

2026 NAL Conference March 15-18

[Link to NAL event page on GCA](#)

Sunday Keynote Speaker: Dr. Jonathan Foley, Executive Director of Project Drawdown

Dr. Foley began his talk referring to Eunice Newton Foote (1819–1888) who was an American amateur scientist and women's rights campaigner who, in 1856, became the first person to demonstrate that carbon dioxide and water vapor trap heat, foreshadowing the discovery of the greenhouse effect. She proposed that higher CO2 levels would raise Earth's temperature. Her work was largely ignored by the scientific community at the time because she was a woman and an amateur scientist, only to be rediscovered in the 21st century. Foote was not a conservationist in the modern sense (such as promoting land preservation), but rather a pioneer in climate science who identified the mechanism responsible for global climate change.

Monday “EDUCATION DAY”

Speakers at the Marriott Hotel

Hon. Shannon Estenoz, Chief Policy Officer, The Everglades Foundation

Protecting Treasured Landscapes: What the Everglades Taught Me

- The Everglades lessons are applicable everywhere. The Everglades became a victim of “water engineering.” Nature is a system. Our bedrock environmental laws are the lode bearing beams holding up the ecosystem. The lives of ecosystems are longer than political cycles. Bipartisanship is not optional. Conservation requires stability in a system that is unstable, by definition. There is a need for building broader coalitions, meeting people where their responsibilities lie, making room at the table, making both parties feel that legislation is beneficial to them. Persistence wins!

Robin Martin McKenna, Chief Operating Officer, National Parks Conservation Association

United by National Parks

- We are loving our National Parks to death. GCA has been advocating for National Parks since 1921, right after women received the right to vote. From 2011 to 2024: staffing down 16%, visitors increasing 19%. History and science are being suppressed in the parks. “Protect the places that ignite your wonder.” NPCA and 5 partners filed lawsuits to stop removal of park signs. Working closely w/other agencies caring for land outside the parks. Wildlife refuges and other lands are already decimated or under threat.

Dr. Wesley Knapp, Chief Executive Officer, Center for Plant Conservation

How the Center for Plant Conservation is Saving America’s Rarest Flora

- Current rates of extinction are 100 to 1,000 times the baseline. Hawaii has huge extinction problem. Not always best to re-plant rare plants because they cause “triggers”. They need to be in the right place with a supportive ecosystem to thrive. Plants are wildlife too! Need

for state wildlife action plans. Advance, Act, Advocate to save plants. Have established Best Practice Guidelines and Applied Plant Conservation Course available on website.

Peggy Olwell, former Program Lead for the BLM Plant Conservation and Restoration Program

The National Seed Strategy: Solving the U.S. Seed Shortage

- Global need for seed is 1.9 billion tons of seed. BLM identifies and cares for only 500,000 tons of seed. In 2023 636 million acres had 230 botanists, that's over 2.25 million acres per botanist. In 2023 there were 45,000 marketing degrees awarded, only 600 botanists. Seeds are important, and very different from crops where the diversity has been bred out of seeds. There is a National Seed Strategy Business Plan. Non-native seeds cost lives. The fires in Hawaii were exacerbated by non-native invasive plants.

Dr. Natalie Exum, Assistant Professor, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and David Flores, Vice President and General Counsel, Potomac Riverkeeper Network

- PFAs in the Environment and Potomac River Basin. Traditional waste water management does not remove PFAs. There is a bill in MD to take PFAs out of our systems, but it is economically unfeasible. Need to stop making products with PFAs.

Rena Ann Peck, Executive Director, Georgia Rivers and Paget Hines Savage, Peachtree Garden Club

Saving the Okefenokee: Conservation, Advocacy, and the Power of Collective Action

- Very inspiring. GCA club success in protecting the Okefenokee Swamp from Chilean mining company. "Must protect what cannot speak for itself". Shared experience and important of place motivated people most. Used media too.

Jordan Lubetkin, Senior Director of Ohio River Restoration, National Wildlife Federation

Restoring the Waters of the 14-State Ohio River Basin: Opportunities for Bipartisan Action in the 119th Congress

- A challenging project because unlike the Great Lakes or Chesapeake Bay, these waters are not widely used for recreation and span so many states. Senate and House bipartisan bill to advance large scale restoration, restore habitat, remediate toxic substances in water, reduce flood risk and prevent spread of invasive species. Bill is unique in that is non-regulatory, simply funding to restore.

