



Senator Murray an Unlikely Advocate for Agriculture

by Jon Dockter, NAFA

For someone who never planned to enter politics, Senator Murray has certainly made her mark on public policy, particularly in agriculture.

When state budget cuts targeted a local preschool program favored by Patty Murray in the 1980's, a state politician told her she "couldn't make a difference" when she went to advocate for it. Wrong answer! Patty promptly responded by organizing a grassroots coalition of 13,000 parents that fought successfully to save the program.

But Senator Murray didn't stop there. She went on to serve on the Shoreline School Board, and in 1988 was elected to the Washington State Senate. In 1992, Murray ran for the United States Senate and beat a 10-year veteran of the U.S. House of Representatives.

To hear Senator Murray explain it, "What really got me into public service was the thought that if you see something going on that you don't like, you can either keep yelling at the TV, or you can actually go do something about it. When those legislators told me that there was nothing I could do to save that preschool program I picked up the phone and called other parents. We wrote letters, held rallies, and after that work, the legislature kept the funding for our preschool program in the budget. That experience put me on a path to the United States Senate."

Although she has spent most of her life in urban rather than rural areas, Senator Murray has a keen understanding of production agriculture. Agriculture is Washington's largest economic sector, as well as its largest employer. Washington

grows everything from wheat to wine grapes and throughout Senator Murray's career, she has worked with growers and processors from across Washington State to make sure they had a voice in the decisions that affect their lives back in Washington, D.C. Whether opening markets or expanding research for apple or potato growers, Senator Murray has always learned from those who were doing the work on the ground.

"Agriculture is a part of my family history," said Senator Murray. "In the early 1900s, my grandfather moved his family to the Tri-Cities to take a job with Welch's processing plant in Kennewick. I remember many trips to Central Washington at harvest time to visit my grandmother. To this day, the smell of fresh-picked fruit reminds me of my childhood. But, to my dad, it meant much more. It was how his family put food on the table and paid the mortgage. I grew up understanding how important family-run farms and businesses are to Washington State's economy, and I use this knowledge every day."

"I also attended Washington State University, which as a land-grant institution has always been rooted in agriculture, and today my Alma Mater continues to be the heart of our state's agriculture research and development efforts. A lot of things have changed since I was going to school in Pullman. The agriculture landscape has changed, the challenges growers are facing have changed, but the value of agriculture to the state of Washington is as important today as when I first took office."

As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Senator Murray has also been a strong supporter of the Alfalfa and Forage Research Program (AFRP). With the large amount of both alfalfa and alfalfa seed produced in Washington, Senator Murray recognizes the importance of the AFRP to her state's producers. "Hay and forage play a critical role in our nation's economy, from feed for livestock to soil conservation to crop rotation, and this is particularly true for Washington State where alfalfa and forage is the third most valuable

field crop. These farmers depend on cutting edge agricultural research to improve yields and drought tolerance, including the important research done by scientists from the Agriculture Research Service and Washington State University in Prosser, Washington. Unfortunately, funding for this critical research tends to lag behind other commodity crops, which is why I've consistently advocated for the AFRP and I'm pleased that we were again successful in including \$1.35 million for this program in the Fiscal Year 2015 Senate Agriculture Appropriations Bill."

When asked about the difficulty in convincing urban lawmakers of the importance of agriculture and the need to support research funding such as the AFRP, Senator Murray adds, "Urban and rural economies are interconnected. The Port of Seattle, for example, exported over 600,000 tons of animal feed, hay, and brewer grain in 2012 alone, creating jobs and supporting the economy in the Seattle area. In order to ensure continued economic growth and to provide food for urban communities, it is critical that our nation's farmers and rural communities are doing well, and for that to happen, we need strong ag research programs."

Senator Murray was pleased that Congress finally passed a Farm Bill this year as well. Murray believes the bill that President Obama signed into law in February was a positive step for our nation and for alfalfa growers. Murray believes a key victory is that the Farm Bill directs the U.S. Department of Agriculture to research and develop crop insurance policies for alfalfa to ensure that farmers have the safety net they need to produce this vital crop. "What's also important to me as a United States Senator is that the Farm Bill we passed ensures that the Washington State agriculture industry remains competitive in the global marketplace."



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