



SEPTEMBER 2026

HPBA Government Affairs Update: September 2026

Featuring Jason Tolleson With Tim Reed

Tim Reed: *Joining me once again is Jason Tolleson, senior director of government affairs at the HPBA. Jason, it's good to talk to you again. How are you doing?*

Jason Tolleson: I'm doing great. Thanks for having me on.

TR: *You bet. Since we last talked, I've been reading in the newspaper about tariffs going back and forth, and I always wait until I talk to you to get the scoop. So I want to talk about tariffs today. But first off, where have you been? Have you been traveling to industry events?*

JT: In early August, I attended the Midwest HPBA annual meeting and gave a presentation there. Going to Springfield—right next to the state capitol, where we had the meeting—was a fantastic opportunity to localize the conversation. I was joined for my presentation by a consultant who works for this broader coalition of impacted folks (energy utilities and, of course, the hearth industry) who are dealing with natural gas issues in that state. So to have the national perspective I brought into the conversation, as well as one of these local resources, was really useful. It was great to share with their

membership the dynamics in play in that state and across the Midwest region. That wrapped up the annual meeting season, and there was some great dialogue with members there.

TR: *I was at that same event. I flew to St. Louis, drove two hours to Springfield, went to bed, taught, saw you for 10 seconds, and went straight back to the airport because of how crazy my schedule was. But I thought it was a great event. As I've traveled to these different HPBA events, it's just neat to see how engaged people are. Bit by bit, we're seeing more business leaders who are really invested in learning, growing, and being advocates for the industry. As we start out, though, I feel like we have to talk about tariffs. I read this in the newspaper, and I don't totally know what to think about it. So I go to you, Jason: Where are we at?*

JT: It's been a little topsy-turvy lately. I want to give a huge shout-out to my counterpart in government affairs: Mike McNeice at HPBAC, our sister organization in Canada. We're just digging through statements. I don't know if anyone's looked at the harmonized tariff schedule and the multiple digits you have to interpret to say, "All right, is this product impacted, or this one?" We did that with these most recent announcements, from both the U.S. government and the Canadian government, to have as full an understanding as possible of the impact. I'll map out each one.

First, the White House announced a new 50% tariff on automobiles, dairy products, and alcohol—those products coming from Canada into the U.S.—and those would take effect in January of 2027. So, looking through the codes, our products are fine.

Then you had the announcement from the Canadian government of counter-tariffs, and they were focusing more on the steel, aluminum, and appliance sector. In looking through those—again, very specific tariff codes and definitions—wood and pellet stoves would be impacted given the way they classify them as

steel appliances that use solid fuel, and gas fireplaces would be impacted too. Electric fireplaces were not included. And what that would be is a 25% tariff on U.S. products going into Canada, taking effect September 8, which is just a few days from now.

So we're having to look at those and see what's going on, but also keep an understanding of the existing environment, including the Section 232 tariffs, which impact steel products, initially proposed in February of 2025. Some of those still exist today on Canadian products coming into the U.S. Trying to keep these different layers and tranches of tariffs organized, and to be able to share this information, is challenging, but it's important to do on behalf of our members.

The key marker coming up, of course, will be September 8 and the counter-tariffs on U.S. products going into Canada. What HPBA and HPBAC are strongly urging is just quick resolution: to bring back the kind of predictable, cross-border trade that is synonymous with the hearth industry, in both our solid-fuel and our gas products—trade that both countries, and the entire North American continent, can fall back on. It's very fluid. We're continuing to watch closely, and on behalf of our members and our consumers, both groups strongly urge quick resolution to this.

TR: *Frankly, it's too bad that there are these stroke-of-the-pen decisions that so drastically affect an entire industry. Manufacturers have felt this for a long time when it comes to regulations. But I'm about 20 years into the industry, and I think these last couple of years are one of the first times that such a drastic swing has been felt at every level of the industry from a stroke-of-the-pen decision. Everybody just wants this thing to go back to normal—not one side does something, the other side punches back harder, and all of a sudden it's like, "What are we doing here?"*

JT: Absolutely. And it's difficult in this space because of the collaboration across borders in

this industry, how we work together, how the associations and our members get products out there to consumers. Over the past 18 months, we've seen this evolving landscape, and it's been very challenging. The interpretation down to specific codes and country of origin—all of this is difficult to sort through. And it's an industry full of small businesses. To be caught up in these broader macro trade issues is also very challenging. I don't think anyone on either side is thinking, *Frontline: hearth products*. We're just in that steel space.

