

GROWERTALKS

SAF in the Lobby

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SAF Members Take to Congress—and the White House—for Annual Congressional Action Days

The Society of American Florists

Nearly 100 Society of American Florists members representing all industry segments, three countries, 25 states and the District of Columbia, traveled to Washington, D.C., March 12 and 13 to meet with lawmakers and key congressional staff. While there, attendees advocated as a powerful group for issues that are critical to the success of retail florists, wholesalers, growers and suppliers—and the overall health of the floral industry.

“I come to Congressional Action Days because I believe that we as good citizens need to make a difference,” said Michael Pugh of Pugh’s Flowers in Memphis, Tennessee. “The only way our elected representatives know what we’re thinking is if we come here and make our voices heard.”

This year’s event featured a direct address from a California congressman with personal ties to the floral industry, a spirited and bipartisan talk about high-profile issues, an address from a veteran network news anchor—and a nearly three-hour White House briefing created especially for SAF, featuring remarks from and Q&A sessions with six top administration officials.

For many SAF members, the chance to be on the Hill with their industry peers speaking to lawmakers has become a highlight of their calendar.

“Over the years, I’ve found it very important to be here and I would encourage everyone to come,” said Karen Fountain of Flowers ‘n’ Ferns in Burke, Virginia.

Art VanWingerden of Metrolina Greenhouses Inc. said he knows firsthand how long it can take to change laws, but he also understands on a deeply personal level the potential pay-off. In the early 2000s, Art spent about five years fighting to improve outdated zoning laws that were adversely affecting his growing operation in Hendersonville, North Carolina. The effort was contentious, expensive and time-consuming, but he ultimately prevailed and helped write the new law.

“That’s the kind of the thing that motivates me to come to Congressional Action Days—change, the ability to progress,” he said. “As an industry and as business owners, we can’t wait for things to change. If we do that, we’ll just be acted upon.”

For other attendees, this year’s event represented a new opportunity to learn and engage.

Hannah Crittenden, who graduates with a degree in supply chain management this spring from Michigan State University, attended this year as one of 23 first-timers alongside her father, Rod Crittenden, head of the Michigan Floral Association.

"I've always been interested in politics and especially now that I can vote," she explained. "I wanted to come to CAD because I want to be involved and I've learned a lot here. Talking to lawmakers and staff isn't just something for the 'elites.' Anyone can pick up a call or walk in an office and comment on an issue. That's exciting."

Highlights from CAD 2018 include:

Bipartisan talks. On Monday, Mike Smith and Jim Richards of Cornerstone Government Affairs in Washington, D.C. kicked off CAD with a candid, bipartisan discussion on the state of politics today—and the challenge of moving key issues forward in a midterm election year. Jim argued that positive reception to the recent tax reform could influence midterm elections more than some pundits are predicting.

"[That law] is really selling well and it has the potential to change how people plan to vote," Jim said.

Mike, for his part, argued Democrats are well positioned to out-perform Republicans.

Expert takes. Before heading to Capitol Hill, attendees were briefed on the year's key issues: key fixes to the country's immigration system and funding for the Floriculture & Nursery Research Initiative and Floriculture Crops Report.

D.C.-based attorney and immigration expert Laura Foote Reiff acknowledged that immigration is a major issue and that it isn't likely to be resolved soon, but encouraged SAF members to share their stories.

"Generally speaking, we have seen very business-friendly proposals from the Trump administration," she said. "But the domestic policy wing of the White House really runs immigration. That's why it's important to talk about the country's business, economic and national security needs, as they relate to immigration."

Dr. Terril Nell, research coordinator for the American Floral Endowment and former SAF president, presented an overview of the Floriculture & Nursery Research Initiative (FNRI) and how that effort has benefited all segments of the industry, along with the general public, bringing some of the top academics and researchers to work on the industry's biggest challenges.

Dr. Marvin Miller discussed the history of the Floriculture Crops Report and the importance of asking Congress to fund the effort once again.

"This is the benchmark report for our industry," he said. "Researchers, producers and marketers need it to plan and so it affects all of us."

White House briefing. Six senior-level administration officials briefed CAD members at the White House during a lively session that lasted more than two hours and featured frequent Q&A sessions. CAD members heard directly from White House officials on issues of immigration, drug enforcement, health care, tax reform trade and labor.

"We've got to come up with a reliable, safe and legal program for immigration," said Ray Starling, special assistant to the president for Agriculture, Trade and Food Assistance and previously chief of staff for Sen. Thom Tillis (R-N.C.). He thanked SAF members for coming to the White House. "I know it takes a lot of effort to leave your businesses and your families to be here, but it's important. It holds us accountable."

Jim Carroll, deputy director and acting director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and previously assistant to the president and deputy chief of staff, detailed his work on the opioid crisis and how that issue is hurting American families and businesses. He also memorably recounted his own family's long history in the floral industry,

dating back to the early 20th century, when his grandparents and parents operated a florist and growing operation in Alexandria, Virginia—Alexandria Floral Co.

A reporter reflects. During the annual SAFPAC Fundraising Dinner, CBS News' Chief White House Correspondent Major Garrett detailed his experience covering the 2016 presidential election and the lessons he learned from that time.

"I have learned more humility," said Garrett, who covered his first presidential campaign in 1992. "I had built up what I thought was a pretty reliable body of knowledge. Then 2016 happened. I am much more guarded about my certainty now."

A congressman connects. On Tuesday morning, just before heading to Capitol Hill, attendees heard from Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-CA-20) who spoke from his heart, calling out personal relationships with SAF members in the audience, about the "heart and soul" and "strength and success" of the Central Coast of California and its agriculture community. In particular, Panetta reflected on a visit to Kitayama Brothers Inc. and how the company's history—and the family's determination to overcome adversity—had moved and stayed with him. **GT**

"SAF in the Lobby" is produced by the Society of American Florists, www.safnow.org. For more information on legislative issues, contact the Government Relations Department.