

Coast-to-coast advocacy for agriculture research

April 15, 2022



Molly McIlquham, Holly Lane, and Lance Merrick meeting with Rep. Dan Newhouse (WA) during the 2023 Congressional Visits Day.

In early March, students, researchers, and certified professionals from ASA, CSSA, and SSSA came together to advocate for increased funding for essential agricultural research during the virtual Congressional Visits Day (CVD). More than 93 participants led over 100 meetings with congressional offices from 30 different states requesting increased support for three USDA competitive grants programs—the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority (AgARDA), and the Equipment Grants Program. The overwhelming majority of Congress and their staff support agricultural research, and our advocacy helps them understand, at a more personal level, the value of investing in these programs. This year also provided a unique opportunity to give input on measures that can help provide relief to the global food supply given the crisis in Ukraine.

During CVD, the Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22) spending bill was passed with increased support for agronomy, crop science, and soil science research. Of the programs the Societies' support, you can see the full list of FY22 appropriations on the funding chart here: <https://bit.ly/36Bway4>. Some highlights include:

- \$1 million for AgARDA to hire staff and create a strategic plan
- \$445 million for AFRI (up \$10 million from FY21)
- \$1.7 billion for the Agricultural Research Service (ARS; up \$230 million from FY21)
- \$8.8 billion for the National Science Foundation (NSF; up \$350 million from FY21)

Perspectives from CVD Participants

This year, the Washington team was made up of three members: Holly Lane (an early career scientist), Molly McIlquham (a master's student), and Lance Merrick (a Ph.D. candidate), all representing Washington State University.

This was Lane's fourth CVD. She first participated in 2017 as a Golden Opportunity Scholar. She says she remembers it was a whirlwind to be led through the historic halls of the congressional office buildings. Mainly, she was struck by how accessible the offices seemed to be. "It was encouraging to experience how willing and excited most of the staff and members of Congress were to meet with us and to hear what we had to say," Lane recalls.

This was McIlquham's second year as a part of congressional visits, both in virtual format. She remembered feeling quite nervous during her first year before the first meeting. Thankfully, Lane was an excellent guide for organizing the discussion and getting down to business quickly while still providing necessary information.

McIlquham says that this year was less nerve-racking since she was familiar with the staffers she met with, further building a relationship with the congressional offices.

There was universal support from all the offices that the Washington State team met with. It is also particularly rewarding to see the progress our Societies have made over the past five years. Support for increased funding has only seemed to improve, even in offices that were hesitant about budget increases in general in the past few years.

One of the Washington State team's most successful meetings this year was with Rep. Dan Newhouse (WA). Lane notes the difference between this year's meeting and the meeting with him back in 2017.

"During my very first congressional visits day, he was supportive of our work but was hesitant to justify increased spending. This year, I was thrilled to meet with him again. This time, he expressed to us that he was already sold on funding AFRI but wanted to hear from us to help him build his case amongst his colleagues."

Washington State University is one of the top recipients of AFRI dollars, which is a key talking point for the team, especially when they get to meet with other alumni of the university. On a more personal note, part of Lane's graduate research was funded in Texas by an AFRI grant. The team hopes in the future to be able to share some of the groundbreaking research that will be funded under AgARDA. Lane and McIlquham also see great potential for the equipment grants program and hope that it will be funded in the upcoming budget.

Future Outlook

Both Holly and Molly are looking forward to meeting with members of Congress and staffers in person next year. While virtual meetings are convenient for these advocacy efforts, there is nothing quite like a firm handshake and smile to move our advocacy efforts forward. Including both a virtual and in-person opportunity to participate in CVD will hopefully increase engagement with offices.

The Societies' Science Policy Office provides support for both new and experienced advocates and offers a variety of excellent advocacy opportunities that range from introductory activities to hosting your own town hall. Members are encouraged to follow #SupportAgResearch on social media to keep up with participants' actions and future advocacy efforts.

Holly Lane and Molly McIlquham (Washington State University) and Rachel Owen (ACSESS) contributed to this article.

Advocacy Award Recipients

ASA, CSSA, and SSSA provide two award opportunities for Society members with an enthusiasm for advocacy to participate in Congressional Visits Day. The Future

Leaders in Science Award is awarded to graduate student members, and the Excellence in Advocacy Award is awarded to non-student members.

Future Leaders in Science

Nancy Bohl Bormann, University of Minnesota

Walter Dauksher, University of Georgia

Mala Ganiger, North Dakota State University

Pricilla Glenn, University of California–Davis

Kelsey Holbrook Jensen, Cornell University

Harkirat Kaur, Michigan State University

LeAnn Lux, North Dakota State University

Lance Merrick, Washington State University

Dinesh Phuyal, Texas A&M University

Excellence in Advocacy

James Kubicki, University of Texas–El Paso

Holly Lane, Washington State University

Lindsay E. Vicars, Heliae Development LLC

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