In March, ASA, CSSA, and SSSA senior and student members came to Washington, DC to meet with their members of Congress and advocate for federal food, agriculture, and natural resources research. The annual Congressional Visits Day is an important opportunity to support publicly funded research. The event continues to grow in size and enthusiasm, and this year was no exception. The 2017 Congressional Visits Day was our largest to date, with 70 participants, including 30 students and 15 Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs).

Congressional Visits Day focuses on the need for increased funding for USDA research programs, specifically the NIFA competitive grants program, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). While the Science Policy Office advocates for increased agriculture and natural resources research across numerous federal agencies including programs within USDA, Congressional Visits Day focuses on the long-term goal of fully funding AFRI. (The 2008 farm bill authorized $700 million for AFRI). Our efforts are paying off as AFRI has grown by more than 50% since 2009.

The timing of the 2017 Congressional Visits Day was particularly important. Not only were there newly elected members of Congress to meet with, they were also working on appropriations for two fiscal years, FY 2017 and FY 2018. Normally in March, Congress has the upcoming FY, in this case FY 2018, but yet to complete the FY 2017 appropriation. This was a great opportunity to protect the FY 2017 and make the case for continued investment in FY 2018.

Advocacy Training

These budget details were covered in an advocacy training session the day before the congressional meetings. Participants appreciated the training to help make their meetings more effective. “I have a better understanding of the federal budget process and how important it is for us as constituents to engage with our congressional representatives, find out how their proposed legislation may affect us, and ask for support in specific ways,” said Jenn Yang, Penn State University graduate student.

Participants also learned the best strategies for communicating with congressional audiences. “It’s important to talk about research in terms of outcomes and solutions when speaking with members of Congress and their staff. “I learned the number one thing policymakers are interested in is how their decisions will help their constituents,” said Colorado State University graduate student, Steven Rosenzweig.

“It was empowering to know that my congressional delegation truly values input from their local constituents.”

Kirsten Workman, CCA and University of Vermont Extension educator