

# Addressing Ethical Standards: Establishment of Publisher and Staff Guidelines Puts ASPB Ahead of the Curve

Over the past two years, ASPB has developed a number of documents outlining the Society's expectations for the various parties who contribute to the publications process, along with procedures and policies to help us deal with allegations of misconduct. It appears that this comprehensive series of documents regarding ethics in publishing puts ASPB ahead of the curve compared to many other scientific societies. In 2003, we developed guidelines for authors, followed in early 2005 with guidelines for editors and reviewers. Also in 2005 we addressed conflicts of interest. Finally, we tackled staff and publisher responsibilities, and on July 19, 2005, *ASPB Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Publisher or Staff Misconduct* was approved by the ASPB Executive Committee during the Plant Biology meeting in Seattle. With this publication, ASPB's suite of documents outlining proper scientific conduct in publishing is complete. All

documents are available via <http://www.aspb.org/publications/ethics.cfm>.

Although a number of disciplinary society publishers have developed ethics guidelines for their authors, fewer have done so for their editors and reviewers. In fact, we wondered whether we had stepped into uncharted territory as we began to develop this final document on staff and publisher conduct. Staff found relatively little in the published literature upon which to build, as discussions of ethics as they relate specifically to the publisher are apparently not common. Covering guidelines for staff is particularly tricky because, as ASPB's legal counsel pointed out, the involvement of employees adds a whole new dimension of adherence to employment laws and Society employee requirements.

Perhaps for many of our readers, it is not too hard to imagine what constitutes ethical behavior for authors, editors, and peer re-

viewers. You might not, however, think too much about the obligations of the staff who are handling your papers or the publisher of the journal to which you entrust your work. Therefore, reproduced here in its entirety is *ASPB Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Publisher or Staff Misconduct*. As we stated in a previous column (*ASPB News*, March/April 2005), we want our publications to be at the cutting edge not only of plant science, but of science in general. And we recognize that, to do so, they must be models of scientific responsibility and integrity. This document lays out explicitly ASPB's commitments as a publisher to you—our editors, authors, and readers.

**C. Robertson McClung**  
Chair, Publications Committee  
[c.robertson.mcclung@dartmouth.edu](mailto:c.robertson.mcclung@dartmouth.edu)

**Nancy Winchester**  
Director of Publications  
[nancyw@aspb.org](mailto:nancyw@aspb.org)

## ASPB Ethics in Publishing: Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Publisher or Staff Misconduct

The American Society of Plant Biologists expects members of the Society and all individuals involved in the peer review and publication of its journals to maintain high ethical standards for scholarship. This document is the fourth in the ASPB "Ethics in Publishing" series, which describes ethical guidelines for all parties involved in the publishing process as well as procedures for addressing allegations of ethical violations. *Ethics in Publishing: ASPB Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Publisher and Staff Misconduct* has been developed to offer guidelines for sound publishing practice. Please also refer to *Ethics in Publishing: ASPB Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Author Misconduct*; *ASPB Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Editorial Misconduct*; and *Conflicts of Interest* at <http://www.aspb.org/publications/ethics.cfm>.

### Expectations for the Publisher

Expectations for the American Society of Plant Biologists, as journal publisher, include the following. The Society will

- provide the human, financial, and other resources needed to publish the journals
- facilitate the prompt review of manuscripts submitted to its journals
- facilitate the timely publication of articles accepted by its journals
- not seek to delay publication of a paper for any reason other than to address technical issues associated with publication (for example, should authors be tardy in submitting corrected page proofs or submit final figures that fail to meet the technical requirements for publication), adherence to journal policies, or credible concerns about the science

- work to educate its member, author, and editorial communities through a variety of venues about ethical conduct in scientific publishing
- in cases of alleged misconduct by authors or editors/reviewers, adhere to the procedures outlined in the ASPB "Ethics in Publishing" series and "ensure that investigations are handled as expeditiously as possible and without harming the reputation of anyone against whom an allegation is made but who is found not to have violated the Society's standards" (*Science and Engineering Ethics*, volume 9, issue 2, 2002, p. 236)
- ensure that retractions or corrections approved by an editor are published promptly in the journal.

## Expectations for Staff

As representatives of ASPB, staff members are expected to uphold the ethical responsibilities of the Society. Specifically, staff will

- maintain confidentiality about reviewers, reviews, comments, and decisions
- not misrepresent the review process to an author
- not forge or fabricate a reviewer's report or alter the scientific content of reviews
- not alter the scientific content of an article under review or accepted for publication in the journals without author and editorial approval
- ensure that papers are scheduled for publication in accordance with established procedures and without bias
- not falsify data related to the journal (e.g., impact factors, acceptance rates, turnaround times)
- adhere to the procedures for handling allegations of ethical misconduct by authors or editors/reviewers as described in the ASPB "Ethics in Publishing" series and immediately refer any allegation of ethical misconduct by an author or editor/reviewer, or any instance of possible conflict of interest, to the Executive Director
- cooperate with the Ethics Review Committee or other investigative bodies regarding possible ethical violations by an author or editor/reviewer
- keep all details of an alleged ethical violation confidential
- ensure that retractions or corrections approved by an editor are published promptly in the journal.

## Procedure for Addressing Allegations of Publisher or Staff Misconduct

1. Any person who has reason to believe that the journal publisher or any member of the ASPB staff has engaged in misconduct or committed an ethical violation in connection with their handling of an author's work or with any other work they perform for the Society's publications must summarize the reasons for

such allegations in writing and transmit this written document to the president, who chairs the Ethics Review Committee (ERC; president, past president, executive director, chair of the Publications Committee, and the editors-in-chief of both journals).

2. The allegations and all information relating to allegations and subsequent inquiries will be kept confidential by the party making the complaint, the ERC, and any Society members and staff working on the matter. The complaint and information developed in any subsequent investigation will not be disclosed to any third parties except as required by law or as may be necessary to enforce the decision of the ERC.
3. The ERC will review the allegations to determine their validity and if further action is necessary. The ERC will conduct all inquiries it deems necessary to resolve the matter and shall consider all relevant information and make findings and recommendations concerning any action that needs to be taken.
4. Legal advice will be obtained to determine the proper legal procedures to be followed by the ERC if the compliant alleges a violation of law or Society employment rules, or if the ERC determines that such advice is needed to aid in conducting the inquiry.
5. The executive director will not participate on the ERC when the allegation is directed against him/her. If the allegation is against the Society as publisher, or against a staff member other than the executive director, then the executive director will be notified of the allegation. If the allegation is against an ASPB employee, the executive director will assist the ERC to ensure that ASPB employment procedures are followed in the investigation.
6. The person against whom the allegation is made shall be given the opportunity to respond to the allegations unless the complaint alleges violations of law or

ASPB employment practices. If such violations have been alleged, then legal advice will be sought to determine if it is proper for the ERC to seek information from the accused.

7. All actions taken in connection with an investigation of an allegation, including telephone calls, must be documented in writing. Copies of documentation and correspondence should be sent to the president, who shall ensure the security and confidentiality of the records.
8. The ERC may seek the assistance of the executive director, the Executive Committee, and any other available ASPB resources in carrying out its confidential investigation and enforcing its decision.✎

*This document was approved by the ASPB Executive Committee July 19, 2005.*