Democracy

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, the definition of "democracy" is government by the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives. Most Americans learn about our government during a civics class in high school. Most of us recognize that we have a voice in electing our governmental representatives, but many of us do not take that next step of helping those elected officials better understand the benefits or consequences of decisions that are made.

During the last month I have had the privilege of seeing how the people are represented in other ways when decisions are made in the government. As the 2018 ASHS Annual Conference ended in Washington DC, the Senate and the House of Representatives each approved their own version of the Farm Bill. Since that time, discussions have been ongoing in congressional committees to find compromises between the two versions so that a single version of the Farm Bill can be approved. During the ASHS conference, Thomas Björkman, ASHS Member and chair of the National Issues Committee, and Jonathan Moore, ASHS legislative consultant, provided opportunities for ASHS members to learn how to meet with their congressional representatives. They also helped a few ASHS members meet with home state congressional representatives and staff. In late August, ASHS was asked to join several other professional societies representing facets of Agriculture in signing a letter of support for the Senate-based bill, as this bill provided more benefits for food and agricultural research than the House bill. The ASHS Board of Directors unanimously approved signing this letter of support.

Since that time, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue announced a plan to move the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) out of Washington, DC, by the end of 2019. Secretary Perdue cited the following reasons for the move: 1) Improve USDA’s ability to attract and retain highly qualified staff with training and interests in agriculture. The concern is that it has been difficult to recruit employees to Washington, DC, particularly due to the high cost of living and long commutes in that area; 2) Place these USDA resources closer to many of the stakeholders; and 3) Benefit the American taxpayers by creating a significant savings on employment costs and rent.

This decision has caused much concern in Washington and across the US as people try to understand the benefits and disadvantages of this change in structure. Jonathan Moore has been keeping abreast of the discussions and has been an effective representative of ASHS in helping to voice concerns about the move during a meeting with USDA Deputy Ag Secretary Steve Censky on September 6th.

During the September 6th meeting, a letter signed by several research professional societies (including ASHS) expressing concern over the move was delivered to Deputy Ag Secretary Censky, and members of the research community were present to ask questions and express concerns about the decision to relocate ERS and NIFA and the evidence that was used to make this decision.

The concerns about this relocation include the costs of moving those currently employed by USDA in Washington to other locations across the US and whether or not those affected even
want to move to other locations. Other concerns have been expressed in regard to the ability of NIFA, in particular, to interact with appropriate agencies in Washington to assure that needed conversations occur to maintain as much research funding as possible into the future. There are also concerns because many land-grant officials question the move of ERS and NIFA out of Washington, but the universities do not want to be eliminated as possible locations for the agencies by speaking up if the plan moves forward.

So what’s the bottom line here? This is a time of particularly active and controversial initiatives that might affect food and agriculture. Decisions are made by legislators and other governmental representatives daily. We as individuals have a vote for those who we want to represent us in making those decisions. We also, as individuals, have an opportunity to help educate those who represent us about the impacts (positive or negative) of the decisions they make. ASHS also helps educate those representatives through a collective voice that can be combined with a collective voice from other similar societies on decisions that will affect our members. Our legislative consultant and National Issues Committee keep an eye on decisions that are being made in Washington and work with the Board of Directors when they believe a collective voice is needed to make an impact.