TR: *We're in the crossfire.*

JT: Unfortunately, that's the situation in play. Hopefully, we can find resolution soon.

TR: *I know you mentioned working with HPBA Canada. What are each of you doing in the middle of this—or is there much you can do besides wait it out?*

JT: There have been active meetings from both sides. As a matter of fact, when we had our Washington, D.C., fly-in in June, some of the HPBA board members from Canadian companies joined HPBAC staff in embassy meetings in Washington. And I've worked with Mike, my counterpart with HPBAC, on some joint meetings at the Canadian Embassy with some of the Canadian provincial offices, Ontario and Quebec, sharing that unified message with their trade people as well. That direct engagement is very important.

TR: *We appreciate the work that you and HPBAC are doing on that. But for everybody reading this, just*

buckle up—and hopefully we get some resolution in the coming months. What else do we have going on from a government affairs perspective?

JT: We're watching the calendar really closely. Being in September, all the states are wrapped up (California was the last state legislature to wrap up its 2026 session). What you'll see now is that everyone will shut down until after the election on November 3, and then business will pick up again on the state level.

On the federal side, Congress is supposed to be back for a few weeks in September, and then they'll go back to their home districts and get ready for the election as well, but I'm sensing that September calendar may be rather abbreviated. One of the big things they all tried to wrap up at the end of August was keeping the government open, and the president just signed that, so the government is funded through December 11. Now, I think everyone's going to go back to the politics side, building up to the election.

That said, here are some of the things on our radar screen: the fuel-choice bill and the appliance-efficiency-standard legislation. We're watching those closely against the clock as well. As of today, it seems like the House will be in maybe one more week this month, and then they're going to go home and run for re-election. On the Senate side, I'm still waiting to see, as they have other bills in front of them that we're very interested in. We'll see how the calendar plays out. I would say this is nothing unusual; this happens in election years. It's just difficult when things grind to a halt.

"We're in the crossfire."

TR: *As we record this in early September, we've got basically a three-month window for fuel choice to*

get pushed through, or we start all over. I know we still have time, but does the shrinking timeline make

you nervous? Or is it amazing how fast things can get done when the finish line is approaching?

JT: It's a little bit of column A, a little bit of column B. The House Oversight Committee just held a hearing two days ago on natural gas bans by states and municipalities. It was interesting to see another committee within the House schedule a hearing about this issue. Was that hearing intended to elevate it? Was it the House leadership saying, "This is still out there; let's keep this front and center"? I don't think there was any interesting new development—we know there are gas bans out there, and there are philosophical arguments on both sides—but that hearing happened, which was very interesting.

On the Senate side, Senator Mike Lee of Utah, who's the chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, filed legislation right before they went out of session in August dealing with appliance efficiency standards (commonly referred to as EPCA). Within his bill, he looks to put into law basically the Berkeley decision, which says that because the appliances are regulated by the federal government (the Department of Energy), the fuel that supplies them should not be restricted by a state or local government. So that bill coming up toward the end of the session is very promising—at least that conversation is starting. EPCA legislation has already passed the House, so the momentum's already there to see it hopefully pick up in the Senate. It could be something where they have a hearing in September and maybe do a markup (where they actually vote on the bill) after the election. So it's a little bit of hurry up and wait, and I feel like I've said that to you several times.

Ultimately, it comes down to the November election. If the chambers hold where they're at, with Republicans in the majority in both, then that on-ramp to get fuel choice back in legislation is a lot shorter. So ask me on November 4.

TR: *This is one of the things that was new for me when I went to the Government Affairs Academy years ago, just understanding how the government works. To get a bill turned into a law, it has to be approved in the House and in the Senate, and there are a lot of different bills out there that you have to hitch your wagon to. It sounds like we have two wagons we've hitched ourselves to. But this latest one from Mike Lee came up quickly, and from what I'm hearing, the concepts have passed the House. If this goes to a Senate vote, is fuel choice here nationwide?*

JT: They would have to take the House version and the Senate version and reconcile them. The nice thing in all of this is you've got a broad coalition of stakeholders—including HPBA and other fuel and appliance associations—really working behind the scenes to get an acceptable product in the bills, and hopefully improving the process when they do have to reconcile what's in the House versus what's in the Senate.

