

## From Oregon to Washington D.C.: Michelle Borges attends the 2024 North American Agricultural Journalist Annual Meeting

“Did you grow up on a farm?” was the most frequently asked question when Michelle Borges attended the 2024 North American Agricultural Journalist (NAAJ) Annual Meeting in Washington D.C. in April. The NAAJ annual meeting was a three-day conference in the nation’s capital that highlighted key topics such as regulations and policies, AI and emerging technology, and sustainability. Agricultural journalists from across the nation attended this event to bring valuable information back to their publications about the trending topics in the agriculture industry.

NAAJ is a professional group of agricultural editors and writers with members from across the country and Canada. This group was formed in 1952, formerly called the Newspaper Farm Editors of America. Each member is dedicated to journalism and passionate about the agricultural industry through their storytelling efforts for agriculture awareness and innovation.

Growing up in an agricultural community, Borges was heavily influenced at a young age to be an advocate for the industry. Her experiences in 4-H and FFA led her to pursue a passion for agricultural communications in her undergraduate and graduate academic career. As a first-year master’s student at Oregon State University, she is learning the foundational skills of agriculture communications through research methods and theories, print and media design, and networking with industry partners.

The NAAJ conference provided Borges the insight of a potential career path in journalism. The conference served as a chance to network with head leadership from organizations such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In addition, she had the chance to hear Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack share his thoughts about current U.S. agriculture successes and challenges.

The conference consisted of various learning opportunities through tours and roundtable discussions. The roundtable discussions allowed open conversation about trending topics in agriculture and the chance for attendees to ask questions. Through a behind-the-scenes tour of the agricultural exhibits at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Borges was amazed by the archives that showcase the rich history of American agriculture. The tour showed the expansive amount of history waiting to be told by agriculture journalists and communicators.

The key topics of this conference were held through panel discussions held at the Cosmos Club; a private social club located in the heart of Washington D.C. During the regulation and policy discussion, climate-smart agriculture was the focus for advancements of innovation and

technology. The U.S. has the safest food supply in the world due to technological advancements. Precision agriculture shows several benefits such as increased profits, improvement of workplace safety, and reduced environmental impacts.

Although there are several improvements to agriculture, the industry faces many challenges. Precision agriculture creates a challenge of high costs, limited access to technology, limited education on how to use new technology, and limited access to broadband data transmission and data ownership. In addition, contamination in soil and food products is a popular topic in the world of food regulations. All of these topics were discussed during the AI and emerging technology roundtable discussion with panelists Walt Duflock, Western Growers Senior Vice President of Innovation, Richard Hung, Assistant Director at U.S. Government Accountability Office, and Peter Liebhold, former Smithsonian Historian.

The conversations throughout this conference created meaningful dialogue to showcase the improvements to the agriculture industry and ways to solve the challenges. To combat the obstacles of the food and fiber industry will require a team of farmers, ranchers, scientists, policymakers, and many more.

“The experiences from this conference helped me expand my skillset to accomplish my goals and aspirations in graduate school and my future career. I plan to use the skills and information I learned to help create more awareness about the successes and challenges of U.S. agriculture,” Borges said.

Executive Secretary-Treasurer, Jacqui Fatka explained how journalists are the storytellers to promote agriculture literacy to help fix the many misconceptions the industry faces. Journalists serve as the liaison between consumers and producers.

Borges is excited to be a student member of the NAAJ Association. She plans to continue to learn from the expert agricultural editors, writers, and communicators within this field. Borges believes a strong network in the agriculture community will help her in the current and future years.

Students interested in learning about agriculture journalism can become a student member of NAAJ. With this membership, students can network with fellow agriculture editors and writers, access bi-monthly newsletters, and have opportunities to enter into the annual writing contest. To learn more about NAAJ, visit <https://www.naaj.net/>.