Science Societies

2020 Congressional visits day: Advocacy in action

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2020 Congressional Visits Day participants.

It's that time of year again when dozens of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members flood the Hill asking Congress to #SupportAgResearch! On 2–3 March, 78 Society members, graduate and undergraduate students, Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs), and staff participated in the 2020 Congressional Visits Day. They met with more than 120 congressional offices advocating for increased funding for USDA research programs in fiscal year (FY) 2021.

About three-quarters of our CVD participants are first-time advocates. All participants receive extensive advocacy and communication training before going to the Hill. Our training day also included guest speakers such as a panel of congressional staff and presentations from USDA leadership—Deputy Undersecretary for Research, Extension, and Education, Scott Hutchins, and National Institute of Food and Agriculture Director, Scott Angle.



Congressional Visits Day participants meet with Rep. GT Thompson (PA).

USDA Research Programs Highlighted

Continuing our success from previous years, the CVD teams again advocated for increased funding for the USDA competitive grants program, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). Over the past decade, AFRI has seen its budget more than double due in no small part to the advocacy efforts of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members at events like CVD.

“My favorite part of CVD was sharing my personal story with congressional staff,” says Cornell graduate student, Lena Abu-Ali. “USDA-AFRI directly funds my research and makes my Ph.D. studies possible, so advocating for that was really meaningful for me.”

Two other USDA research programs were highlighted by CVD participants—a competitive equipment grants program and a new research program called AgARDA (Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority). Established in the 2018 farm bill, AgARDA is a pilot program that would fund “breakthrough” research projects to address agriculture's most pressing challenges. The program was not funded last year, so CVD participants made the case for this new funding mechanism within USDA that could lead to transformative changes in agriculture.

Overall, congressional offices were highly receptive to the funding requests of the CVD participants. Dozens of offices included the three USDA research programs in their FY2021 appropriations requests. Members of the U.S. House of Representatives were also asked by CVD participants to sign two “Dear Colleague” letters in support of AFRI and AgARDA. Just days after CVD, the letters had more than 90 signatures!

The 2020 CVD was also the first opportunity for new ASA, CSSA, and SSSA CEO, Nick Goeser, to attend. “The importance and impact of our Ninth Congressional Visits Days was felt throughout our training and delivered in Capital Hill visits,” Goeser said. “Washington, DC moves fast—and it is essential to educate, inform, and communicate our needs to our elected officials through Hill visits. These visits not only relay our priorities but create change and impact in our political process to deliver research funding and support for our members and certified professionals.”

Leadership, Networking Opportunity



Congressional Visits Day participants meet with Rep. Jim McGovern (MA).

Not only is CVD an opportunity for participants to engage in face-to-face advocacy with members of Congress, it's also an excellent leadership and networking opportunity.

“CVD was a unique opportunity for me, as an early career scientist and student, to make a meaningful connection with my Society and work together for a common purpose,” said Colorado State University student, Courtland Kelly. “I feel much more connected to the Societies and now feel like I have a supportive network to join at the Annual Meeting and build throughout my career.”

CVD is an annual event that any Society member can participate in. While the Societies provide funding awards for 18 graduate students and three postdoc or senior members to attend CVD (see sidebar), every year we have several Society members who provide their own funding to participate in this unique advocacy and networking event. We encourage all Society members to engage in the various advocacy opportunities that the Society offers; you might be surprised how much you enjoy it.

“I am so jazzed to set up follow-up meetings [in Arizona] with my Senate and House reps I met with in DC,” said Arizona CCA, Karl Wyant. “I think this training could open up more political participation for me in the long term!”

Follow the hashtag #SupportAgResearch on social media to check out our participants in action, and see photos from the 2020 CVD here: **https://flic.kr/s/aHsmLPzxJQ**.



Congressional Visits Day participants with Sen. John Boozman (AR).

Advocacy Award Recipients

“Advocacy Award Recipients” is the title of this sidebar. It should be larger than the headings (2020 Future Leaders in Science Award and 2020 Excellence in Advocacy Award). So, you could make the headers that smaller “bold, black” header size or your could keep the headers as is and make the title that smaller red title size.

ASA, CSSA, and SSSA provided 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 was awarded to non-student members.

Future Leaders in Science Award

Lena Abu-Ali, Cornell University

Ryan Bryant-Schlobohm, Oklahoma State University

Devon Carroll, University of Tennessee–Knoxville

Neha Chatterjee, University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign

Jaclyn Fiola, Virginia Tech University

Alwin Hopf, University of Florida

Courtland Kelly, Colorado State University

Holly Lane, Texas A&M University

Krista Marshall, University of California–Davis

Greg McGlinch, Ohio State University

Spencer Moller, University of Delaware

Janel Ohletz, North Carolina State University

Haleigh Ortmeier-Clarke, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Jesse Puka-Beals, North Dakota State University

Rahul Raman, Texas A&M University

Keegan Smith, University of Kentucky

Hunt Walne, Mississippi State University

Vivian Wauters, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities

Excellence in Advocacy Award

Brian Gardener, Ag Spectrum Co.

Tracey Olexa, NTM Engineering, Inc.

Carolyn Olson, AGI, USGS

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