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Move forward on immigration

I'd be willing to bet most folks in our industry don't have an elaborate tie collection. I myself own three.

They rarely come out except for the occasional wedding or funeral, but this past May, I packed all of them up and headed to our nation's capital to do some politicking on behalf of our members. I am a bit of a fish out of water in a place like Washington, D.C., so thankfully I was in good company with Jeff Stone (OAN executive director), Steve Shropshire (OAN contract legal counsel), and Leigh Geschwill (F&B Farms and Nursery, another grower member).

We set out with a clear plan and loaded schedule to see our entire Oregon delegation — five U.S. representatives and two U.S. senators — along with several folks from a half dozen government agencies. We had each been on a similar mission in the past, as this is an annual gig the association does as a service to the membership.

Now, if I had to do this routine daily I would surely go crazy, but catching a glimpse under the hood of the political engine that basically runs this country is a pretty fascinating experience. It can be a real eye opener. At times it is easy to become quite hopeful (believe it or not) and other times it's downright frustrating.

While we addressed a variety of issues ranging from transportation (the high costs of nationwide freight), to water (storage and quality needs), pest and disease control and funding, new laws surrounding worker protection standards and many other concerns. The "big one" was the same as it has been for years now: Immigration reform.

We've long been a leading voice to help assure a dependable and legal workforce that is critical to our industry (and many others). We have also pushed to establish a system to secure a future workforce that helps our country avoid the perpetual cycle where economic upswings are often stifled by growth-inhibiting labor shortages, especially out in the fields where we make our products.

The good news is that this time, it was different when it came to discussing immigration. Elected officials were actually saying the "I" word, at least in terms of agricultural labor force. It actually seemed to be on most people's radar. There were even bills being kicked around. It gave us a chance to have a more defined voice and not just that tired old groan, "please fix it."

The Ag Act and/or Goodlatte Bill was the talk of the town. Instead of picking it apart for some of the frivolous flaws it may contain, we were able to (in some cases to the amazement of our congress members) say: "We can work with this."

As it looked while we were there — and it continues to evolve for better and for worse — there were several steps in the right direction. Just one step in the right direction would be a miracle given how long the issue has been held hostage and kicked around like a political football. There are dire needs out there for more workers so our industry can grow to meet its demand.

Unfortunately, while a clearer message was more powerful, it was also easier to disagree with. There are well-intended people everywhere holding out for the "perfect" policy at the expense of the "OK" ones. These folks desire to pass a bill that gives them every single thing they want and concedes nothing to those who oppose reform. But how long can we suffer shortage before we have an industry that is irrelevant — too expensive, too much of the same non-laborious crops, and so on? Please don't tell me (again) it'll be after the next election. The time to act is now.

So, put on your tie or leave it at home, but let's get up and get moving forward on this. That way, we can all move forward knowing when there is opportunity we will be able to build teams to take advantage of it. ☺



Josh Zielinski
OAN PRESIDENT