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# SOWING SEEDS OF LEADERSHIP:



New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Program Updates

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**Class 17 -Washington, D.C.  
February 2026**



Our mission is to develop knowledgeable, multicultural leaders for New Mexico's agricultural, food, and natural resource industries.

## **LEADERSHIP REFLECTION: WASHINGTON, DC TRIP – LEARNING THE POWER OF REPRESENTATION, RELATIONSHIPS AND PERSPECTIVE BY YESENIA PALMA**

My goal for traveling to Washington, D.C., with NMALP Cohort 17 was to deepen my understanding of how national policy, particularly in agriculture, is made and to observe leadership in practice. At the beginning of the trip, I hoped to gain a clearer understanding of how national policy is made (agriculture, trade, and representation) and to develop as a leader working within systems. I was curious to learn more about how organizations and congressional office's function: how relationships are established, how messages are communicated, and how advocacy moves from conversations to action. As someone who works with agricultural communities, youth development, and educational organizations in New Mexico, I was also very interested in seeing how local voices and lived experiences translate into national decision-making.

Early in the trip, it became clear that leadership in Washington, D.C., relies more on building relationships and credibility than on authority and titles. This was evident during our visit with the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF). The on-the-spot interview exercise underscored the need to communicate key messages quickly and confidently to influential individuals when time or attention is limited. This is no small task! Effective agricultural support requires deep subject-matter expertise and powerful communication skills that hold up under intense pressure. The AFBF interview session was a reminder to practice preparation, message discipline, and self-awareness as a leader and representative of our communities.

Our meetings with congressional staff further emphasized relational leadership. The conversation with Chance from Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury's office was constructive, not only for its glimpse into the behind-the-scenes work of congressional offices but also for what they need and expect from constituents and organizations: clear information, timely communication, follow-through and solutions. Hearing that raw data, lived experiences and "what's happening on the ground" from New Mexico matter was empowering. Our meeting with Emily Hartshorn from Congressman Gabe Vasquez's office further reinforced that leadership and advocacy do not end once a bill is signed or a law is passed. Staying engaged, informed and collaborative is essential, even without an elected position.

My most significant learning moment during the trip came when we visited the Delegation of the European Union to the United States. We were fortunate to meet with Silke Borger and learn about international trade from a global perspective. That experience opened my eyes to how interconnected our agricultural and economic systems are. What happens at the international or federal level matters profoundly for producers and communities back home. It challenged me to think not only about domestic policy but also about diplomacy, cultural awareness, and long-



term relationship-building as essential leadership skills.

The meetings with organizations such as the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association and the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) showed me how leadership emerges through united advocacy and collective action. While learning about these organizations was helpful and valuable, I was especially humbled by the NASDA team. Their collaborative work to provide services demonstrated that effective leadership occurs through quiet actions, such as coordinating tasks and building trust among team members.

In addition to professional meetings and experiences, some of the most meaningful reflections came from simply experiencing D.C. itself. Walking through the Washington Monument, the World War II Memorial, and the Reflecting Pool was a powerful moment for me, especially during the Night Tour of D.C. The nighttime lighting created a moment to reflect on service and sacrifice, as well as responsibility and legacy. It was a reminder that leadership and the decisions leaders make carry weight, and that our freedoms and opportunities are available today because others came before us and led with courage and conviction.



# WASHINGTON, D.C.: A CITY AS CONFUSING AS ITS STREET LAYOUT

BY ANTHONY COLIN

Washington, D.C., is a difficult city to think about clearly and coherently. At times, it feels as though the city is actively resisting coherent understanding. Going into our trip, I had hoped my experiences would coalesce into a mental shorthand about what D.C. is and how it works. As someone with two brief trips to D.C., a job involving daily policy work, and a habit of occasionally indulging in the illness of consuming political infotainment, I genuinely thought understanding D.C. would be a straightforward process of updating prior assumptions with new information. While the experiences of this trip certainly pulled back portions of the curtain, every glimpse of the stage felt like it was from a completely different play. So, rather than discussing any pithy impressions of the city itself, I will instead ramble about how the trip answered and evolved my thinking about a few discrete questions.

