Timing is everything when grabbing the attention of Congress

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Several years ago the American Sugarbeet Growers Association embarked on a coordinated effort to have sugarbeet growers lobby Congress in support of the sugar program. Called a “fly-in”, it is a common tactic used by interest groups of all stripes, and it’s done for a reason: to grab Congress’ attention. As any Member of Congress will tell you, their days are usually scheduled in 15-minute increments so it’s awfully difficult to get their undivided attention on a specific issue. The fly-ins are therefore scheduled to canvass Capitol Hill, to create a “buzz” about them being there, and to cut through the clutter of these busy schedules. In recent years, the sugarbeet growers have also joined forces with their brethren in the sugar cane industry and jointly lobbied Congress. That way, the Members of Congress get a deeper understanding of the beet-cane coalition.

This year, the timing of the fly-in was particularly useful. The House and Senate are now embarking on writing the federal budget for the 2015-16 fiscal year and will soon be writing the appropriations bills that follow. In both these instances, amendments to kill or reform the sugar program are possible, if not likely. That’s because the opponents of sugar policy -- the large industrial users of sugar like Hersheys, Mars, Kraft, etc., -- are relentlessly on the attack. Even though Congress just finished writing the Farm Bill last year, our opponents have already asked their friends on Capitol Hill to introduce bills to dismantle the sugar program. That, despite the fact they were defeated in all five votes taken in the House and Senate during that process. These huge, deep-pocketed multinational food companies are constantly seeking to undermine sugar policy even though they are also our valued customers.

So it’s with that backdrop that many sugarbeet growers from the Red River Valley traveled to Washington, DC, made those congressional visits, and also attended several political fundraisers. All told, the growers got our message across to over 260 offices. And they did not just lobby Congress’ rank and file, they reached out to the leadership. The picture below shows several Crystal board members and House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway (R-TX) and House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA). Climbing the congressional ladder to this level can pay off at critical legislative moments.

For those who don’t pay attention to politics, or care for it that much, it’s certainly understandable to wonder why American Crystal spends so much time and attention on what goes on in Washington, DC. It would be nice if we could just go about our business. But that’s not the way sugar has ever been; it’s always been intertwined in government in the United States and around the world. World sugar trade remains one of the most distorted markets, period. Without good policies in place we’d be swamped by dumped, subsidized foreign sugar. We could ignore that, but we’d ignore it at our peril. Rather, we chose to be good at it, and thank goodness we have some growers willing to wear out some shoe leather getting that across to Congress.