

Turning Down the Heat: Negotiating Wildfire Prevention and Recovery Confidential Information for Staffer for Representative Sydney Smith

Character Sheet

Republican Professional Staffer to the House Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Rep. Sydney Smith (R-Altusa).

Rep. Sydney Smith (R-AT)

You work for Congresswoman Smith, who serves as the Chairwoman of the House Agriculture Committee. Representative Smith represents the fifth district of Altusa, a large Western state devastated by the recent wildfires. Smith is a fairly senior House Republican who has a strong record as a loyal member of the party – the Speaker often utilizes her to bring other members around on legislation (particularly the House Freedom Caucus). She is also a member of the Republican Study Committee (108 members total). The Congresswoman voted for the recent bipartisan budget deal that the President struck with the Republican Speaker and Democrat Senate Majority Leader to lift budget caps and was instrumental in getting enough far-right members to support the bill. Recent press reports indicate that Rep. Smith may be tapped to serve as the new Secretary of Agriculture – there are rumors that the current Secretary is moving to the U.S. Trade Representative to handle NAFTA renegotiation and to combat China’s tariffs of U.S. exports.

Altusa

Altusa has suffered significantly over the past few summers. Wildfires have devastated local forests and seriously harmed the lumber industry, a main component of the Altusa economy. The state is second-most prone to wildfires nationally and has the highest potential exposure.

This simulation was written by Kessely Hong, Lecturer in Public Policy, John Fogarty, Monica Giannone, and Emily Schlichting at the Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University (HKS) as part of the Harvard Kennedy School’s “Teaching Legislative Negotiation Project.” These materials were developed with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. HKS simulations are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. They are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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Your Background

You are from the South and moved to Washington, DC after graduating from college. You started as a junior Staff Assistant for a member from your home state and have worked your way up to this senior professional staff role on the House Agriculture Committee. You've been with the Chairwoman for a while and really enjoy working for her. Success in DC revolves around being in the right place at the right time – if the Congresswoman does become the Secretary of Agriculture, there is a strong chance you'll be tapped for a top post at the USDA. This would be a career changer for you. Delivering in this negotiation will help secure that spot, should she actually be nominated.

Supplemental Background Emails

To: You (Smith's Office, House Ag)

From: Thompson, Lowell (Smith's Office, House Ag)

Date: May 25th

Subject: WPRA conference list

Thanks for letting me know your thoughts on our general approach – I think it tracks well with what we've discussed. Just chatted with the boss about it. Have a few items below that you should keep in mind going into these conversations.

First, I wish I could give you more clarity around the nomination rumors, but you know how closely held these things are. Proceed as though it's a go –and be sure to keep on the good side of Danvers' staff, as they'll be running the confirmation process if she is nominated. Best not to build any ill-will.

Moving onto the policy, we are in a good spot. I don't need to tell you, but it is *essential* that this conference succeed and that we get a bill signed into law. Altusa Governor Rischmann called the boss yesterday and stressed again that he will support *any* bill back at home with relief funding in it – we would really like to avoid a break from the Governor right now so it's important that we are in this deal.

Below are my additional thoughts on the three amendments that were added in Committee. As a reminder, the Chairwoman doesn't want to disappoint the members who sponsored these provisions, but enactment is the goal here – none of these are set in stone yet. The Senate bill already had strong bipartisan support, which undermines us a bit in asking for more here. Given the likely difficulty of passing all the House amendments in the Senate, it is possible you may need to concede a bit to avoid derailing the discussion.

House Amendments

We believe the Democrats are going to attempt to strip out the provisions we added in House Ag Committee. If possible, we want to keep all three – we know that deregulation encourages economic growth and creates jobs. This will be especially helpful in getting Altusa’s logging industry back on its feet after the fires, which have made it increasingly difficult for local timber companies to access forests.

- **Amendment 1:** Strong first step to increasing access to these forests for potential timber interests, clearing the way for logging in these forests. Remote communities are cut off from critical infrastructure and resources—this amendment will reduce those barriers and help the rural populations in Altusa. Of all the amendments, this is the one we care about most. The timber industry folks have been pushing it hard.
- **Amendment 2:** Reduces redundant regulation – the boss supports this amendment and it’s an easy messaging win for deregulation.
- **Amendment 3:** Dems are going to attack this as cutting funding for rural schools – which it’s not. It’s only diverting half of the 20% of funds earmarked for non-educational uses. We are obviously not against rural school systems—we strongly support this program. But some of the funding going to watershed restoration and road maintenance could and should be run by private companies. If we are going to reduce fire risks and fight them effectively, we need to increase water supplies and fund road maintenance, so we can access the fires to put them out.

A final note – we batted some ideas about forest thinning around with Alvarez’s staff before they decided he was fully opposing the bill in House Ag Committee. Might be worth revisiting as folks seem generally supportive and it could help placate some of our more conservative members if we need to let some of the amendments go.

It’s critical that this bill gets done and it looks like this conference may be the only window we get.

Keep me posted on how things are going.

Thanks,

LT

Lowell Thompson
Majority Staff Director
House Agriculture Committee
Office of Congressman Sydney Smith

To: You (Smith's Office, House Ag)

From: Caleb_Osterman@altusa.gov (Governor of Altusa's office)

Date: May 21st

Subject: WPRA must haves

Hey,

Thanks again for hopping on the phone just now. The Governor wanted to be sure the Chairwoman was up to speed before entering conference negotiations. We really need this relief to come through – our state's resources for responding to this have been almost completely depleted.

Topline takeaway—Governor Rischmann feels strongly that the Senate bill would be better than no bill at all. We know Sen. Danvers' team can be hard bargainers but a stalemate where the bill dies is truly not an option for Altusa right now. My boss wants to be as helpful as possible, but at the end of the day he will publicly back the Senate bill if it's that or no relief.

Obviously don't want it to come to that, especially with your boss being considered for the USDA job, but figured you'd at least like the courtesy of knowing in advance.

Thanks,

Caleb

Caleb Osterman
Director, Federal Affairs
Office of Governor Thomas Rischmann of Altusa