Pasha Majdi, Chief Advocacy Officer and Coalitions Lead, Nature is Nonpartisan

Pathways for Bipartisan Success in a Hyper Partisan Environment

Laura Brennan, Federal Policy Climate Lead, The Nature Conservancy

Clean Energy: Climate, Conservation and Community Considerations

At the end of the day, Zone VI delegates met to brainstorm and plan for visits and meetings with Senators and Representatives and/or their legislative staff members. We reviewed the GCA's legislative priorities and talking points, organized our schedule of visits, and individually prepared our notes for the

meetings. We also participated in the Ohio River Basin State Strategy Session with Jordan Lubetkin to understand the issues particular to Maryland.

Tuesday “CAPITOL HILL” Day

Senators, Representatives, and Speakers in the Congressional Auditorium

Tom Suozzi (D), US House of Representatives, New York

- Discussed the “Problem Solvers Caucus” begun in Jan. ’25 consisting of 23 Democrats and 23 Republicans

Gabe Evans (R), US House of Representatives, Colorado

- Cattle farmer who discussed legislation and policy to address farm equipment purchase issues, permitting reform, ecologically sound burns, common sense practices for wildfire mitigation.

Lesley Kane Szynal, Executive Director, Outdoors America at the Open Space Institute

America the Beautiful Act and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Updates

- Some movement in states to reverse long term easements. Funding of \$900 million per year from fees from drilling on federal land.

Ben Keys, Wharton School of Business, Video Interview by C-Change Conversations

Climate Change Impact on the Insurance Industry

- Climate change is increasing risks and cost of insurance, negatively impacting home ownership, some markets will become uninsurable. See rise of state run insurance because private insurers are leaving many areas, e.g. Florida.

Sheldon Whitehouse (D), US Senate, Rhode Island

- Discussed solar permitting, oceans, climate change impact of mortgage markets, banks, financial markets. Oceans and the International Plastics Treaty. Fisheries Act. Unilever is example of company pledging to recover plastics, corporate model of what is doable.

Don Bacon (R), US House of Representatives, Nebraska

- Growing Climate Solutions Act – credits for sustainable agriculture. Bipartisan Farm Bill for \$14bn in conservation funding. Energy independence is a national security issue. Natural gas, nuclear, solar and geothermal opportunities.

Pamela O’Connor Chapman, NAL Vice Chair, State and Local Affairs

State and Local Engagement

Cindy Hyde-Smith (R), US Senate, Mississippi

Lyn McMillin, NAL Vice Chair, Native Plants

Growing a Movement for Native Plants

- Terrific presentation. Laws are needed so that community partners can make plans.

Susan Collins (R), US Senate, Maine: Video Message

- Two native plant projects in ME.

Suzanne Bonamici (D), US House of Representatives, Oregon

- Bipartisan Oceans and Estuary Caucus. Coastal Restoration Act. National Estuaries Act.

Jared Huffman (D), US House of Representatives, California

- No such thing as a “sacrifice zone”. Bristol Bay, Alaska. Pebble Mine. Revolution Wind (NE).

Sandra Law, NAL Vice Chair, Agriculture

Threat to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness: Video Interview with Tina Smith (D), US Senate, Minnesota

- Area covers 150 miles, one million acres. Most visited area of US. A dark sky sanctuary. 2023 Public Land Order imposed 20 year moratorium on mining leases, now in danger of being overturned. Pulling in Senators of neighboring states and those who care about public lands.

On Tuesday evening, Zone VI delegates dined at Zone VI Conservation Committee Zone Rep Liz Evans’ home in Georgetown. We discussed conference topics, provided conference feedback and enjoyed gathering with GCA friends old and new. Alma Paty of Trowel Grden Club gave us all marigold seeds!

Wednesday “LEGISLATIVE DAY”

Six Zone VI Delegates participated in Meetings with the Offices of:

Senator Angela Alsobrooks (met w/Lila Osman, Legislative Correspondent)

Senator Chris Van Hollen (met w/Senator Van Hollen and Leo Confalone, Legislative Correspondent)

Congressman Jamie Raskin, 8th District (met w/Joe Tesfaye, Senior Legislative Assistant)

Congressman Johnny Olszewski, 2nd District (met w/Will Thorne, Legislative Correspondent)

And Delivered the “GCA Legislative Priorities for Congress 2026” document to the offices of:

Congressman Andy Harris, 1st district

Congresswoman Sarah Elfreth, 3rd district

Congressman Glenn Ivey, 4th district

Congressman Steny Hoyer, 5th district

Congresswoman April Delaney, 6th district

Congressman Kweisi Mfume, 7th district

Monica Tucker attended the conference and submitted notes.