



Friday, November 21, 2008 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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Washington State Academy of Sciences launched

By Sandi Doughton
Seattle Times science reporter

When the federal government needs the best scientific information on any subject, it turns to the National Academy of Sciences.

Now, the state of Washington will be able to do the same with a group of local luminaries.

The Washington State Academy of Sciences inducts its founding class of 104 members today, signaling the group's readiness to weigh in on anything from the coastal impacts of rising sea levels to the Puget Sound region's infamous traffic snarls.

"We want to bring the best scientific talent to bear on issues of importance to the state of Washington," said retired University of Washington zoologist Gordon Orians, the group's president.

More than 30 states have science academies, but nearly all are small organizations devoted mainly to science education, Orians said. "In this sense, we're pioneers."

The Washington group is modeled after the National Academy of Sciences, established by President Lincoln in 1863 to "investigate, examine, experiment and report upon any subject of science or art." The organization has assessed the science of stem cells, genetic engineering, climate change and virtually every other major scientific controversy of modern times.

"An increasing number of public-policy questions require scientific input," UW computer scientist and founding board member Ed Lazowska said in an e-mail. "WSAS is a place for the governor and the legislature to turn for this advice when they need it."

No specific subject has been picked for the state academy to evaluate, but many of the questions leaders are grappling with could benefit from sound scientific advice, Orians said. Those include where to locate wind farms, what global warming will mean for Washington, how to improve the health of Native Americans and the dangers posed by toxic pollutants.

Everyone in Washington who has been elected to one of three national academies — science, engineering and medicine — was invited to be a founding member. They include two Nobel laureates (Lee Hartwell of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and Edmond Fischer of the UW), a former astronaut (Bonnie Dunbar, president of the Museum of Flight), a former pharmaceutical executive (Tachi Yamada, now leader of the Global Health Program at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), a rocket designer (George Mueller, of Rocketland Kistler Corp. in Kirkland), and an ex-head of the National Cancer Institute (Richard Klausner). More than half are from the UW.

Created by the Legislature in 2005, the group will respond to requests from state agencies or other organizations to analyze scientific and technical issues, review existing data, and issue reports, said Guy Palmer, director of Washington State University's School for Global Animal Health and a member of the founding board. Reports will be peer-reviewed to ensure they are accurate and unbiased.

"This is not a group that makes policy," he said. "We want to make sure we get the best science into the hands of people who do make policy."

But first, the organization needs a budget. Launched with \$340,000 in state seed money, the goal is to become self-sustaining. Members will volunteer their time, but agencies will cover the administrative costs for each analysis. Orians estimates studies will cost at least \$100,000 each.

With the state facing a \$5 billion budget shortfall, that could be a tough sell, agreed Dunbar, also a member of the founding board.

"But in the end," she said, "if you have good studies upfront, you will save money in the long run."

Sandi Doughton: 206-464-2491

or sdoughton@seattletimes.com

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