Kathy Baylis is an Associate Professor in the department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics at the University of Illinois. She joined the department after several years as an Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia where she remains an adjunct faculty. She earned her PhD from the University of California at Berkeley in 2003, where she specialized in international agricultural and conservation policy. She has worked in policy in both Canada and the United States, as a staff economist at the US Council of Economic Advisors in the White House and as Executive Secretary of the Canadian National Farmers Union. Professor Baylis has helped bring in over $29 million in grants, and has supervised over 25 graduate and post-doctoral students. She has published over 40 journal articles and has coauthored a textbook on U.S. and Canadian agricultural policy. Her current research includes evaluating agricultural and forest conservation programs in Mexico, Indonesia, India and Sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, she is leading an initiative on big data, food security and the environment at the University of Illinois.

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for AAEA?
One key opportunity for the association is the increasing need for the work done by our members. Agriculture, natural resource management and international development are at the core of many pressing global challenges, including the fundamental question of how to feed an expanding global population while preserving the environment. Research by members of the Association has the great potential to inform policy solutions for nutrition, environment, agriculture and rural development in the United States and globally. Being visible in these policy discussions has the added benefit of attracting students into our profession.
A second opportunity, and related challenge, is the potential provided by novel data sources and methods for analysis: a.k.a. ‘big data’. Research on many of the above global issues is hampered by a lack of detailed data on behavior, market, environmental and household outcomes, and the inability to combine data from multiple sources at the needed temporal and spatial scale. Novel data sources, such as from remote sensing and big data analytical methods are allowing us to ask questions that were not possible before now.

What actions would you initiate to address the challenges and opportunities described in your response to the previous question?
Over the past couple years, with colleagues at the University of Illinois, I have started an initiative to facilitate the use of big data methods for agriculture, environment and development research. As part of this initiative, we are helping compile data, code and information on methods and limitations of big data approaches. I would like to work with others in the association to help facilitate data access and processing, and highlight work done by our members in this area to lower the start-up costs to access data and big data tools for our members.
The Association is already doing much to facilitate the outreach of the research of our members. I hope to work with our communications group to broaden the reach of the AAEA to other international and multidisciplinary outlets.

At the end of your three-year term, what changes/new initiatives would you have helped create?
After my three year term, I hope to have established a group on big data and a web-interface for data, scraping and processing code and examples of big data methods used in research. More broadly, I would also like to work with members to identify other areas where junior researchers face large start-up costs, and where the association can help reduce those barriers to entry. I also hope to help enhance our outreach, particularly to researchers, media and interest groups working internationally and/or in multidisciplinary settings.