CCUBC 2006 Advocacy Meetings Summary
November 29 & 30, 2006

Dr. Art Olson, CFBS Executive Director

This past week, we organized a series of meetings for the Canadian Council of University Biology Chairs (CCUBC). Dr. Jim Cheetham, President, CCUBC, and two members of the Carleton Department of Biology, Dr. Root Gorelick and Dr. Iain Lambert and myself took part in the meetings which provided an opportunity to further explore the implications on last week's Economic and Financial Update (EFU). Our request for a meeting included the key points that CCUBC wished to make. Representatives from the organizations scheduled to meet with us were advised ahead of time of the following topics of concern:

1. Core funding for universities
2. Support for the national granting councils
3. Removing the financial barriers faced by many students

A copy of the CFBS brief "Sustaining A Renewable Resource" was included in the initial letters to Government and granting agencies' representatives requesting scheduling these meetings.

The overall reaction to the EFU was positive with everyone looking forward to the 2007 Budget for clarification. Generally speaking the EFU is seen as a clear message that science is important, that Canada needs to increase our capacity to meet our science's needs, that the responsibility is shared by government and industry and that government needs to clearly define what kinds of science it needs.

1. Our first meeting was with Lorne Wheeler, Senior Policy Advisor to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, and Kim Houston, Acting Director, Ecosystem Science, Fisheries and Oceans Canada. The discussion ranged from the role of industry and their growing appreciation of the need for good data, through to potential of our northern waters, the growing focus on ecosystem management versus a focus on individual species, possible changes in legislation, the Department's assessment of their science needs to UN resolutions related to dumping. In all of these, the quality and availability of science were essential.

2. Our second meeting was with Dr. Pierre Chartrand, VP Research and Terry Campbell, Executive Director, Corporate Affairs for the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR).

- It would appear that this coming year's resources won't likely allow many new research commitments given that essentially all of the available resources were allocated this past spring. Considering the average 3.9 year duration of most research awards, the only funds likely available to deal with new applications and inflation will be those freed up as awards mature, the inflation adjustment announced in the 2006 Budget and a number of areas in which savings might be achieved.

- Discussion included the need to increase expenditures in research as the community grows, impact of the Canada Research Chairs, the hiring of new staff at universities and thus expanded demand for research support, the need to demonstrate both outputs and outcomes, the dangers inherent in an entitlement approach, the value of and the perceptions around peer review, reviewer's fatigue, concerns regarding targeting of research funds resulting in a decrease of scientific excellence and CIHR's international review completed this past spring.

3. Our third meeting with Dr. Nigel Lloyd, Executive Vice President, Dr. Danielle Menard, Director, Policy and International Relations, and Isabelle Blain, Vice-President, Research Grants and Scholarships at the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC). Issues discussed included:

    - The increased research demand as good news for Canada.

    - The status of the governance studies currently underway on the granting councils (a number of studies are underway with how the councils are managed, overlaps between the granting councils and how best to measure performance under consideration. The results are now in the hands of a consulting firm.)

    - Challenges to success rates in discovery grants as a metric to measure outcomes, the need to develop other ways of measuring outcomes, perceptions of the peer review system and the concept of entitlement.

    - With the uncertainty regarding growth in funding, we raised the dilemma resulting from governments having built up our university systems and thus the need to maintain both the infrastructure and the people this growth has attracted from around the world.

    - The implications of narrow focusing on specific areas which could result in a reduction in Canada's output of highly qualified personnel and the capacity to train more.

    - The EFU's references to the Federal/Provincial transfer payments was touched on. This led to discussion of the impact on indirect costs and options such as the potential re-establishment of post-secondary education transfers to the provinces.

    - Industrial scholarship demand, intellectual rights (currently under review as a result of subsequent transfers issues, research scholarships and the NSERC's upcoming conference relating to international post-doctoral support were also touched on. As well, the push by major research universities to establish a system akin to the UK's Star approach was raised.