TR: *What's the process of that? Do they have to revote when they do this?*

JT: If you have differing versions, a few options could come into play. Say the Senate version passes. Then, it could go over to the House, and that could be the vehicle. In a situation like this, it's rare that the Senate would entertain the House version; it's something with the Senate. They like to do their own bills, and they like to package them up with other ones. But it still gives that pathway. The good news is the concepts have already been approved by the House. Now you've just got to find the right vehicle to get it through. The Senate is much more deliberative—they take a lot longer—so to even see the bill in front of the committee will be a really important first step.

TR: *Okay. Well, that's a great update, Jason. What else do we have going on?*

JT: Well, I'm glad you mentioned that you attended the Government Affairs Academy—or, as we call it today, the Government Affairs Leadership Academy. I have some exciting news to share. We've been running this program for 18 years now; I think the first class was back in 2008. It's become one of the most valuable programs and tools that HPBA has to offer. And over time, we've seen participants walk away with more than just advocacy skills. They've grown and stepped into bigger, deeper leadership roles—at their companies, within HPBA, or with the affiliates. That type of growth is what's driving the next chapter for the program. So here's the exciting news: Starting October 1, when the new application window opens, the program will officially be known as the HPBA Leaders Academy.

TR: *I love that, and I want to hear more. What's the vision?*

JT: I think this name reflects where the program is headed, with a much broader emphasis on leadership development and industry-wide education. Advocacy training has always been there, and it will continue to be there, but this is broadening the scope and the lens of the overall program.

And really, the third piece of this evolution, in addition to leadership and advocacy, is industry education. Moving forward, participants will learn how other parts of the industry work—the hearth, patio, and barbecue industry as a whole, not just the part they're in. Most participants come up through one segment or role in their career. But an engineer at a gas fireplace manufacturer and the owner of an independent retail shop see completely different sides of the business, and this program will help close that gap. It will mean going deeper into how the product moves through

design, manufacturing, distribution, retail, installation, and service. It will emphasize codes and standards, which we do today, but broaden that out. It will dive deep into testing, which is such a huge element of wood stove products. And it will investigate the market forces that shape the industry along the way. As leaders in the industry, they want to understand that whole system, to make better decisions for their companies and to represent the industry more credibly in front of a legislator, a supplier, or a board of directors.

TR: *That's great. I've mentioned before that I first heard about the Government Affairs Academy a long time ago. I was a young punk kid trying to figure out my life, and there was a disconnect for me: Why do I care about government affairs? I'm trying to figure out how to make more money and sell fireplaces. So I put it off for a long time. Even the year I went, I was resisting it because I was so busy, and my buddy Grant was in the same boat, and he called me and said, "I'll do it if you do it." After we went to Washington, D.C., for the Government Affairs Academy, we walked away totally changed. We said, "This is the de facto leadership academy of our industry." Even then, the benefits to my career were huge. And I tell everybody: "I don't care if you care anything about government affairs. You've got to go to this thing, because it's going to change the way you lead your company and represent the industry." So it's really neat that government affairs isn't getting minimized, but this thing is a leaders academy, and it's cool that the intentionality of that is being turned up even further.*

JT: Here's why this really matters: The industry doesn't just need people who can speak up in front of their legislators. It needs leaders who can grow and guide their companies, mentor others, and shape the future of the industry from the inside out. Advocating in front of a policymaker

becomes a natural reflex—you just learn to do it. We'll still teach the process and how people are engaged in the political landscape, but now it's so much more. This evolution of the program ensures that participants get that broader toolkit: the confidence to advocate, the skills to lead, and a true understanding of the industry they're leading. I think this is a long-term investment in the bench strength of the industry. Someone pulled you in; you pull in the next person; that person pulls in the next person. That momentum continues to build,

which is a great asset across the board, from HPBA as an organization to our board of directors, the affiliates, and the affiliate committees and boards. With all of that in mind, the application window is opening on October 1.

TR: *That's awesome, Jason, and this has been great. As always, we're thankful for the work that you, HPBA, and HPBAC are doing on our behalf, and it's exciting to know where this new HPBA Leaders Academy is going. Thanks again for everything.*

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