One of my strongest curiosities going into our trip was also the most difficult to address diplomatically with our hosts. I wanted to understand whether private interests or citizen groups had greater sway over the policymaking process. There is so much noise about this question – “corporate lobbying,” “making your voice heard,” etc. – that it becomes impossible to discern who has the strongest

influence on the final text of a congressional bill. Unfortunately, though, insofar as I was able to respectfully sneak up on the question, the answer that emerged during visits was, “that’s not a very useful question.” In fact, from the very first meeting of the trip, I began to learn things that chipped away at the premise of my curiosity. For example, during that first meeting with the American Farm Bureau Federation, I learned that roughly three-quarters of congressional staffers told a pollster that “personal relationships are the most effective way to reach lawmakers.” Presentations that day

also underscored how rare it is for lawmakers to have direct access to the accounts and advice of everyday farmers and ranchers. From the mouth of a lobbyist, these facts felt like fairly strong evidence in the “private interests have more sway” camp. That was until later in the week, when our group met

with staffers working for two of New Mexico’s congresspeople. In those meetings, it became obvious that those “personal relationships” could be with literally anyone, from lobbyists to state officials to community organizers to your neighbor Doug. There would be nothing stopping

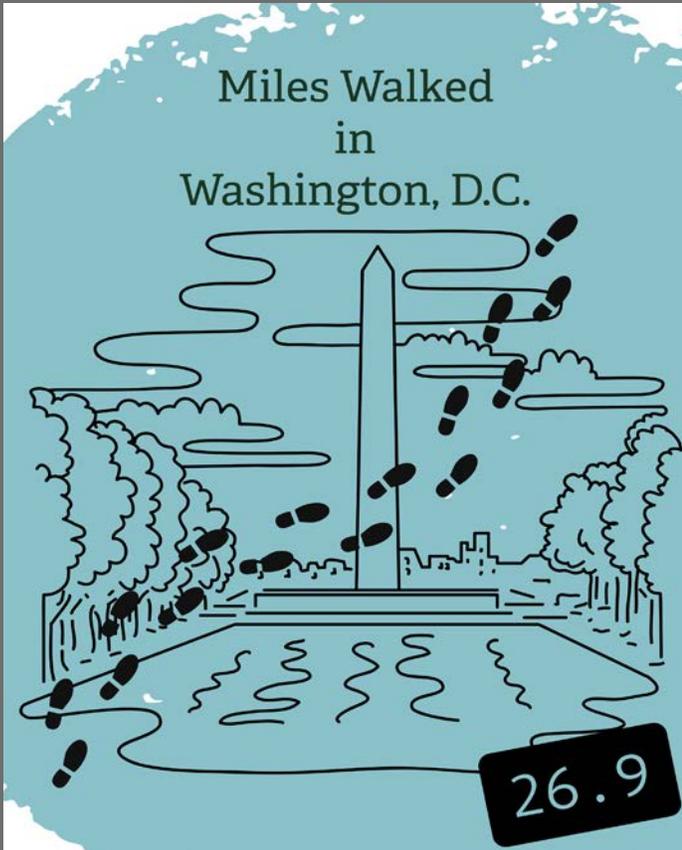


private money from lobbying for public benefits, or Doug from telling Senator So-and-So to deregulate XYZ Corporation. Our trip simply refused to abide a clean division of “moneyed” and “genuine” influence.

