



FoodHub in the News

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By Mihir Zaveri

Oregon's Deborah Kane talks policy with secretary of agriculture, meets President Obama

PORTLAND, OR – When Deborah Kane was invited to the White House to talk food policy and rural issues last week, she ended up bending the ear of Barack Obama.

Kane, vice president of food and farms for Portland-based nonprofit Ecotrust, was one of 18 at the grass-roots roundtable to share and discuss the most pressing rural issues with the Obama administration -- and the president himself. The administration designated Kane as a rural "champion for change" and wanted her to advise the newly created Council on Rural Affairs on rural economic growth and innovation.

Ecotrust gained prominence last year after developing FoodHub, an interactive online tool that pairs food producers with wholesale purchasers. Kane calls it a "match.com for farmers, ranchers and growers."

Kane talked to The Oregonian about her meeting. Answers are edited for brevity and clarity.

What was meeting the president like?

No one said the president of the United States would be in the meeting. They said we would be in a room with Secretary (Tom) Vilsack and senior members of the Obama administration, which I thought was a thrill. So imagine how much more thrilling it was when the president entered the room.

We were seated at sort of a square table, and the discussion was just getting under way, as Secretary Vilsack had just set the stage and was inviting folks to comment on priorities. The door opened and the leader of the free world walked into the room.

What did you talk about with the President?

He came to me, I said, "President Obama, it's an honor to meet you." He looks at my name tag, "Deborah from Portland, tell me about yourself."

I said, "Well one of the things that you should know about me and my organization is we're doing a lot of work right now to get better food into schools and so I have to tell you I'm a

huge fan of the First Lady." He laughed and said, "I am, too. She's doing a great job isn't she?"

What did you share with Secretary Vilsack and the others?

I had two things: school food and FoodHub.

We were trying to prove that if you can allocate a few additional pennies to schools, they will have greater buying power to support local farmers. I asked whether or not the federal government might want to look at easing up some of the restrictions on the use of federal funds as it relates to the school meal program. (The FoodHub community suggested topics that Kane further talked about): There's tons of food supply and demand but the support for value-added processing or to help farmers get their products to market efficiently are disappearing.

We also talked a lot about the need for better access to credit and to streamline paperwork for grant and loan programs. FoodHub members were also very concerned about scale-appropriate regulations.

I talked about continuing to invest in ecosystem service markets, the notion that agriculture provides environmental services in addition to edible food crops. One example is carbon sequestration on agricultural lands. The feds are going to have to play a leadership role in making sure that information about how farmers can access those ecosystem service markets get out. I talked about severe dissatisfaction in the region with the administration's handling of genetically modified organisms as it relates to GMO alfalfa and sugar beets.

What ideas might you bring back?

Farm husbands are statistically more likely to die first, so you have a lot of agricultural women inheriting the family farm. One presenter talked about a really innovative program that trained farm women to successfully manage the family farm after their husbands passed on, which I thought was tremendous.

Tell me about your background. Has agriculture always interested you?

I've never not done food and agriculture. Now, you have this whole national conversation about food and the role of agriculture. Young folks are getting degrees in food systems and getting masters in public health with an emphasis on food and nutrition.

I've had the honor of working with farmers and ranchers basically my whole professional life. I felt like this was a culminating moment where I got an opportunity to share what I'd learned.

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