



WPVGA grower members, staff, and PILI participants stand up for potatoes at Washington Summit

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

Wisconsin rolled out the red carpet for future leaders of the potato industry, welcoming them to the state, February 19-22, for the Leadership, Education & Advancement Foundation's "Potato Industry Leadership Institute" (PILI).

Visitors enrolled in the Leadership Institute traveled from Colorado,

Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Washington for two full days of leadership training.

The PILI program provides an overview of the local and national potato industry, including challenges

and issues beyond the production sector.

2025 PILI Grower Leader Colin Szawlowski of Valley Spud, Hadley, Massachusetts, welcomed participants to Madison, Wisconsin, and began introductions.

Leadership Institute participants introduced each of their assigned classmates after having talked to and interviewed them beforehand and provided information about their assigned partner's farms/employers, families, leadership goals, and something fun about that person.

National Potato Council (NPC) Chief Operating Officer Mike Wenkel,

Above: Future leaders of the potato industry toured The Little Potato Company in DeForest, Wisconsin, as part of the Potato Industry Leadership Institute (PILI), February 19-22.

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Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Executive Director Tamas Houlihan, and Potatoes USA Chief Marketing Officer Kim Breshears presented “Understanding the Organizations of the U.S. Potato Industry.”

DISCOVERING STRENGTHS

NPC Program Coordinator Madeleine Poulin provided business skills training for the 2025 PILI class, and Wenkel conducted an exercise on “Discovering Your Strengths.”

The 2025 Leadership Institute included visits to The Little Potato Company, the Food + Farm Exploration Center, Heartland Farms, Alsum Farms & Produce, and the Wisconsin Dairy State Cheese Company.


PILI participants from Wisconsin included Erin Meister, Reabe Spraying Service, Inc., Natalie Nesburg of the Potato Sustainability Alliance, and Matt Young, who works for the Wisconsin Potato Coalition. 2025 marked the 23rd year of PILI, and Wisconsin has 39 alumni members.

From Wisconsin, PILI participants flew to Washington, D.C., February 22, where they joined state potato growers, WPVGA staff, and industry representatives at the NPC Washington Summit, February 24-28,

Above: Many members of the Wisconsin contingent “Standing Up for Potatoes on Capitol Hill” include, from left to right, Keith Wolter (Hyland Lakes Spuds), Chelsea Zegler (McCain Foods), Erin Meister (Reabe Spraying Service), Joe Kertzman (WPVGA), Matt Young (Wisconsin Potato Coalition), Natalie Nesburg (Potato Sustainability Alliance), Tamas Houlihan (WPVGA), Mark Finnessy (Okra Family Farms), and Eric Schroeder (Schroeder Bros. Farms). Also attending the Washington Summit were Larry Alsum and Wendy Dykstra.



continued on pg. 20

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continued from pg. 19



to “Stand Up for Potatoes on Capitol Hill.”

Also flying to Washington, D.C. to advocate for and discuss issues vital to the success of the Wisconsin potato industry were Larry Alsum and Wendy Alsum-Dykstra from Alsum Farms & Produce; Keith Wolter of Hyland Lakes Spuds; Chelsea Zegler, McCain Foods; Mark Finnessy, Okray Family Farms; Eric Schroeder of Schroeder Brothers Farms; and Tamas Houlihan and Joe Kertzman of the WPVGA.

NPC’s annual Washington Summit

provides a forum for potato industry members to discuss, define, and advocate for the policy priorities impacting their businesses and protecting their ability to farm.

Attendees of the annual Washington Summit hear from top officials and policy experts and meet with Congressional leaders representing potato-growing states and districts.

ADVOCATING FOR ISSUES

During the 2025 NPC Washington Summit, attendees advocated for issues such as keeping potatoes in federal nutrition programs,

Above: WPVGA Executive Director Tamas Houlihan (left) and Alicia and Jeremie Pavelski (front row, far right) of Heartland Farms pose with PILI participants in front of the world’s largest potato masher at the Food + Farm Exploration Center, in Plover, Wisconsin.

promoting free and fair-trade agreements, and protecting tax policies that support the long-term health of family-owned farming operations.

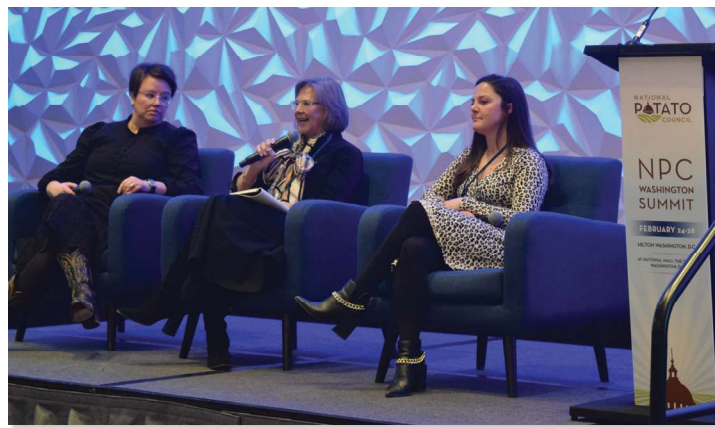
The six NPC issue papers that Washington Summit attendees discussed with Congressional leaders and staff covered “Securing



PILI participants sampling cheese at the Wisconsin Dairy State Cheese Company are, from left to right, Alexandra Bare (Minnesota), Steve Hovan (Montana), Brice Walther (Michigan), and Michael Murphy (New York).



