

by Ken Nobis  
President

# Reflections from D.C.

Last month I was in Washington, D.C. for a couple of days with two MMPA board members, Eric Frahm and Butch Brown, MMPA's Director of Member Relations Sheila Burkhardt and General Manager Joe Diglio.

We were in Washington, D.C. to attend the summer Ag Breakfast hosted by the Ag Leaders of Michigan (ALM) for the members of the Michigan congressional delegation.

The breakfast is attended primarily by members and their staffs from districts that have strong ties to agriculture, and by our two U.S. senators. Representatives from national agricultural organizations and commodity groups also attend.

It's not just the relationships with the political and regulatory leaders that are important, but also those we form and strengthen with the other commodity groups and allied agricultural industries like Tyson Foods, Monsanto, National Corn Growers Association and National Feed Grains Council. It's one aspect of our ongoing effort to keep in mind the game is played by far more people than those who are part of our own small group.

Coming together with other segments of agriculture makes me realize the similarities more

than the differences, and I start wondering why we don't work more closely together. For example, the growing opposition to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is something several groups try to address individually. Is an individualistic approach to an issue like this the most effective way to educate the public, or would we be better off to pool our resources and work together? We need to coordinate our efforts to address matters that affect more than one segment of agriculture.

The Ag Breakfast and related events provide a relaxed atmosphere to exchange ideas and viewpoints, nurture relationships and discuss business. I have to admit I was apprehensive when we started taking part in these outreach trips to D.C. Making small talk and doing all that is expected in these quasi-social/business events does not come naturally to me.

Having participated for several years now, I do feel more comfortable, and I recognize the tangible benefits of proactively building relationships and providing information about our industry when there is no urgent agenda.

It wasn't until I was elected as MMPA president and then as National Milk Producers Federation vice president that I became a frequent visitor to D.C. I probably average five or six visits per year now, and my respect for our country and our institutions seems to grow with each visit. I make it a point to walk the distance between the Capitol Building and the Lincoln Memorial when I have a chance to do it.

The Lincoln, World War II, Korean War and Vietnam War Memorials in particular remind me of the sacrifices so many have made and continue to make to protect our freedoms. Even today when we find fault with our elected leaders, we are free to complain without fear of retribution. In addition to strengthening relationships, visits to D.C. remind us that despite the problems we read and hear about every day, our country is strong and has a solid history.

I had some time during this visit between scheduled morning activities and an afternoon visit to the office of Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, so I welcomed the opportunity to walk along the Washington Mall. July is a prime month for visitors to our nation's capital, and this day was no exception. I learned when you are one of only a few in a crowd wearing business attire, people assume you must not be a tourist and therefore are qualified to give directions. I just hope those nice people I gave directions to finally reached their destinations. But if they didn't, they probably just thought they had been misled by another politician.

Seriously, though, as we look ahead to the primary races and the fall elections, let's make every effort to elect representatives who will go to bat for the agriculture industry and who recognize our industry is critical to our state and our country. The right to vote is something Americans hold dear, so don't miss an opportunity to go to the polls and be heard.

Ken