



# 2021 Congressional visits fay goes virtual

By Chelsea Obeidy, Aakriti Sharma

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Chelsea Obeidy, Julie McClure, Matthew Polizzotto, and Jack Karlin meet with Richard Parker and

*Chelsea Obeidy, Julie McClure, Matthew Polizzotto, and Jack Karlin meet with Richard Parker and Katie Lample from the office of Sen. Jeff Merkley (OR).*

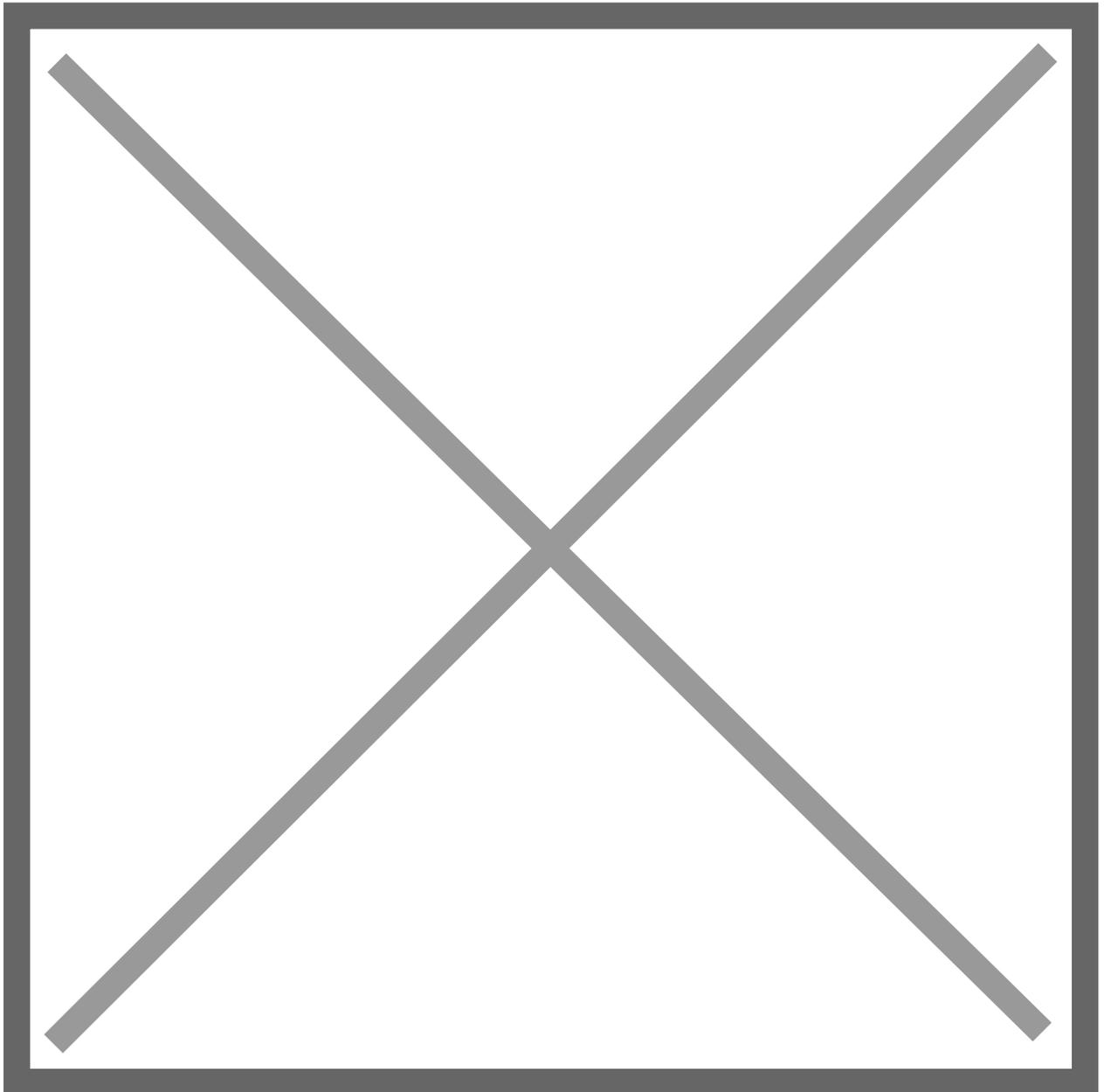
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As with many things over the past year, the annual ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Congressional Visits Day looked a little different. Instead of bringing Society members to Washington, DC, this year, ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members met with Congressional Offices *virtually* to advocate for #SupportAgResearch! On 9–11 March, 114 Society members, graduate and undergraduate students, Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs), and staff participated in the 2021 Virtual Congressional Visits Day (VCVD). Participants met with 131 of congressional offices advocating for increased funding for USDA research programs in fiscal year (FY) 2022.

