

NFRA's Representatives to Washington DC:

Marilyn Reese, Kevin Garden, Jennifer Roeser, Bob Coe, Jerry Hamby, Stephanie and Ryan Cooke

Summit Strategies: Mark Detric and Geoffrey Urbach

Jerry, Stephanie, and I started off the meetings on Wednesday night with dinner. Kevin, Mark, and Geoffrey came to guide us on how to approach the meetings and what to expect.

Mark and Geoffrey got us started off early on Thursday February 1st at 8 AM, with breakfast and a discussion about meeting times and how we were going to split up. We all hit the ground running at 9 AM, meeting with Terry Camp, House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands. This was a good meeting as we all got our feet wet trying to figure out who should speak and when. Thank goodness for Mark who kept us from rambling too much!

Next Geoffrey took Jerry, Stephanie, and myself to meet with Daniel Tidwell who is Legislative Director for Congressman Chuck Fleischmann, Tennessee.

We carried on to meet with Holt Edwards, Legislative Assistant for Senator Bob Corker, Tennessee. Mr Holt was an active listener, and had a page full of notes by the end of our 30 minutes. We then scurried down the hall to meet with Kayla McMurry, Legislative Assistant for Senator Lamar Alexander, Tennessee. Kayla was a joy to speak with, she is from Knoxville TN, just up the road from our Ocoee Inn. She has also visited our area and has rafted on the Ocoee River previously. Kayla was a good listener and had a page of notes by the end of our meeting.

All of the Tennessee delegation asked to be kept informed with our issue and what happened after the meeting with USDA and Forest Service.

Next Geoffrey led us to the basement cafeteria for a quick lunch before joining back up with the other half of our team. Once we were made whole again we met with Annie Hoefler and Lucy Murfitt with Majority Staff Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. As described by Summit Strategies, the Committee groups would have a lot more knowledge of how the Forest Service Special Use Permits worked and would have more questions for us, which they did. This meeting had a positive tone with Annie and Lucy willing to help down the road should we need them.

Mark and Geoffrey led us to meet with Candice Hull, Joe Petrzekda, and Alexis Segal, all Legislative Assistants to Senator Dianne Feinstein. Alexis attended the meeting via phone. The meeting went well with a few questions from Alexis via speakerphone. All 3 asked to be kept in the loop with our big meeting.

We then met with Bryan Petit and David Brooks with Minority Staff Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

Across the hall was our final meeting of the day before debriefing. We met with Kaitlynn Glover, Legislative Assistant to Senator John Barrasso, Wyoming. She stated her job is to figure out who is doing what and who is in charge with the government agencies. Ms Glover listened to every word we had for her and is very interested in making phone calls and anything she could do to help on our behalf. Bob, You are very lucky to have such a person working on your behalf.

On to our debriefing session and to dinner where we able to expel all our experiences before embarking on a new day of meetings. We enjoyed great conversations over dinner leaving the stress of the day behind us!

Day 2, I split off with Bob for the morning meeting. Jerry, Stephanie, Jenifer, and Marily headed out together.

Bob, Geoffrey, and I met first with Holly Heussner, Legislative Assistant to Congresswoman Liz Cheney, Wyoming. The meeting with Holly went well with her listening carefully to us, taking notes, and asking questions. Holly asked to be kept up to date on our afternoon meeting.

Next was the torturous walk in the 30 mile per hour wind with temperatures in the 20's to Summit Strategies office for lunch and preparations for the BIG meeting at USDA. We focused closely as Mark, Geoffrey, and Kevin briefed us for the meeting. During this session we found out that our meeting location and the players had changed. After further talk, we decided that this was for the better anyhow. While we ate lunch the conversation turned into wild animal stories, which eased all minds prior to setting out to last meeting!

Arrival to the meeting at the USDA Building had some challenges, but after all arrived we were escorted up stairs past the Secretary's office to our meeting room. After everyone sat we went around the room introducing ourselves.

The Team found we were meeting with Robyn Whitney, Scott Vandegrift, and Erin Connelly. Robyn Whitney, Legislative Analyst Office of Congressional Relations, was a political appointee from the Trump Camp. Robyn worked for the Elect Trump team prior to this appointment. Scott Vandegrift, USDA and Forest Service Legislative Affairs, Scott is a Forest Service employee on loan to USDA. Erin Connelly, Acting Chief of Staff/Forest Service Liaison Natural Resources & Environment, Erin has only been in this position for 4 weeks. They had scheduled 1 hour for us to meet with them.

After introductions, Marily got straight into the history and purpose of NFRA, then Jennifer focused on why we came, then Jerry explained what putting Lake Ocoee Inn & Marina out for bid would mean for him personally and with some hypothetical situations, and then Bob jumped in on how this would turn his world upside down as well. Erin, Scott, and Robyn listened attentively and all 3 took copious notes. I believe all 3 had a full 2 pages of notes by the end of the meeting. Jennifer keeping the team focused on the end game asking twice what to expect as the next step, where do we look for answers. After the second ask, Robyn stepped up stating he would push this issue to the top of his list and have an answer for us by next week. WOW, we all had smiles at this time. The meeting ended with everyone shaking hands.

Next we followed Robyn to his office for business cards, during this walk Robyn said something to the effect of changing wording in the Forest Service manual to RE-ISSUE an expired Special Use Permit! Could this be the Mother Load at the bottom of the Waterfall? I sure do hope so!

Submitted by,

Ryan Cooke
Lake Ocoee Inn and Marina