Quarries Rocking Capitol Hill

Nearly 300 people from aggregates operations all over the country went to Washington, D.C. for NSSGA's first-ever Legislative & Policy Forum/Fall Board Meeting. The four-day event was full of professional development sessions, committee meetings, networking and a full day of face-to-face meetings with lawmakers on Capitol Hill. There were more than 175 meetings in the offices of senators and representatives where engineers, managers, equipment operators and CEOs discussed the need for a serious investment in our nation's transportation infrastructure.

We are so excited that so many people took it upon themselves to advocate for our industry. If we do not continue to talk about the issues affecting our operations, no one else will. We will build on this incredible event so that we can have even more meetings on Capitol Hill and let Congress know that when the aggregates industry is doing well, America is doing well.

We were also glad to welcome a dozen members of Congress to the event. Each talked about the importance of investing in our infrastructure. The benefits are tangible at every level, from fixing potholes on local streets, to repairing bridges that carry hundreds of vehicles per day, to ensuring that commuters and commerce travels between states.

After all, we know that interstates do not end at state borders. Interstates 81, 83, 95 and 270 bring friends and families into the state as well as customers and tourists who spend time and money in the state.

There are thousands of hard-working people in Maryland who produce the crushed stone, sand and gravel necessary to improve our crumbling and congested infrastructure. Recent studies show that every job in a quarry supports nearly five outside the operation in other industries, like construction and trucking.

With that in mind, we were glad to hear from Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt remark on the burdens that regulations have on our country's businesses, especially when regulations are not based on common sense or sound science.

"Let's say you have a stream that includes trout and salmon, and there's dam upstream and irrigation downstream. To get permits, you have to address the salmon with the Commerce Department, the trout with Fish and Wildlife, the dam is regulated by the Army Corps of Engineers and the irrigation is regulated by the Bureau of Reclamation," Secretary Zinke said. "It's never too late to look at what we're doing and do it better."

Pruitt said that establishing consistency when it comes to regulatory enforcement is a top priority. "Regulatory reform does not mean a dearth of regulations. It means that we are going to go about things consistently, and regulations are intended to make things regular. The greatest impediment to economic growth has been regulatory uncertainty. If agencies change the rules of engagement over and over, that affects the economy and businesses substantially,"

Pruitt said. "At the end of the day, farmers, ranchers, businesses, community groups and states all care about the water they drink and air they breathe."

Focusing on one regulation, the controversial Waters of the United States rule, Pruitt said that no longer would a puddle be considered under the EPA's jurisdiction. "What's coming next is a replacement definition that matches the intent of the Clean Water Act using objective criteria so we know where federal jurisdiction begins and ends."

The Trump administration has proposed to rescind the 2015 Obama administration rule and intends to issue a new and less onerous one, yet the court still needs to address whether a District or Appeals Court would have jurisdiction to hear lawsuits against WOTUS rule. This is because NSSGA filed a lawsuit to stop the rule and joined with 32 states and other business groups to oppose the WOTUS rule on constitutional, procedural and legal grounds.

The rule would have dramatically expanded federal jurisdiction over dry streambeds and isolated wetlands. Such a jurisdictional overreach would have impacted the permitting process for aggregates operations and increased the cost of vital public works projects with little to no environmental benefit.

While these were welcome words from senior government officials, they and their agencies can only implement so much change on their own.

We need to support candidates for elected offices who know and support the value of aggregates operations, construction companies and every business related to building our communities and infrastructure. It also means that we need to invite our lawmakers – from mayors to senators – into our operations and job sites on a regular basis. There is simply no better way to demonstrate how many jobs are impacted when our country invests in our roads, bridges, highways and public works projects, than with in-person visits.

Please visit www.nssga.org/advocacy to find out how you can help advocate for the aggregates and construction industries.