About half of the 2021 VCVD participants are first-time advocates. In order to prepare everyone for their congressional meetings, all participants received extensive advocacy and communication training. Participants were divided into teams

representing 38 states. In addition to the group training, each team met individually, to practice their message and prepare to meet virtually with congressional offices. Participants also heard from guest speakers, which included a presentation from the new director of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Dr. Carrie Castille.

One again, VCVD teams advocated for increased funding for USDA research programs. Three USDA research programs were highlighted, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), a competitive equipment grants program, and a new research program called AgARDA (Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority). These programs provide research funds to address agriculture's most pressing challenges and would lead to needed transformative changes.



*Matthew Duncan, Neha Chatterjee, and Eric Ifft meet with Mary Ellen Richardson and Rep. Darin LaHood (IL).*

### **Hear From Participants: Team North Carolina**

Aakriti Sharma, Janel Ohletz, and Matt Kinkade from Team North Carolina were all in gear to meet with the congressional staffers representing Sen. Tom Tillis, Sen. Richard Burr, and Rep. David Price. The excitement grew when the team found out that Rep. Price himself would join the meeting in person. To have the congressman directly

interact with the team was a great surprise and reflected what a strong supporter and advocate he is for agriculture research. The team felt very touched to know that the lawmakers actually do listen to their constituents' voices and care about the problems the people face.

Being involved in the legislative process as a scientist-advocate for the very first time, Sharma felt that the nation's top officials are not only motivated by political interest, but were open to their constituents' interest as well. "We were amazed to hear them ask us what, legislatively, it would take to address our concerns," Sharma said. "That conversation right there made us feel that we could have an influence in policy-making! Personally, I felt this experience very worthwhile as I was able to experience the bigger picture of how science evolves. Advancement in science stems from research in the labs and fields, but only if it is properly nurtured through sufficient funding!"

## **Hear From Participants: Team Oregon**

Chelsea Obeidy, Matthew Polizzotto, and Jack Karlin met with Oregon congressional staffers representing Sen. Jeff Merkley, Sen. Ron Wyden, and Rep. Peter DeFazio. The three offices indicated support of funding USDA programs and showed an interest in carbon sequestration and soil health. The offices were particularly interested in the Soil and Water Lab's research at the University of Oregon. They hoped to develop a relationship with the lab and expressed a need for further communication and research pertaining to soil and water quality.

As a graduate student and first-time policy advocate, Obeidy was really excited by the interest in her post-fire soil and water quality research and looks forward to sharing the data as it develops. She felt that hearing the interest in soil health and climate

change was really valuable, and it created hope that change will be made towards a more sustainable future. She was also surprised by how rewarding participation in the advocacy process was and hopes to participate again.

The Oregon team was excited to meet with Sen. Wyden's office because he had proposed legislation that builds upon the 2018 farm bill, which focuses on improving soil health, crop resiliency, and addresses the climate crisis. Overall, Oregon's congressional offices were highly receptive to the funding requests of the VCVD participants and were greatly interested in the Society's work for addressing future challenges.

Although the congressional meetings were not face-to-face this year, many more participants were able to engage in VCVD. It was the largest group of Society members to have ever participated, likely due to virtual attendance! "It is so great to get to know other folks in the Societies, whether it is junior scientists that you can mentor or more experienced practitioners that can offer advice," said Cortland Kelly. "In this year of isolation, it was great to feel connected and meet new friendly faces." Teams were also able to join in on virtual happy hours to network and discuss their experiences, which provided an opportunity for further interaction.

We encourage all members to engage in the various advocacy opportunities that the Societies offer; you will be surprised by how much you enjoy the experience! Follow the hashtag #SupportAgResearch on social media to check out our participants in action, and view photos from the 2021 VCVD here: <https://bit.ly/39ZZWeA>.

Congressional Visits Day is no small task to coordinate, virtually or in person. We want to thank the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Science Policy Manager, Julie McClure, for all her

time and hard work ensuring another fruitful CVD!

## **Advocacy Award Recipients**

ASA, CSSA, and SSSA provides 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 is awarded to non-student members.

### **Future Leaders in Science Award**

Aaron Anderson, University of Maryland

Mara Cloutier, Pennsylvania State University

Dani Gelardi, University of California–Davis

Taqdeer Gill, Tennessee State University

Juan Gonzalez, University of Florida

Kayla Griffith, University of Missouri

Steven Haring, University of California–Davis

Nathan Hein, Kansas State University

Deepak Joshi, South Dakota State University

Anna Jurusik, University of California–Merced

Geoffrey Koch, University of California–Davis

Molly McIlquham, Washington State University

Lauren Roswall, University of Maryland

Arshdeep Singh, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Hardeep Singh, Oklahoma State University

Tina Sullivan, Utah State University

Hallie Wright, University of Georgia

### **Excellence in Advocacy Award**

Edgard Jauregui, Heliae Development LLC

Jeanette Norton, Utah State University

Kathleen Smits, University of Texas–Arlington

Yu Yang, University of Nevada–Reno

Michael Young, University of Texas–Austin

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