January 22, 2008

Dear Member,

The International Society for Computational Biology (ISCB) is concerned about the ability of non-US scientists to participate in scientific meetings and research in the US. We believe this exchange of ideas benefits the scientific enterprise as well as the countries and individuals involved.

We have heard reports of ISCB members who are not non-U.S. citizens having trouble coming to the US to work, study or attend conferences, or having trouble leaving to visit family or attend scientific meetings (because it is hard to get back into the U.S. once you have left). While the situation has reportedly improved over the last few years, there remain problems.

We have an opportunity, through ISCB past board member and chair of the public affairs committee, Barbara Bryant, working together with FASEB, to contribute to testimony in front of the U.S. House Science Committee in February about scientists’ problems with visas. Your feedback must be in Bryant’s hands by 25th January, 2008, in order for it to be useful in the Committee hearing. However, we will use any information we receive after that date for further advocacy, so please do not hesitate to send it in.

Can you help us by telling us of problems you or your colleagues have experienced with entry into the US? Please send email to policy@iscb.org (preferred, so that Bryant can gather additional information from you if necessary), or post your experiences at http://iscb-discussion.blogspot.com/2008/01/iscb-members-and-us-visas.html (especially if you’d like to remain anonymous), or both. The more specific your story the more helpful it will be in this advocacy effort.

We are particularly interested in answers to the following questions:

1) Are you experiencing delays getting visas or outright rejections of your applications?
2) Are you seeing this problem from particular countries of citizenship?
3) Specifically, what problems are you experiencing (i.e., difficulty getting consular appointments; delays in application processing; denial of visas; problems with US-VISIT system)?
4) For each problem, is it due to not following or understanding the existing visa application guidelines and restrictions (such as not applying far enough ahead of time, failing to schedule a consular interview, providing incomplete applications, country-specific single entry reciprocity agreements), or is the problem a failure of the U.S. immigration system to follow its own policies?
5) What change, if any, do you feel we ought to advocate?

Thank you in advance for contributing to our efforts to gather personal stories demonstrating that the current U.S. visa policies require further improvement to eliminate the impediment of scientific exchange and progress.

Sincerely,

Barbara Bryant
Chair, ISCB Public Affairs Committee

p.s. ISCB urges its members who have had problems to also contact the National Academies International Visitors Office (http://www7.nationalacademies.org/visas/index.html), and complete the online questionnaire. This office has been very helpful at interceding behind the scenes on behalf of scientists with the U.S. Dept. of State and Homeland Security. And the data they generate is very useful for making the case for improved visa processing.