

July 10, 2003

The Honorable John McCain  
The Honorable Ernest Hollings  
The Honorable George Allen  
The Honorable Sam Brownback  
The Honorable Barbara Boxer  
The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchison  
The Honorable John Kerry  
The Honorable Ron Wyden  
U. S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Sherwood Boehlert  
The Honorable Ralph Hall  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

John H. Marburger, III  
Director, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy  
The Old Executive Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20502

Dear (\_\_\_\_\_):

We urge you to endorse an explicit requirement for regular, informed, and ongoing public participation – especially the periodic convening of citizen panels – in the pending legislation (H.R. 766/ S. 189) to authorize the federal nanotechnology research and development program.

Citizen panels, or consensus conferences as they are also called, are now internationally recognized as a key tool for effective technology assessments and fiscally sound technology policymaking. They should receive specific statutory authority in the nanotechnology authorization, and the funding for such panels should also be specifically authorized.

Citizen panels offer a simple, cost-effective, and proven method to implement a key recommendation of the National Science Foundation's Panel on the Societal Implications of Nanotechnology. That advisory group stressed the urgency of adopting practical mechanisms to increase public participation in federal policymaking for nanotechnology. Without clear leadership from Congress and the White House on this issue, federal agencies are unlikely to feel free to move ahead on their own authority to implement such an innovative technique for increasing public discussions and public participation regarding this major new technology.

Right now, the House bill, H.R. 766, mentions citizen panels as one possible mechanism for public input and public output – a provision sponsored by Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson. Unfortunately, the Senate bill, S. 189, does not address the critical need for public participation

in national deliberations about nanotechnology policy at all, nor does it talk about citizen panels. In a democracy such as ours, everyone stands to benefit from this open and inclusive process:

First, the benefits to industry are quite clear. Early and ongoing public deliberations on nanotech issues will give industries early signals of public interest or public concerns about particular lines of research or particular applications or products. Citizen panels would engage average citizens in extensive conversations with leading experts on the full range of nanotechnology issues. That means they would contribute to citizen opinions that take into account the most timely and reliable information available.

Second, research also will benefit. Citizen panels on nanotechnology will draw public attention to a wide range of academic research and federal R&D efforts. That gives universities and other research institutions a prime opportunity to demonstrate to an often skeptical public that they do hold themselves accountable for federal tax dollars.

And third, citizen panels are in the best interests of ordinary citizens, whose voices are now so rarely heard on the profound health, environmental, social, and ethical issues at stake in the development of socially significant technologies. Informed and deliberative public input about nanotechnology may help avoid the contentious struggles that have marked the history of such major technologies as nuclear energy, genetically modified foods, and stem cell research.

In short, citizen panels are good government that's also good for business, good for research and development, and good for families and communities across the United States.

For all of these reasons, we are concerned about the absence of any mechanism for public participation in the current Senate nanotechnology bill, S. 189, and the less than clear embrace of the idea in the House-passed bill, H.R. 766. Citizen panels alone, of course, will not totally correct the current lack of broad informed public participation in technological policy issues. But the inclusion of such requirements in this bill will be a major step in the right direction.

We hope that we can count on your support for public participation via citizen panels in the pending legislation. We also urge you to endorse a provision authorizing strong support for research on societal and ethical impacts of nanotechnology. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

See attached signatures

CC: The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson  
E. Floyd Kvamme, Co-Chair, President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology  
Jeffrey Mervis, Science Magazine  
Barnaby J. Feder, The New York Times  
Rick Weiss, The Washington Post