4. Our fourth meeting was with Dr. Elliot Phillipson, President, and Suzzanne Corbeil, Vice-President, External Relations at the Canadian Foundation for Innovation. Their "read" of the EFU was that it was a strong signal for investing in science. Industry Minister Bernier's recent announcement of the final batch of CFI awards was discussed in the context of the numbers of applicants, the role of the universities in screening applications and the review process. As well, the following were raised:

    - Office of the Auditor General (OAG) audits – we were already of the understanding that the Auditor General was very impressed with the level of openness and financial probity inherent in CFI's approach. The OAG is currently carrying out a horizontal audit of all of the granting programs related to research. The issue of cooperation between the Councils will be part of the OAG's report next spring and is expected to confirm the perception.

    - Success rates as a metric were seen as one tool but not necessarily comparable to other agencies given CFI's multiple levels of review and approval.

    - The impact of reaction by those who appear to treat the research granting process as a lottery rather than a competition where the best wins and the entitlement issue were considered.

    - While funding for future years will depend on Budget decisions by the Government (approximately $20 million is available to continue the CFI process for each of the next two fiscal years), we talked about some of the options such as reverting to "A" base funding like the other granting councils rather than a transfer of funds to CFI , the UK three year rolling funding and the implications of carry-forwards given the long application and review time frames.

    - The question of "how much is enough" was challenged by noting that research and the training of highly qualified personnel are not one time events and in fact are analogous to ongoing responsibilities such as education or healthcare(where definition hasn't yet been achieved). There was agreement that an improved understanding of the economic and social benefits was necessary to respond to demands for accountability. Negative metrics such as the brain drain, global competition and scientist mobility were not seen as useful.

    - The implications of higher enrollment in post-secondary education, the development of more professional personnel, the increase in numbers of graduate students in driving an increased demand for research support was discussed.

    - CFI has awarded 40% of their funding in the health/life science related category.

    - We were advised that CFI, CIHR and NSERC had been looking at operating and maintenance costs trying to establish what is an appropriate level of support. As well, a parallel study is underway on scientific depreciation (how long does equipment remain state of the art). Results indicate that computer and communication equipment has a 3-4 year life, highly specialized facilities 5 to 6, non highly specialized facilities 7 to 8 and buildings and facilities 12 to 13 years.

5. The fifth meeting was with Wendy Sexsmith, Acting Chief Scientist, and Gerry Thom, Director General, Human Resources, Health Canada. The bulk of the discussion related to the need for new hires in biology for the life science regulatory agencies and how best to provide access to opportunities (About 40% of the current 3000 biology trained staff in Health Canada can retire within the next 5 years. If one looks across the Government of Canada, this number is probably tripled). Existing programs and possible new approaches were discussed. The constraints resulting from security clearance requirements was noted as a problem. The need for a Canadian Master's level program in regulatory science was also raised. Adjunct professorships were seen as a useful investment but should provide benefit to both agencies involved.

6. The final meeting was with Carment Charette, Executive Director, External Relations and Innovation, Science and Innovation Sector of Industry Canada. Most of the discussion dealt with the need to develop the framework outlined in the EFU with all agreeing that such a focus was positive given the percentage of the population that understand the need for research.

    - The EFU suggested a high level of targeting which suggests that new monies might well be focused on government priorities. Given that these are currently defined as environment, health and energy, about 80% of current research would fit within these objectives.

    - Metrics were again touched on with "success rates" not being seen as particularly useful in an environment focused on results (outcomes have been shown to be definable – as per the Millennium project).

    - The role of universities in developing highly qualified personnel was clearly understood.

    - The proposal to examine the transfer of management to universities of non-regulatory research carried out by the Government was discussed as a possible challenge for the Science ADM's Committee currently looking at what exactly are Government's science needs. Given the number of existing such relationships between the federal government, universities and provinces, the time frame for change was seen as long.

All in all, the meetings went well in identifying the huge amount of activity underway. While there are indications that the Government would like to outline their science policy before Christmas, timing may require release in early spring. Actual changes will become evident as the Speech from the Throne and the 2007 Budget are tabled.