcement about the largest proposed lease sale in offshore U.S. waters for wind energy. Jewell said the lease sale is part of the agency’s “smart from the start” approach to use science and other information to “de-conflict” areas from the start.

Hydraulic fracturing, a well completion technique also known as fracking, could benefit from more public understanding, she stated. Fracking, Jewell said, is “a wonderful example of the public not being brought along to understand risk and industry not doing the job that it could have done up front in helping people understand the risks and the benefits and reassuring people that their groundwater was not going to be contaminated.”

### *Trending: Fiscal Constraint and Generational Shift*

Jewell counted climate change as one of three major trends that she said influence everything DOI does. The second is operating in a time of constrained fiscal resources when agencies need to be smarter at what they do and when science will be “absolutely critical” for making informed decisions.

She said a big issue is dealing with the challenge of water and drought. Noting that there likely will not be enough money to address all water-related issues, Jewell said, “We have to pick and choose, we have to

triage, we have to be smarter about our use of water—and science will guide our way.”

The third trend Jewell identified is the generational shift from the baby boomers to Generation X and the Millennials. “That knowledge transfer between the older generations and younger generations could not be more profoundly important than it is right now,” she said, adding that DOI, AGU, the business community, and others need to work together to play a significant role in the knowledge transfer and in welcoming young people into science roles.

### *Politicization of Science*

AGU’s Science Policy Conference included tracks on climate change, natural resources, and water as well as plenary sessions on the business of science and the future of science in the U.S. Congress. During the 17 June plenary session on Congress, three Democratic representatives bemoaned congressional politicization, distrust, and underfunding of science.

Rep. Scott Peters (D-Calif.) said he is “surprised” about the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, of which he is a member. “Some of us use air quotes around [the word] science when we talk about the science committee,” he said. The committee “is loaded with people [who] have an ideological viewpoint on science, and anyone who comes in and talks about climate in particular will be challenged.”

Rep. Donna Edwards (D-Md.), also a member of the science committee, added, “Every time there is even something that hints at a discussion of climate change, then the conversation devolves into silliness.” She said, for instance, that Kathryn Sullivan, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, recently had to provide the committee with an elementary explanation of the difference between weather and climate, in part because a number of committee members “do not have a significant science research background that allows them to look any deeper than ideological headlines.”

Edwards expressed some hope that Democrats and Republicans can work together constructively on science issues, pointing to the broad bipartisan support for the NASA reauthorization act of 2014, which passed the House on 9 June. However, she also expressed concern about the Frontiers in Innovation, Research, Science, and Technology Act (H.R. 4186)—known as the FIRST Act of 2014, which the National Science Board and others have criticized for impeding funding flexibility, among other concerns.



Sally Jewell, Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Randy Showstack

Rep. Jim Moran (D-Va.), ranking member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, said that climate change has been among the most partisan issues. He added that because of the partisan divide on science, “we are not putting money into basic research.”

Regarding distrust of science and federal science agencies, some of it “is being driven for clearly pragmatic, profit-oriented reasons,” said Moran, who is retiring after serving in the House for 23 years.

### *Reaching Out to Congress*

Moran urged scientists to communicate more with policy makers and speak up on issues. “Scientists seem too reluctant to speak up and be proud of the work that they do because of this political pushback that we are experiencing in this current social environment. Hopefully, there will be a pendulum swing, we’ll start relying more upon science, some of the leaders in the corporate sector will speak up on their behalf, and we will start to take the lead

again, not just in scientific discoveries but in protecting our planet.”

Edwards added, “It’s unfortunate that so many members of Congress will say the same thing: We don’t really hear from the scientific and research community.” Edwards said that with more scientists communicating with Congress, “we will have a better capacity to make public policy decisions that really will pay off in the future.”

—RANDY SHOWSTACK, Staff Writer