

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Democracy in Action

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Pictured: Counter clockwise from top: The Illinois delegation meeting with Omri Rahmil (close left), legislative assistant for Congressman Peter Roskam (6th District).

The current political climate may make you want to cut yourself off from all news outlets and social media platforms, but it's for this very reason that constituents and small business owners need to make sure they have the ears of their legislators.

This also is why attendance for the Society of American Florists' 37th annual Congressional Action Days was the highest since 2005. For over three decades, SAF has organized this event for its members—which includes retail florists, wholesalers, breeders, distributors and growers—to help them get in front of their local lawmakers.

This was your scribe's first time at CAD and it was an eye-opening, and at times eye-popping, experience. The morning of the first day consists of speakers from SAF, AmericanHort and around government (included a journalist from The Washington Post) for a run-down of the issues facing our industry and what we'd be

asking for when we visited Capitol Hill the next day. This year, there were three: Overall tax reform, specifically a floriculture exemption on the border adjustment tax; immigration reform to include a guest worker program; and a modest increase of \$250,000 for the Floriculture & Nursery Research Initiative program.

Unfortunately, the snowstorm that wreaked havoc across the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic also dumped on Washington, D.C., so most of Congress couldn't get into the Capitol. But meeting with congressional aides is still important, as they're the ones who pass along messages from constituents to the representatives and senators.

I was with the Illinois delegation, and being with a large state means lots of appointments, walking through the labyrinth of halls that house all of the congressional offices. It was a whirlwind of brisk walking from different buildings and floors, shaking lots of hands, and going through your spiel over and over.

But it's worth it. Dave Mitchell, fourth-generation owner of Mitchell's Flowers & Events in Orland Park, Illinois, has been attending CAD for over 20 years and, although change in our government happens at a snail's pace, he's seen the positive effects that come with meeting with lawmakers face to face.

"I don't always agree with what's going on in Washington, but I do know that our industry needs someone to tell our story," said Dave. "I feel like it's my duty to speak because if you don't, and things don't go the way you want them to, you only have yourself to blame. They may not agree with what you're saying, but they listen. You have to at least try."

It was also Mike Klopmeier's first time attending CAD. Mike is GM of the Darwin Perennials division at Ball Horticultural Co. and has been involved in many government-related issues with our industry, including meeting with APHIS and being one of the key experts during the *Ralstonia* outbreak in 2003. But he had never visited congressional offices before.

He thought going into the meetings with three focused messages was the best strategy, which helps SAF members remember the important talking points.

"For me the issues on tax and immigration reform was all about what is good for our customer, to help them be more successful," Mike said. "And it's most likely that being there in person helps a lot." **GT**