



Family Farm Alliance Mourns Loss of Long-Time President Pat O'Toole



Pat O'Toole and his wife, Sharon visit with Don Schwindt near the Schwindt's Colorado farm, autumn 2023.

GRAND JUNCTION, COLORADO, Feb. 26, 2024 – Patrick O'Toole, the long-serving president of the Family Farm Alliance who was seen by many as the voice of Western irrigated agriculture, has died at 75.

“Pat was a proud Irish warrior with a big heart and a good head,” said Alliance Vice-President Don Schwindt (COLORADO). “I already miss his phone calls and I will never forget him. He will be an integral part of my life until I join him in my final journey.”

Mr. O'Toole passed away Sunday afternoon at a hospice in Grand Junction, surrounded by his family. Mr. O'Toole suffered a stroke on February 13 at his family's Ladder Ranch, in the Little Snake River Valley on the Wyoming/Colorado border. The ranch has been in his wife Sharon's family since 1881.

Pat and Sharon met while students at Colorado State University, where Pat graduated with a philosophy degree. They eventually took over management of the ranch and liked to tell people they raise “cattle, sheep, horses, dogs and children.”

Mr. O’Toole leaves three children and six grandchildren.

Pat O’Toole may be best remembered for his passion for conservation and love of the land, especially in the Little Snake River Valley. The O’Toole family and Ladder Ranch were the recipients of the distinguished 2014 Wyoming Leopold Environmental Stewardship Award.

Mr. O’Toole’s interest in water intersected with the Family Farm Alliance while he was serving on the Clinton administration’s Western Water Policy Review Advisory Commission. Mr. O’Toole was the only commissioner representing Western irrigated agriculture and, in the end, refused to sign the report, opting instead to prepare a dissenting alternative report.

A former member of Wyoming’s House of Representatives, he was a member of the Alliance’s Board of Directors since 1998 and was named as the organization’s fifth President in March 2005.

“Pat became Alliance president, and I was hired on at the same time – on my 40th birthday, 19 years ago,” said Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen (OREGON). “Since that time, there was rarely a day when I wasn’t on the phone with him. We fought some tough battles together, and we helped forge solutions together. He was one of the great mentors and great friends of my life.”

In his time as President, the Alliance was asked to testify before Congressional committees 98 times. Mr. O’Toole represented the Alliance at Capitol Hill hearings over 20 times.

“Pat was an articulate speaker,” said Mr. Schwindt. “His words will leave a lasting legacy.”

He was known for his unique ability to work in a holistic and broad-based manner across philosophical and party lines.

“Pat was a deep thinker. He tried to absorb diverse perspectives as he settled on how to advocate for agricultural interests,” said Mr. Schwindt.

First Vice-President Schwindt and Alliance Second Vice-President Paul Orme (ARIZONA) will lead a committee set up by the board of directors to select the next Alliance president. In the meantime, Mr. Schwindt will oversee Alliance business and lead board meetings.

Mr. O'Toole's passing occurred just days after the Family Farm Alliance annual conference wrapped up in Reno (NEVADA). While the conference set another attendance record, the mood in Reno was somber and his absence was keenly felt and noted by many of those who spoke at the event.

"We will carry on together with thoughtfulness, respect and love in his memory and absence as Pat continues on his journey," said Alliance Advisory Committee Chairman Urban Eberhart (WASHINGTON). "He will always be with us."

In his 19 years as Alliance president, Mr. O'Toole spoke extensively to water user groups and agencies and was known for the bi-partisan approach he employed on behalf of the Alliance on water use and irrigation issues.

"Pat was involved in many organizations and valued his association with the Family Farm Alliance the most," said his wife, Sharon. "He truly valued his close relationships with members and was so proud that everyone in the organization are people who get things done."

Additional coverage of Pat O'Toole's remarkable life will be featured in the March 2024 edition of the Family Farm Alliance "Monthly Briefing". His family is planning a July 2024 memorial service at Ladder Ranch.

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