

BY Sarina Katz



DJ GLISSON, II

MAKING ALLIES AT *Advocacy Days*

120
participants

42
first-timers

260
Hill meetings

40
states represented

Now in its sixth year, the Land Trust Alliance's Advocacy Days celebrates its ongoing success bringing land conservation leaders to Washington, D.C., to meet with policymakers under the new administration. On May 1, 120 ambassadors from the land trust community arrived in Washington to advocate for the programs and issues that are vital to our conservation efforts.

On top of the priority list this year are both the 2018 Farm Bill and full and permanent funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). In a midday briefing Senator Pat Roberts (R-KS), chair of the Senate Agriculture

Committee, spoke about the upcoming Farm Bill and announced he would do everything he could to increase funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. Tax reform was also a hot topic—proposed policies may threaten incentives for charitable giving, particularly in the form of a conservation easement or land donation.

A Far-Traveling First-Timer

So what's it like to arrive on Capitol Hill, briefings and talking points in hand, gearing up to meet with elected officials? "It's exciting to be here," says Austin Quinn-Davidson, a first-timer to the Hill who is the legal affairs and land transactions director at the accredited Great Land Trust (GLT) in Alaska. She traveled more than 4,000 miles for this year's Advocacy Days, her first visit to the capital since her internship

Ane Deister, executive director of the California Council of Land Trusts, says advocacy is “part science, part art and part magic.”

in the city as an undergraduate student. An attorney by trade, Austin has a background in legislation and easement negotiation, but this was her first experience lobbying on behalf of her land trust. Toting jars of smoked salmon and pictures of Great Land Trust’s beautiful properties, she was ready.

With only one representative and two senators, Austin was able to meet with all three members of the Alaskan delegation during her visit. Her biggest goal during these meetings was to simply tell GLT’s story and build the foundation of a productive relationship. She says, “Land trusts in Alaska do amazing work, but our congressional delegation isn’t always familiar with the projects we do, so it’s exciting to share some of our successes with them.” With the new administration proposing changes that could affect all land trusts, Austin knew it was an important time to come to D.C. Despite facing an unknown future, she felt a sense of community in her state’s offices. “Everyone is interested in learning more about what’s going on in their backyard,” she noted.



Austin Quinn-Davidson, legal affairs and land transactions director with Great Land Trust, shows U.S. Rep Don Young images of GLT’s properties.

One of the projects Austin talked about is the recent acquisition of oceanfront property on Kodiak Island. After nearly two decades of effort by the local community, a partnership between a Native corporation, Leisnoi, Inc., GLT and the local borough government resulted in the permanent protection of 1,028 acres of culturally significant and biodiverse land.

Austin retold this story, and many others like it, during her meetings on the Hill. She stressed the importance of finding a balance between development and conservation, a message Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and her staff found particularly important. “As Alaskans we all like to get outside by going hunting, fishing or hiking, so we look for creative market solutions to help us conserve more land and, where possible, generate income for landowners like Native corporations,” says Austin.

At the end of her stay in Washington, Austin was hopeful for the future. Her takeaway message? “I’m looking forward to continuing the conversation and interested to see how our congressional delegation and Great Land Trust can work together to support the work of land trusts across the country.”

A Community Conduit

No two people experience Advocacy Days the same way, as is the case with first-timer Austin and veteran advocate Ane Deister. Although fairly new to the California Council of Land Trusts (CCLT) as its executive director, Ane has been lobbying on Capitol Hill for over 20 years in defense of water and natural resources. For her, advocacy is “part science, part art and part magic.”

As the most populous state in the country, Ane and her fellow ambassadors held 13 meetings this year; there was a lot of ground to cover, and at times the group split up to tackle two meetings simultaneously. “There’s nothing more compelling and convincing than meeting with representatives, both who share your views and positions, and those who may feel differently. The value of the dialogue is priceless,” she says.

With such a broad spectrum of offices to visit, Ane’s process was to be authentic and keep things simple—she approached each meeting with a fresh perspective. Her agenda items matched those of the Alliance: Farm Bill provisions, LWCF funding and tax reform. “Tailoring your message in a way so that a particular member of Congress can hear

it from his or her perspective is key.” While visiting Senator Dianne Feinstein’s (D-CA) office, for example, the Farm Bill was heavily discussed by all advocates in attendance. As the largest agricultural state in the country, the bill’s funds are vitally important to California’s land trusts, and the power of their stories were impressed upon the senator’s staff.



Ane Deister (red scarf), Linus Eukel, executive director of the John Muir Land Trust and board chair of CCLT (to her right) and the Alliance’s Sarina Katz discuss tax reform with Rep Cook’s staffer, Mathew Groves.

Throughout her busy schedule, Ane found the members “incredibly generous and gracious—they know what it takes to come here and what a grind this process is. They love seeing people from home.” As the leader of a membership organization, she’ll take back to California what she heard and experienced on the Hill and provide briefs for her member land trusts. “That’s part of my responsibility, being a community conduit for the public at large.”

Secretary Zinke

Advocacy Days 2017 featured a private reception with newly inducted Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke. He spoke about the importance of strategic public-private partnerships and his hopes for restructuring the management of our public lands. “Be an optimist,” he told the room. “Be a leader.” Stating “I believe in science,” Secretary Zinke remarked how there’s a need for science to guide land management. You can view his entire speech at www.lta.org/blog/us-interior-secretary-speaks-advocacy-days.

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