

# Charting a course through a perfect storm

**The political process can be aggravating, and most of the population is disconnected from it at an alarming rate.**

This column has consistently warned of the clear and present danger to our system of government and nation due to the lack of understanding of how things happen at a state and national level.

It is one thing to fundamentally disagree with policy. Engagement in policy is essential and critical to serving the public good. But putting ourselves in a bubble and watching it all burn down will give us what is next — chaos.

That is only part of the equation. The other growing issue is the large amount of turnover in our state and federal legislative bodies. We must be the adults in the room to help chart a course. Without our engagement, we have no say over our destiny.

## Closing the gap with legislators

Of the Oregon legislators who held office in 2020, 15 members of the Senate and 32 members of the House are no longer seated legislators as of this writing. That represents a staggering 50% turnover in the Senate and 53% in the House.

Although these figures take into account the advancement of legislators moving to the other chamber, the normal churn of departures — and with it, the loss of institutional knowledge and collaborative know-how — is a challenge for anyone interested in sound policy, including our industry.

Even legislators that are not aligned in any significant way with our policy goals will be missed. Many would take the time to consider the solution-oriented approach of the nursery and greenhouse industry. Now, a new group is taking the reins.

Heading into the 2025 session, at least 23 senators and 37 representatives will have churned through the legislature (66%), meaning in 2025 only seven senators and 23 representatives (33%) were legislators in 2020. Why does this matter? The state legislature and the new cadre of interest group lobbyists have not built relationships that

render good decision making.

How do we close the gap? We make it personal, meaning we engage in person. This means emailing your elected official. Be constructive and provide a sensible solution. The association does this on your behalf, but it takes everyone.

We do tours to get shoes dirty and open minds about what it means to be in production agriculture. We engage at the state capitol to provide a complete picture of the diverse membership we have. We have a political action committee to participate in the election of nursery industry friendly office seekers.

Activists and political staff members have become the new proving grounds for future candidates. They used to come more from church, business, and broad community leaders. We must be vigilant.

## Someone old, someone new

Matt Mika, AmericanHort's vice president of advocacy and government affairs, has a little handy dandy sheet to provide members in the need to educate and inform Congress. It is stark. In the U.S. House, 81 of the 435 members were new this session (40 Republicans, 34 Democrats). Of these new members, 12 have never served at the state or local level prior to being elected to the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. Over 200 members of the U.S. House have never voted on a Farm Bill before — and half have been in D.C. for less than five years.

The Farm Bill is the largest agricultural policy bill that is renewed every five years. This is the seventh Farm Bill in my career. It is not just the members, but out of the 54 members of the House Agriculture Committee, only seven staffers of these members' offices have worked on the Farm Bill.

House freshmen in both parties have a lower median age than incumbents in the chamber. For the Republican caucus, the youngest house member is 33, the median age is 59 and the oldest is 85. On the Democratic side, the youngest is 26. I have shirts older than that in my closet. The median is 61.4 and the oldest is 86.



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This does not even count the uber-geriatric ages in the U.S. Senate, where eight members are older than 80.

Oregon's congressional delegation is a microcosm of the dynamic in Washington, D.C. Three of our freshman legislators are 60 or under (the youngest being 54). Two are in their upper 60s and three are in their 70s.

## How does today compare with the founding of our nation?

I am 60 and feel like I am on the back 9 holes of my career. Watching the State of the Union address, I admit I felt it was a live simulcast of an old folks home. The debate over age and elective office will be discussed in earnest during the 2024 election cycle and the standard bearers for each party are of an age that raises questions.

I think it is fair to say that our founders had not considered that our system of government would be governed by the same people for a lifetime.

So the perception by my two daughters of our founding fathers is that they were old white men. Well truth be told, our founding fathers were not old. Let's run it down: Ages of the Founding Fathers on July 4, 1776: James Monroe, 18; Aaron Burr, 20; Alexander Hamilton, 21; James Madison, 25; Thomas Jefferson, 33; John Adams, 40; Paul Revere, 41; and the old man in the room was George Washington, 44. Heck, Betsy Ross was 24.

So if our nation can endure its defining moment in the hands of young, hard-working, visionaries, perhaps we should stop complaining about ages and start working on making our country the best it can be. ☺