Food + Farm Exploration Center Chef and Kitchen Lab Facilitator Davey Lynch conducted a seminar “Innovation Is in our Instant Pots,” during which he created a delicious Irish stew using Little Potato Company Creamer potatoes.



a Competitive Agricultural Tax Policy,” “Agriculture Immigration Reform,” “Proactive Trade Policies,” “Reinforcing the Nutritional Value of Potatoes in Federal Policies,” “U.S. Potato Industry Priorities in the Farm Bill,” and “Investing in U.S. Potato Industry Research.”

In addition, Zegler was in Washington, D.C. to represent McCain Foods after the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) had frozen implementation of work funded under the Inflation Reduction Act, including McCain’s Regional Conservation Partnership Program project that helps potato growers.

Zegler met with Congressional leaders to explain that further implementation delays could mean losing an entire crop year of practices

continued on pg. 22

Top Left: Wendy Dykstra and Larry Alsum both sit on the Finance Committee of the National Potato Council (NPC), which holds all committee meetings as well as its Annual Meeting of the Voting Delegates and Awards Dinner during the Washington Summit. Larry is also a member of the Environmental Affairs Committee and Wendy sits on the Board of Potato LEAF (Leadership, Education, and Advancement Foundation).

Top Right: A discussion panel during the Washington Summit on “What to Expect for Nutrition Policy in 2025” included, from left to right, Jennifer Tillier, chief of staff to the Deputy Secretary and senior advisor to the Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, USDA; Beth Johnson, founder and principal partner of Food Directions, LLC; and Katherine Thomas, Senate Agriculture Committee senior professional staff, Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry.

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continued from pg. 21



to assist growers with agronomic and conservation challenges.

During lunch on Tuesday, February 25, Wenkel and NPC Chief Executive Officer Kam Quarles conducted a priority issues overview for PILI and Washington Summit attendees from across the country.

At the Washington Summit, NPC holds its Annual Meeting of the Voting Delegates and Awards Dinner, and meetings of all committees, including Finance, Legislative Affairs, Environmental Affairs, Grower Outreach & Industry Research, Trade Affairs, and the Board of Directors.

NEW ADMINISTRATION

General Sessions on Wednesday, February 26, included “The New Administration—A View from Inside

the Transition,” by Brian Klippenstein, a member of the USDA Transition Team.

A discussion panel on “What to Expect for Nutrition Policy in 2025” included Beth Johnson, founder and principal partner of Food Directions, LLC; Katherine Thomas, Senate Agriculture Committee senior professional staff, Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry; and Jennifer Tiller, chief of staff to the Deputy Secretary and senior advisor to the Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, USDA.

“Agricultural Immigration Reform” was the panel discussion subject tackled by Wenkel of NPC, Diane Kurrle, senior vice president of USApple, and Jonathan Sarager,

Left: Nathan Gonzalas, editor and publisher of “Inside Elections with Nathan L. Gonzales” and an election analyst for “CQ Roll Call,” gave a keynote address and election analysis during lunch, on February 26, as part of the NPC Washington Summit.

Middle & Right: Members of Congress addressing the potato industry on Capitol Hill included Sen. Ronald Lee Wyden (left), Oregon, and Sen. Dan Newhouse (right), Washington.

senior director of federal government affairs, Western Growers.

Nathan Gonzalas, editor and publisher of “Inside Elections with Nathan L. Gonzales” and an election analyst for “CQ Roll Call,” gave a keynote address and election analysis during lunch on February 26.

Members of Congress addressing the potato industry on Capitol



PILI participant Erin Meister of Reabe Spraying sits at the desk of Wisconsin Congressman Derrick Van Orden during Capitol Hill visits as part of the NPC Washington Summit.



Larry Alsum and Wendy Dykstra (left and right) of Alsum Farms & Produce, and Natalie Nesburg (center) from the Potato Sustainability Alliance traverse the halls of Congressional office buildings during the NPC Washington Summit.



Above: Visiting the office of Congressman Mark Pocan during the NPC Washington Summit are, from left to right, Wendy Dykstra, Larry Alsum, Natalie Nesburg, Erin Meister and Joe Kertzman.



Left: Meeting with Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson's policy advisor, Scott Rausch (right), during the NPC Washington Summit are, from left to right, Eric Schroeder (Schroeder Bros. Farms), Tamas Houlihan (WPVGA), Keith Wolter (Hyland Lakes Spuds) and Chelsea Zegler (McCain Foods). Also in the room but not visible in the photo are Mark Finnessy (Okray Family Farms) and Matt Young (Wisconsin Potato Coalition).
Photo courtesy of Bill Schaefer Photography

Hill included Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar; Idaho Sen. James E. Risch; Dr. Justin Benavidez, chief economist with the House Ag Committee; Sen. Ronald Lee Wyden of Oregon; Sen. Dan Newhouse from Washington; and Rep. Glenn "G.T." Thompson of Pennsylvania.

On Thursday, February 27, Washington Summit attendees from Wisconsin and all major potato producing states gathered at Capitol Hill to meet with dozens of Congressional leaders and staff to advocate for the potato industry's policy priorities.

Wisconsin potato growers and industry representatives rolled out the red carpet for PILI participants and traveled with them to Washington, D.C. for a week of "Standing Up for Potatoes on Capitol Hill." **BC'T**

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