

GROWERTALKS

JZ on D.C.

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Highlights from the 2023 Impact Washington Summit

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When more than 100 horticulture professionals descended on our nation's capital in late September, the chance of an impending government shutdown was looming over everything. As of press time, the crisis was averted with a continuing resolution to fund the government until November 17, but it cost Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) his speakership, opening the door for what looks like will be a long slog for House Republicans to elect a replacement that they can all agree on.

With the wide divisions between both parties—and even within the parties—it's been much more difficult to break through all the noise to present important issues. AmericanHort holds this biennial event to help our industry connect directly to our policymakers to try and implement change and improvements to legislation that will benefit and support our businesses.

Did we move the needle during this year's Impact Washington Summit? There's no concrete gauge to rely on in today's political climate, but as AmericanHort's Craig Regelbrugge and Ken Fisher discussed during the meeting, it's ALWAYS important to take advantage of the chance to get in front of your representatives. Regardless of all the distractions of performative politics, it's good to remind them about the issues you care about and that they work for us.

1. The Illinois delegation with Freshman

Congresswoman Delia Ramirez (D-IL). Her district includes Ball Horticultural Company's headquarters in West Chicago. 2. Undersecretary of Agriculture Jennifer Lester Moffitt discussed some of the programs that the Department of Agriculture has recently implemented, including \$1 billion in urban greening programs, section 7721 of the Plant Protection Act that provides funding to deal with invasive insects and diseases, and rolling out a new grant program for H-2A employers. 3. Former Maryland Governor Larry Hogan was the keynote speaker at Impact Washington. It was more of a Q&A session, with Bell Nursery's Cole Mangum (left) and AmericanHort's Ken Fisher (right) leading the discussion. The governor attributed his success and popularity as a Republican in a blue state with working across the aisle. "You can get more done by persuading people and providing solutions," he said. 4. Attendees went to the Capitol building to listen to three policymakers who've worked closely with AmericanHort on specific legislation targeted toward hort and specialty crops. 4a. Rep. Jim Costa (D-CA), who's been in Congress for 19 years, has worked to pass legislation for the specialty crop sector, including on investing in automation. 4b. Rep. Dan Newhouse (R-WA) is the lead on the Farm Workforce Modernization Act that has passed the House twice. He's also worked on bills that would apply relief for H-2A housing expenses and expanding H-2A to all ag

businesses, including dairy farmers. 4c. Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-VA) is one of the key players in developing the new Farm Bill and said she'd like to see a special coalition just for specialty crop producers. There are rumors that she may run for governor of Virginia. 5. Congressman Bill Foster (D-IL) took the time to stop and talk to the Illinois delegation about some of the issues.

The specific issues delegates brought to the Hill were:

- **Workforce/labor:** Improvements on the H-2A program, including housing requirements, phasing in E-Verify and getting rid of the I-9 process, increasing the cap for H-2B, and encouraging support for the Farm Workforce Modernization Act (which includes a lot of these improvements)
- **Farm Bill:** Encouraging passage of the 2023 Farm Bill, especially specific provisions that support hort businesses, like the Specialty Crop Research Initiative, and increasing funding for the Plant Protection Act and the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program
- **Taxes:** Preserving the step-up basis for inherited assets for family-owned businesses, and reinstating expensing for Section 174 research and experimentation back to the year the costs were incurred instead of over five years, which was changed when the Tax Cuts & Jobs Act was passed in 2017
- **Research:** Continue to seek funding for the Floriculture & Nursery Research Initiative and the IR-4 program
- **Transportation:** Lowering the barriers to the new apprenticeship program that will open the pool of truck drivers to those under the age of 21 (as of now, commercial drivers cannot drive over state lines unless they're over 21 years old), and increasing funding for new Commercial Motor Vehicle parking under the Truck Parking Improvement Act

Out of all of these issues, the Farm Bill is the most pressing. The current version was signed into law December 2018 and expired this past September. Thankfully, most ag programs are funded until the end of the calendar year, and the House and Senate Ag Committees are working on drafting versions of the bill to be introduced. AmericanHort believes that with the impending presidential election, there will be mounting political pressure to finish and pass a new Farm Bill by June 2024.

Right before the opening night reception, a listening session and roundtable discussion was held with representatives from USDA about its proposed new pilot program specifically for greenhouse growers. The new Controlled Environment Crop Insurance Program is being developed specifically to protect plants "grown in fully enclosed controlled environments" that may be subject to destruction orders from federal or state agencies if they get a disease.

The program also fills in some of the gaps that aren't available in other federal insurance programs, such as:

- Coverage for all plants grown in a controlled environment, including cuttings, seedlings and tissue culture (there's a specific list of genera in the crop insurance handbook)
- A streamlined application and policy renewal process
- Coverage for producer-selected plant categories

A few growers who attended the session were optimistic and thought it was a big step in the right direction. Traditionally, greenhouse growers could only take advantage of federal crop insurance programs that were originally intended for row crop and field producers. This is the first time there will be a single-peril insurance option for greenhouse growers that can be purchased as a standalone policy or in conjunction with other nursery insurance.

Since the coverage is based on specific diseases, one improvement that greenhouse growers would already like to include is that “insects/pests” be in the language. Right now, USDA is only including diseases that are vectored by insects, however, growers argue that you can just as easily find yourself quarantined for an insect outbreak.

Growers would also like more to ensure that the insurance actually covers all losses—with the way it’s written now, you only get covered if USDA gives you a destroy order. If they just quarantine you—and let’s just say it’s during the month of March or April—you’re on your own.

The program will start rolling out December 1 to counties that have significant greenhouse production (like Florida and Michigan), and in anticipation of it, USDA has been holding in-person and virtual listening sessions. Since this new crop insurance program is part of the Farm Bill, the hope is that some of the small improvements can be included in the new version that’s being worked on now.

For more information on the Controlled Environment Crop Insurance Program, including handbooks and FAQs, [GO HERE](#). **GT**

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