

Op-Ed by Rep. Greg Walden

Making Progress Together for our Region and State

The biggest disagreements and loudest voices got most of the attention during this last session of Congress, from filibusters to failed websites, immigration to ISIL. However, while the pundits blared, many of us worked hard to achieve important legislative wins for Oregon and America in 2014—like boosting American energy and jobs and rooting out waste to save taxpayer dollars. Make no mistake, we still have work to do, but we have a strong foundation to build on next year with the new Republican majority in the Senate on efforts to grow and strengthen Oregon's rural communities.



Submitted photo

All in all, I'm proud that three bills I wrote this session—protecting rural satellite television service, providing more water and power for Central Oregon, and boosting agriculture research in Hermiston—are now the law of the land. And several other of my initiatives passed the House with bipartisan support, including the plan to reform federal forest policy to grow jobs in the woods, improve forest health, and provide needed revenue for schools, roads, and law enforcement. Although I am disappointed the Senate did not hold a vote on this plan or any forestry bill to assist our region, this gives us a strong base to build on next year with the new majority in the Senate. I've already begun conversations with members of the House and Senate from both parties on efforts to reform federal forest policy and better manage our lands. All of these initiatives were developed transparently with community support, so they will have good momentum going into 2015.

One of my top priorities is making federal agencies like the IRS, the VA, and the EPA more transparent and accountable to taxpayers. I sought and secured a federal investigation into the enormous, costly, failure of Cover Oregon to stop the waste, demand the truth, and get accountability. That investigation is ongoing, and we hope to get the results in the near future.

And when the FDA proposed rules that would have made it harder to grow onions and brew local beer, I pushed back hard on behalf of producers and brewers, inviting the FDA to visit with Oregon growers to witness the rules' impact firsthand. Our voices were heard as the agency reworked these to make them better for Oregon producers. I doubt most people realize how much time a member of Congress and his/her staff spend helping cut through red tape at agencies like the Social Security Administration or the VA. For me and my team, we helped more 2,811 Oregonians over the past two years, including nearly one thousand veterans cases.

The Energy and Commerce Committee I serve on had 51 bills signed into law this session, including legislation to increase hydropower and boost research for pediatric diseases. We launched a major initiative called 21st Century Cures to aggressively help find cures for the nearly 6,500 known diseases that lack them. This is an exciting initiative that will dramatically improve the lives of people all over the world.

The Committee also conducted thorough oversight of federal agencies under our jurisdiction. When the Federal Communications Commission proposed a "study" that sought to poke their noses into America's newsrooms, the Communications and Technology panel that I chair objected strongly, leading to the agency dropping this threat to the First Amendment.

And Congress successfully passed legislation to help clean up the mess at the VA and allow more veterans to go outside the VA to access care in the communities where they live. This will really help veterans, especially in our rural communities. We also passed plans to streamline and improve job-training programs and provide needed resources to farmers to tackle drought, fire, and new diseases and pests in their crops.

Getting deficit spending under control also remains a huge priority of mine. The House passed a budget that balances over the next 10 years and eventually pays off America's debt. I supported efforts to reform programs, eliminate waste and duplication and as a result we cut discretionary spending to a level below when President Obama took office.

This work doesn't always grab the headlines or dominate the chatter on Twitter, but these quiet gains improve the lives of people and help get our region and country on a better track. I could not have been as successful working on these issues without hearing from and listening to you—the people of Oregon's Second District. Just this year, I traveled more than 9,000 miles through our enormous district to hold town halls (49 in the past two years) and other community meetings. That's in addition to the thousands of telephone town hall questions, emails, letters, phone calls, Facebook messages, and tweets I've received from you and answered (more than 41,000 just this year).

As the New Year dawns, I pledge to continue to work as hard as I can to solve our problems, here at home and across the nation. I want to continue to hear from you about your ideas and priorities. This is how I develop my "to do" list to take back to Washington, D.C. each week. Please visit www.walden.house.gov to send me an email to let me know what you think should be on my plate for 2015.

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