Having stalled on that line of questioning, I asked whether the policymaking process is well equipped to handle the fast-moving, highly interrelated issues of our modern world. Here, our trip’s teachings were more accepting of the premise of my question. The first insight our trip brought to bear on this question was the simple fact that congressional staffers are insanely busy. We spoke with only two, but they merely confirmed what other hosts had told us; staffers’ days are scheduled in minutes, and the signals of their job come with noise. When you combine this time limitation with the fact that most staffers have a wide breadth of policy-domain responsibilities (i.e., they might cover food and agriculture, science and technology, health policy, etc.), it becomes clear that there is very little room to dig into the complexity and tertiary causes of a given issue. Take, for example, an issue that came up in casual conversation during the trip: the declining sales of alcohol in the United States. If we, as farmers, agree that this is a bad thing and that Congress must take measures to stimulate alcohol consumption, then the discussions of this trip would lead me to believe that simpler aspects of policy would be more likely considered than others. We, as farmers, may mention the levers we know, like microloans, small-grain price support programs, crop insurance, research programs, etc. Others in alcohol distribution may bring up issues of regulation, like state licensing schemes. In vogue topics like tariffs and imports would also be more likely to enter the conversation. However, no matter how much they functionally contributed to declining alcohol sales, complicated and tertiary topics like public transportation availability and urban planning might never have room to enter the discussion. Transportation lobbies would not be

attuned to “declining alcohol sales”; agricultural lobbies would have their own goals that could crowd out other lobbies; and Congress would have very little time to turn over far-flung policy rocks that lead to cumbersome levers like “urban planning”. And that’s for the slow-moving issue of year-over-year sales declines. When we consider the 105-mph policy fastballs that regularly graze our headlines, it becomes clearer to me why Congress has a reputation for taking pitches. Every individual involved could be making rational decisions and working their absolute hardest (every single person we met in D.C. fit this description) and yet still miss the issue’s full nuance and causation. From what I saw, there are simply structural blind spots.

Despite these admittedly cynical takeaways, our trip to D.C. was genuinely informative and a blast. This article barely scratched the surface of the trips and visits we were able to make. And yet, one could take ten trips like this and still not have the full picture of D.C.’s goings-on. The mind struggles to comprehend how much must happen there every single day. Nonetheless, I am grateful for the glimpses I got.



Know a rising leader with a passion for New Mexico agriculture? The New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Program is recruiting emerging professionals ready to grow their skills, expand their influence, and lead with purpose. This is more than a program—it's a launchpad for the next generation of agricultural leaders.



## FROM TRIBAL LANDS TO THE NATION'S CAPITAL BY CHERYLIN ATCITTY

My husband likes to say, "Ask not what your tribe can do for you, but what you can do for your tribe." It is a twist on John F. Kennedy's quote, but it resonates with me because I grew up on the Navajo Reservation. I kept that thought in mind as I flew across the country to Washington, D.C. I had been to Washington, D.C., but it had been part of a tribally focused agenda. This time I would be there to learn about agricultural policy and industry and to observe leadership in action. Washington, D.C., is a sight to behold, with the grandeur of its buildings and the many interests of the country on display at every turn. I took the time to analyze the art and was struck by a "Protect Oak Flat – Apache Stronghold" poster. I knew this opportunity to speak on tribal agricultural issues might not come again, and I had to make the most of my time in each meeting.

With that thought in mind, I paid close attention to each presenter and focused on the pressing issues and how tribal agriculture fits. Each meeting offered a different perspective, and I learned how policy plays a role. I learned how interconnected agriculture is, from local producers and tribal ranchers to national policy discussions and international partnerships. What stood out to me most was not just what was discussed, but the responsibility that comes with being present in those rooms. If tribal agriculture is not represented, it risks being overlooked, not because it lacks value, but because it is absent from the conversation.

During our visit, we met with a wide range of organizations and leaders, including the American Farm Bureau Federation; staff from Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury and Con-

gressman Gabe Vasquez; the Delegation of the European Union to the United States; the National Cattlemen's Beef Association; and the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture. We also attended the Farm Credit marketplace reception and visited Mount Vernon, home of George Washington.

Being in Washington, DC, was not business as usual. Our visit occurred during a government shutdown, and the atmosphere reflected that uncertainty. Many federal offices were closed, protests and counter-protests were underway, and tensions were noticeably high. There was a visible increase in military and law enforcement presence throughout the city. Experiencing these conditions firsthand underscored the seriousness of the moment and reinforced the importance of steady leadership during times of uncertainty.

