

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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At Impact Washington

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The timing was ideal for AmericanHort to hold a congressional lobbying event like Impact Washington since the labor shortage issue is what's keeping growers up at night. Labor, or the lack thereof, was what everyone was talking about at Cultivate in July. And on the second day of Impact Washington, AmericanHort's Craig Regelbrugge opened the day with new data released that morning from the U.S. Department of Labor showing there are currently 6.17 million jobs open that employers cannot fill. That was jaw-dropping news that we were able to share with legislators on the Hill.

Impact Washington, which was held recently in Washington, D.C., is the first lobbying event AmericanHort has held in about nine years—back when OFA and ANLA were separate organizations. Craig, who works hard to make sure horticulture is represented on Capitol Hill, told me their goal was to have about 100 people attend the event and they sold out a few weeks before, so he was pleased with the turnout. It was a nice mix of wholesale greenhouse and nursery growers, retailers, landscapers and breeders representing 25 states—and even one Canadian!

All of us spent two days listening to current and former policy makers and walking the halls of the Senate and House offices to meet with legislators. The goals were to educate them and their staff on our three primary issues: seasonal labor reform along with H-2B program and cap relief; Farm Bill provisions to continue to help fund horticulture research; and our industry's perspective on tax reform. The speaker list was impressive, with a Senator, a Representative, a former ambassador and a special assistant to the president.

Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) has been a friend to horticulture, as he's been the leading voice in the Senate for trying to find ways to resolve the labor issues impacting our industry. He's been very involved and has visited most of the



grower businesses in his state of North Carolina, including Van Wingerden and Metrolina. Touring these facilities “gave me a greater appreciation for what growers go through,” he said. “Especially with greenhouse building and regulations.”

Pictured: • Top: From left: Dr. Mike Klopmeier, Ball Horticultural; Gary Knosher, Midwest Groundcovers; Peter Orum, Midwest Groundcovers; Congressman Mike Quigley (D-IL 5th); Joe Hobson, Midwest Trading; Christa Orum-Keller, Midwest Groundcovers; Ken Doty, Doty Nurseries; and Dr. Marvin Miller, Ball Horticultural.

• Middle: Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) speaks to Impact Washington attendees.

• Bottom: Hanging out with Congressman Danny Davis (D-IL 7th) in his office. Senator Tillis said one of the reasons the government hasn't been able to enact any type of comprehensive immigration reform is because policy makers have tried to put everything into one big bill. He believes the only way to get there is to pair up complementary pieces of the debate, so that the pieces will eventually make a whole puzzle.

Another popular speaker was Arturo Sarukhan, who served as Mexican Ambassador to the United States from 2007 to 2013. Jokingly calling himself a “recovering diplomat,” Mr. Sarukhan spoke at length about Mexican-U.S. relations and our current situation.

Of course, he had to address the elephant in the room—which is the current administration’s interactions with Mexico. As you would expect, the rhetoric has strained our relations with them.

“Trump has changed public narratives on both sides,” said the ambassador. “He used Mexico as a political piñata during the campaign.” Because of this, negative perception of the U.S. from Mexicans went from 11% to 84% in one year. This has created a new complexity when it comes to immigration reform and most of the onus is on the U.S. to figure it out, said Mr. Sarukhan.

“To Mexicans, immigration reform is about fairness, about being treated well,” said the ambassador. “To many Americans, it’s about the rule of law.”

There were 15 of us in the Illinois delegation, so AmericanHort smartly split us up between north and south. Since I live in Chicagoland, I was with the northern group. Most of the appointments we had were with legislative aides, but we did get to meet a couple of congresspeople, including Dr. Danny Davis (D-IL), who represents the 7th District. We spoke with the Congressman for an hour, and as someone who’s served in Congress for 20 years, he had a lot of insight.

AmericanHort is hoping to hold an event like this every other year, with more opportunities to open it up to more attendees. This is the second lobbying event I attended this year and it was just as exciting, inspiring and motivating as SAF’s Congressional Action Days in March. Craig made the point that visiting policy makers does work (Congressman Brad Schneider’s aide said that face-to-face meetings help make them more aware of the issues that are important to us). But he also said that it doesn’t need to stop there; all of the growers I was with invited the senators and congresspeople to visit their operations so they can get to know them better and see for themselves how these issues are affecting them. Hopefully, they take them up on their offers. **GT**