

Visiting Walla Walla, Sen. Maria Cantwell focuses on wine trade issues, Mill Creek



U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell examines a map of the Mill Creek Flood Control Project as Mill Creek Coalition and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers members update her on the status of the channel running through downtown Walla Walla.

By Cameron Peters

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U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell made a whirlwind, one-day visit to Walla Walla on Friday to discuss challenges facing the community, including tariff issues in the wine industry and concerns about Mill Creek.

The Washington state Democrat's itinerary for the visit featured a round-table with local winemakers and growers, and a tour of the Mill Creek Flood Control Project, led by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Mill Creek Coalition.

The round-table took place at L'Ecole No 41 in Lowden and was attended by five local winery representatives, as well as Thomas Henick-Kling, director of the Washington State University Viticulture and Enology Program, and Brian Duvall, president of the Walla Walla Chamber of Commerce. Figgins Family Wine Estates, Garrison Creek Cellars, Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, Woodward Canyon Winery and L'Ecole No 41 were all represented at the round-table.

The round-table, which ran for over an hour, touched on wide-ranging issues pertinent to the wine industry.

Notably, tariff and trade challenges were discussed, as well as the importance of a strong export market to further establishing the Walla Walla Valley

as a world-class wine region.

"If you're going to be a world-class wine region and a world-class winery and produce wines of the caliber that we all do in here, you need to have a presence in the export market," said Woodward Canyon Winery owner Rick Small.

Environmental concerns were also a topic at the round-table. Wineries voiced their concerns about the potential ill effects of smoke on grapes, an issue of particular prominence as wildfire season again plagues the Pacific Northwest.

According to L'Ecole No 41 co-owner Marty Clubb, in some cases wildfire smoke can absorb into grape skins and give the resulting wine an undesirable smoky smell.

The specific effects of smoke exposure on wine grapes are still unknown, however, and more research will be need, Henick-Kling said.

Cantwell also toured key segments of the Mill Creek Flood Control Project and was briefed on the state of the project by members of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Mill Creek Coalition, which includes Walla Walla County, the city of Walla Walla, the Port of Walla Walla and the Downtown Walla Walla Foundation.

During the tour, coalition members stressed the importance of the flood-control system to Walla Walla.

“Our community relies on (Mill Creek Flood Control Project),” said Pat Reay, executive director of the Port of Walla Walla. “Our economy relies on it. Life relies on it.”

The project, which was built in the 1930s and '40s to address a long-running flood-control problem, is increasingly a point of concern in the community in the face of rapidly aging infrastructure. A study to examine elements of the project — specifically the 8-mile concrete channel running through downtown Walla Walla — is currently in the process of securing funding.

“We don’t know what we don’t know until we analyze it,” Reay said. “What we know is there’s aging infrastructure and there’s going to be something failing at some point.”

The study aims to better inform the Corps about options for the project going forward to prevent an infrastructure failure. The first installment of funding has already been authorized by the federal Office of Management and Budget.

Despite the brevity of her visit, Cantwell emphasized the value of being able to speak with constituents.

“There’s so many things happening that I definitely want to take advantage of the opportunity, being here this weekend to hear from people,” Cantwell said.