Surprisingly, one of my favorite parts of the trip was how few people were in Washington, DC, due to the government shutdown. The quieter streets made the city feel more personal and reflective, giving space to slow down, observe, and truly ponder the experience and responsibility of being there.

This trip helped clarify my role as a leader not only in agriculture but also in tribal communities. Leadership is not simple and is rarely comfortable. It requires courage to speak up, raise issues that may not be popular, and advocate for communities that are too often under-represented. Leadership



also means listening, learning, and finding ways to bridge worlds. It requires a holistic approach. It cannot be all about finance or policy; it is also about the producer and the consumer. It is about understanding the process from soil to supper.

Throughout this trip, I kept thinking of my dad. I wished I could call him and tell him that all the years he spent teaching me to work with livestock, manage the land, and take responsibility seriously had brought me to Washington, DC. That moment of squaring up with a 1,000-pound cow gave me the confidence to speak about agriculture not only as a policy topic but as a lived experience and a way of life. I was promoting the life he intended for me, one rooted in hard work, stewardship, and care for the animals and land.

As I reflect on this experience, I return home with a renewed sense of purpose. Washington, DC, did not change who I am, but it sharpened my understanding of why this work matters. Tribal agriculture belongs in national conversations. Our voices, experiences, and knowledge are essential to shaping resilient and sustainable food systems for the future.

Most importantly, this trip reaffirmed a guiding principle for me: leadership is about service. It is about asking what we do for our communities, our land, and the generations that follow, and about having the courage to ask.



## SEMINAR 5, WASHINGTON, D.C., NATIONAL POLITICAL PROCESS BY MICHAEL PURDY

Class 17 of the New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Program met for their fifth seminar in Washington, D.C., where the focus was on learning about our national political process and its effects on agriculture and the food industry. During this trip, the class had the opportunity to meet with staff members for several House members, leaders from national organizations and the agricultural industry, and several individuals who work hard every day to keep our government up and running, even when the government is shut down. Because the NMAL class was visiting Washington, D.C., during the final stretch of a 43-day government shutdown, expectations for the class were low regarding the activity we could witness and opportunities for networking. However, as the class would quickly come to discover, a government shutdown had little effect on the productivity of so many who work in our nation's capital.

After arriving in Washington, NMAL Class 17 reconnected over dinner and discussed the agenda for the coming week. The following day, the seminar began with a walking tour of the National Mall. For many class members, it was their first time seeing the grand architecture of the Capitol Building, Lincoln Memorial, and Washington Monument. After the long walk down the Mall, the class spent the rest of the day meeting with the American Farm Bureau, which explained its purpose of providing a unified voice for farmers and ranchers

while advocating for policies that benefit the agricultural industry and rural communities. AFB also graciously provided the class with media training to equip members with the tools to convey information to the public while maintaining professional poise during difficult lines of questioning.



The following day, the NMAL class spent the morning meeting with staff members for New Mexico House Representatives Melanie Stansbury and Gabriel Vasquez, where we had the chance to discuss some of their legislative priorities for New Mexico, ask questions, and analyze the complexity of their jobs. One aspect shared by both staff members we met with was their willingness to work with others across the aisle to benefit their constituents. The

next meeting of the day was with Silke Bogger from the Delegation of the European Union to the United States. Silke Bogger serves as the Agriculture Counselor for the EU Delegation and has been involved in many national trade and policy initiatives. Bogger went into great depth on the importance of trade relations between the US and EU, while highlighting many of the differences in agricultural production and consumer needs. It



was interesting to hear about how difficult it can be to balance the demands of politicians and their ever-evolving international trade policies with the constantly growing consumer demands for foreign products.

The next day, we began with a meeting at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association headquarters, where industry leaders summarized efforts to promote policies that benefit the cattle industry and beef production in the US. Next, we met with NASDA to discuss national coordination of efforts to provide effective policy for the agricultural industry in each state. On the last two days of the seminar, the class visited the historical home of President George Washington, Mount Vernon, where we reflected on the leadership characteristics of historical figures and today's leaders. The final and most meaningful trip of the seminar was to Arlington National Cemetery, where the NMAL class had the honor of taking part in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It was a somber and heavy experience to stand on the hill overlooking the vast acres of headstones marking the final resting place of so many veterans who gave their lives for their country. Being able to pay our respects to those who fought to protect the very institution we had been carefully studying all week felt like the perfect ending to the weeklong seminar.

