

# Jerry Hagstrom



## Ag group shows fly-ins are back

THE AMERICAN SEED TRADE ASSOCIATION held its annual policy and leadership meeting this week at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in downtown Washington.

In past years that would not have been newsworthy, but ASTA is the first agriculture group to hold a meeting in person in Washington since the coronavirus pandemic was declared in March 2020. The three-day event showed the value of assembling a critical mass of stakeholders with a goal—in this case, making the case for the importance of science—and may offer an idea of how other meetings may proceed in the next year.

ASTA, whose members develop, grow, and sell crop and garden seeds, displayed both enthusiasm and caution about its gathering. When D.C. eliminated size limits on meetings, ASTA notified its members that they could bring their families. Some spouses and children made the trip. One couple even brought a baby.

But ASTA also required attendees to fill out a questionnaire each morning confirming that their temperatures were normal and that they had no symptoms of COVID-19 or contact with infected people in the last 14 days. The staff also checked each attendee's temperature (though the devices didn't always work).

More than 90 members attended in person. About the same number took a remote option. ASTA Chairman John Latham, an Iowa seed-company owner, quipped to ASTA President and CEO Andrew LaVigne that he was “the anchorman” of the hybrid meeting.

“We need you to come to Washington,” former Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts of Kansas told the attendees in a video that an ASTA official said the 85-year-old Roberts had managed to film at home without any technical assistance—save some advice on the positioning of his huge cowboy hat.

As with many pre-pandemic fly-ins, there was a reception with an open bar for all attendees, a separate event to raise money for ASTA's political action committee, and a tour of the monuments. But unlike a meeting from, say, 2019, attendees were asked to wear their badges with color-coded dots—blue, yellow, or red, to show how close people wanted to get to other attendees.

The agenda blended perennial seed-industry issues such as regulation and international trade with more immediate concerns—sustainability, how to attract more Black employees, how women can advance, and how offices can be reopened.

The session about reopening offices may have provided the most important information to the industry and the larger society. One executive noted that as many as 80 percent of seed-industry employees had to go to work because they grow or distribute seed or conduct research on new varieties and don't have the “luxury” of working from home. While there has been a lot of national conversation about workers' resistance to return to the office, the executives said managers need to ask employees if they have the right conditions to work at home. They also acknowledged the fear that workers who aren't seen by their bosses in the office may lose out on raises and promotions.

The importance of science—and the threats to it—permeated most sessions. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack noted in a video that the Biden administration would uphold a biotechnology regulation promulgated by President Trump's Agriculture Department.

In a final session, USDA Deputy Secretary Jewel Bronaugh thrilled the seed executives when she said in an interactive video from her office that “it all begins with the seed.”

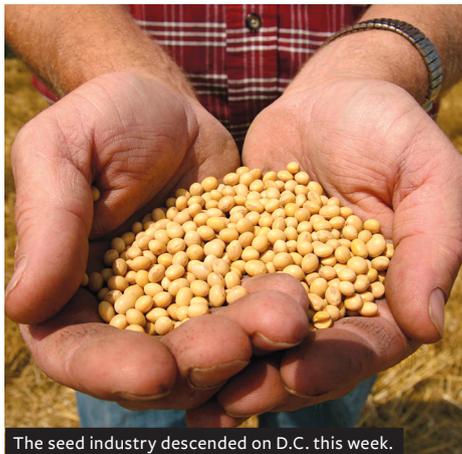
To an industry that fears science skeptics will put a stop to innovations such as genetic engineering of seeds that can lead to

higher productivity, less use of pesticides, and lower carbon emissions, Bronaugh said she hopes the success of the COVID-19 vaccine will lead to renewed faith in science.

“We can't pick and choose which science we like,” Bronaugh said, adding that the nation needs to get back to making decisions based on peer-reviewed science.

Bronaugh left the seed industry with the news that USDA has drafted a plan to bring more people back to the office and that she will join officials from the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development to lead the delegation to the United Nations Food Systems Summit in New York in September. The industry fears activists will push anti-scientific conclusions, but Bronaugh promised to promote science and innovation.

One source of disappointment was that meetings with members of Congress and their staffs still took place mostly by video. Janae Brady, ASTA's head of government affairs, said she hopes that Capitol Hill will be fully open by next year's conference. □



The seed industry descended on D.C. this week.

Contributing Editor Jerry Hagstrom is the founder and executive editor of The Hagstrom Report, which may be found at [www.HagstromReport.com](http://www.HagstromReport.com).