

# **Ursula Rick**

Senior Policy Analyst, Policy Branch of the Science Mission Directorate  
at NASA Headquarters



## **What is your current occupation?**

I am a Senior Policy Analyst within the Policy Branch of the Science Mission Directorate (SMD) at NASA Headquarters. Our team of analysts supports a wide variety of policy and political duties for SMD leadership and the five SMD science divisions (Astrophysics, Earth Science, Heliophysics, Planetary Sciences, and Biological and Physical Sciences). These duties include drafting testimony for Congressional hearings and answering questions from members of Congress, messaging for the annual President's Budget Request, liaising with SMD programs for audits by Government Accountability Office and the Office of Inspector General, managing various advisory committees, and developing domestic and international agreements to do science with partners across the US and world.

## **What is your educational background?**

BS, Metallurgical Engineering and Materials Science, Michigan Technological University  
MS, Engineering Sciences, Dartmouth College  
PhD, Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences, University of Colorado Boulder

## **A key message for students is that the geoscience workforce is dynamic, and boundaries between sectors and occupations are fluid. How has this been true in your career?**

While doing my PhD on melting polar ice sheets, I began to realize that I did not want a traditional career in academia or research, and at the same time became more interested in

science policy with the increased public visibility of climate change. Thus, I took science and technology policy courses during my PhD and learned about the vast and complicated intersection of science, policy, and politics. I was hooked and chose to pursue policy more throughout my career.

After a combination science and policy post doc, I moved to Washington, DC for an AAAS/AGI Congressional Fellowship and spent a year in the office of Senator Mark Udall, working on energy and natural resource policy. This experience opened my eyes to all the possible careers related to geosciences and how I could use my academic training and my time on Capitol Hill to impact policy areas in which I was interested.

After the fellowship, I managed regulatory affairs for Western Energy Alliance, working primarily on air and water regulations for the oil and natural gas sector. This job required me to dig into my old atmospheric sciences PhD coursework, which I thought I'd never use again, to understand the science underpinning current and proposed regulations.

My next position was Managing Director at Western Water Assessment at CU Boulder where I was responsible for the overall strategy and day-to-day operations of a large research group working on water supply, drought, and climate in the Colorado River Basin. We translated science for a wide variety of water users in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming, and we had to ensure that the research we did would be useful to our non-academic stakeholders; it could not be simply curiosity driven. I greatly enjoyed seeing science being used by people outside of the research community, and my team taught me the best methods for ensuring that science produces useful information.

Finally, I began working for NASA in 2019. Space policy is quite different from energy and natural resource policy, however Earth observations from space do provide a great deal of information to geoscientists and their related policy issues. The experiences and skills I acquired in each previous position have helped me to excel in my current role, and I have enjoyed learning about a completely new policy area. Each new career move has been an opportunity to learn.

**Where do you see your sector moving in future years? How would you advise students to prepare to be competitive job applicants and successful employees?**

The U.S. Federal Government will always have need of a diverse, scientifically literate workforce across its many departments and agencies, whether working in technical or policy roles. There are many internship and fellowship programs across the government, including at NASA, and these are an excellent opportunity to see what it is truly like to work in the Executive Branch, to be exposed to the many types of roles geoscientists can have, and to make valuable contacts. Aside from these opportunities, I suggest that students consider how their academic training and other experience could provide value to specific government roles and how they could help solve key problems that the government is facing. Think creatively about how to tweak your skills to work on a problem from a different angle than you currently do.

**What is the role of networking in your sector? Do you have advice for a student who is just beginning to build their network? What is the best way for students to get their foot in the door?**

Networking is important for any career, especially policy roles, as relationships with internal and external colleagues are critical for getting things done. A strong and diverse network will also be a benefit when you need expertise or advice that you or your organization do not have.

Networking did not come naturally to me, but I have found it easiest to simply ask people about their interests and their careers. Attend as many events as you can, even virtual ones, and do not be afraid to ask questions of people who seem interesting to you. There does not need to be a grand strategy or detailed plan for networking at events. Rather, follow your natural curiosity, which will be more likely to result in interesting and less forced conversations that you and the other person are more likely to remember.

**What does a “typical” day of work look like for you?**

My typical day involves several meetings with NASA colleagues and external partners with whom I am working on projects. I also spend time drafting various documents and reviewing policies and agreements.

**What is the best part of your job?**

The best part of working at NASA Headquarters is supporting the scientists and engineers that develop all of the amazing NASA missions. I get to work with and learn from some of the most creative and skilled people who all believe strongly in the mission of NASA. Almost every week, I am amazed at something I didn't know existed in our solar system or galaxy and at how we figured out a way to observe it.

**Do you have any other comments or advice for students looking to enter your sector of the geoscience workforce?**

Be curious, look for ways to serve the geoscience community, and say yes to opportunities to do something new, both big and small.

**Connect:**

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