After a week in our nation's capital, it was difficult to process the amount of information we had been exposed to, as well as the complexity and nuances of navigating the structure of our Federal Government. One aspect of the trip that stood out most to me was the dedication of so many government employees who continued working in Washington through the government shutdown. While the shutdown and its burdens were discussed in our meetings throughout the week, the prevailing understanding among most of the workforce was "there is still work to be done." Witnessing the level of commitment shared by so many of these leaders in D.C. inspired a new level of respect for our nation's political process, as well as for the many men and women who work for the benefit of our country.



# EXPLORING WASHINGTON, D.C. BY MARISSA DILES

Despite coinciding with a record-long government shutdown, our trip to Washington, D.C., was still six jam-packed days filled with political processes, media training, foreign trade discussions, and sightseeing. We had a full schedule of meetings with several agricultural agencies, including the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture. Additional meetings included agriculture portfolio staffers from Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury's and Congressman Gabe Vasquez's offices, as well as a visit with Silke Boger at the European Union. Our group also enjoyed the bonus of being in D.C. during the Farm Credit Fly-In.

My main goal during our time in Washington was to deepen my understanding of the complex political processes and learn more about how lobbyists influence federal policies and laws. Our time with American Farm Bureau, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and NASDA gave us an inside look at the world of lobbying and how they fight to protect the interests of agricultural producers throughout our country by meeting with congressional members and their staff to help persuade them to vote for or against certain bills.

My favorite meeting during the trip was our session at the American Farm Bureau Federation, where Johnna Miller led our media training. Johnna is the Senior Director of Media and Advocacy Training at American Farm Bureau. She coached us to be better agricultural advocates by having us practice telling our agricultural stories authentically, so consumers, legislators, and the public can better understand agricultural producers' ways of life and have less reason to oppose us. We also put her coaching into practice through mock interviews. Watching the video of my mock interview helped me see what I need to work on when speaking to inform and educate others. Being in D.C. during the Farm Credit Fly-In was a personal bonus for me, since I work for a Farm Credit association. The event allows Farm Credit associations to showcase their customers' products and operations to members of Congress and their staff, and it occurs only every two years. Attending the Fly-In allowed me to visit with some of my customers who were in attendance, network with others in the Farm Credit system, and learn about and taste a variety of agricultural products from across the country.

Of course, we could not take a trip to D.C. without partaking in some of the tourist activities. We kicked off our sightseeing with the Monuments by Moonlight tour. The tour bus picked us up at Union Station, allowing us to explore the station and admire the beautiful architecture before our tour. Once our tour started, we were lucky to have a full moon and a very entertaining tour guide. The monuments lit up at night were breathtaking, and the tour allowed us to stop and



explore several of them, including the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, Iwo Jima, and the Capitol Building. Our next tourist experience was exploring the great history of our first U.S. President, George Washington, by spending a day at his estate in Mount Vernon. The house was under restoration during our visit, so we were limited to what we could see inside, but the entire estate offered incredible views and rich history, including President George Washington's gravesite. On our last day of the trip, we had the humbling experience of visiting Arlington National Cemetery and laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

This trip also allowed us to get to know our classmates better because we had so much time together. This was my favorite part of the trip. While we have been participating in this program for nearly a year now, this trip was the most in-person time we have had together, and it was nice to spend time visiting, laughing, and exploring between meetings and appointments. On the last night of the trip, Yesenia, Anthony, and I used our free time to go back into the city, exploring around the White House and searching for a unique place for dinner that we wouldn't be able to find back in New Mexico. After a while, we settled on a delicious Spanish restaurant and spent the evening talking about our favorite parts of the trip as well as the program so far.

To summarize our time in Washington, I'll end with a quote from John F. Kennedy, "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other." Throughout our meetings and experiences, this trip emphasized the importance of leadership and inspired me to keep learning to strengthen my leadership and advocacy skills.



# WASHINGTON, D.C. AGRICULTURAL POLICY & ADVOCACY TRIP BY AARON ROMERO

Our recent trip to Washington, D.C., was designed with clear learning objectives focused on Agricultural Policy and Advocacy. The experience provided valuable insights into policy formation, political dynamics, and the role of advocacy in shaping agricultural policy in the United States. At the end of the trip, I can confidently say that I improved my understanding of the process of agricultural policy formation in the U.S. Our group examined the dynamics of power and politics in Washington, D.C. It was interesting to explore the history and evolution of our democracy, and I now have a greater respect for its complexity and how interconnected systems operate.

During the trip, we discussed policymaking processes firsthand and learned how lobbyists, think tanks, and constituents influence government decisions. We were given insight into the interconnected systems of democracy, particularly in relation to agricultural policy. A major focus of the trip for me was to examine leadership and teamwork in political contexts and to learn strategies for coalition-building and collaboration with diverse groups. I gained confidence and strengthened my credibility, learning that I could also be a trusted voice in agriculture. The trip resulted in significant professional growth for me. I gained a deeper appreciation for how agricultural policy intersects with federal programs and further developed practical skills to advocate for farming and rural communities. This experience will serve as a foundation for continued engagement in agricultural policy and leadership.

One of my favorite visits of the trip was with the American Farm Bureau, where we discussed Washington and other Western issues. We were given legislative and policy highlights and talked about current Senate processes and other current events. This was a busy time of year, and we discussed aspects of the Big Beautiful Bill and how it was passed through the reconciliation process, which requires only 51 votes, compared with standard bills, which require 60 votes to pass. It was interesting to discuss the many agencies Farm Bureau works closely with, including the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service, Fish & Wildlife, and USDA, just to name a few. A popular topic has been the Mexican gray wolf and how its recovery is progressing better in the U.S. than in Mexico. As an employee within the Farm Credit System, it was good to talk about current USDA initiatives, such as plans to reopen vacant allotments as a strategy to grow the country's cattle herd. Disaster relief programs for floods and wildfires were also a hot topic, and we talked about the role the Department of the Interior plays in its firefighting capabilities. In addition to these great discussions, the agency provided our group with hands-on training in both advocacy and media. We left with a core message that farmers have a powerful story to tell. By combining advocacy with effective media engagement, we can build credibility, influence policy, and ensure our voices are heard in Washington and beyond.



# A WORD FROM COLLEGE DRIVE

## BY TINA WILSON

In November, Class 17 and I traveled to Washington, D.C., despite the government shutdown. We met with several congressional staff members who were still working in their offices. As we walked around the congressional office buildings, I noticed people working even though they weren't being paid. A highlight of the trip was visiting with Silke Boger, Counsellor for Agriculture at the European Union Delegation to the United States. I met Silke at the American Bureau convention last year. During our visit, she compared agriculture in the United States and the European Union (EU). For example, 60% of beef in the EU is a byproduct of dairy. Trade in the EU is a single market, meaning that once goods enter the EU, they can be sold anywhere. This means that if France imports pecans, those pecans can be sold in other EU countries without any red tape. I found it interesting that hobby farming is popular in the EU.

The trip concluded with a visit to Arlington National Cemetery, where four members of class 17 presented a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. For me, it always fills me with a sense of pride and patriotism for our great country.

Do you know a rising young professional ready to lead the future of New Mexico agriculture? The New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Program is recruiting passionate individuals eager to grow their leadership skills, expand their networks, and gain a deeper understanding of the issues shaping agriculture and rural communities. This immersive program brings together emerging leaders for hands-on learning, statewide and national experiences, and lifelong connections that make a real impact. If you—or someone you know—has the drive to lead, this opportunity could be transformational. We are actively recruiting for class 18, which will begin in June. Applications are due on April 15th and can be found at <https://aces-nmal.nmsu.edu/application.html>.



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