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TALL XIII
Session 6 – California
October 14-18, 2013

Monday, October 14, 2013

It's hard to believe it's already Session 6 – this one and then one more before our international trip! I've been to Sacramento once, but the rest of this trip to California would be completely new to me. The Lubbock/Muleshoe crew flew out bright and early to get there.

California Agricultural Policy Briefing – Mr. Paul Wenger, California Farm Bureau Federation
California Air Policy Issues – Ms. Cynthia Cory, California Farm Bureau Federation

We arrived at the California Farm Bureau Federation Headquarters, but unfortunately did not get to hear the first two presentations thanks to American Airlines and our hotel shuttle. However, these briefings certainly set the stage for what we would hear throughout the rest of the week.

California is number one in the nation for agriculture, even though many people think of it as the place for glitz and glamour. Their agriculture generates about \$37.5 billion per year and their top five products are dairy products, greenhouse and nursery products, grapes, almonds, and cattle and calves. California growers produce a lot of specialty crops, which certainly is different from Texas. More than 60 percent of California's farms are less than 50 acres in size.

The state certainly has issues with air quality. In fact 2005 brought about new air quality regulations for agriculture, which have impacted producers. This was the first that our group would hear firsthand about the regulatory challenges California producers face.

California Department of Food and Agriculture – Secretary Karen Ross

Secretary Ross leads the California Department of Food and Agriculture, an appointed position. She said that California and Texas have some similar issues including those related to being a border state. She said their biggest challenge is invasive species and mitigating animal disease. The California Food and Agricultural Code defines "invasive pests" as "animals, plants, insects, and plant and animal diseases, or groups of those animals, plants, insects, and plant and animal diseases, including seeds, eggs, spores, or other matter capable of propagation for which introduction into California would or likely would cause economic or environmental harm." Their impacts range from clogging water pipes to killing wildlife, from ruining crops to posing a human health hazard. Ross said they have lost 33 percent of their general fund support for this issue.

Secretary Ross noted that other issues include water and labor. One question, she said, is how to collaborate better across the cabinet. She said they must think about a more integrated multiple resource management strategy in the face of these budget cuts.

Climate change is a big deal, she said. Farmers are willing to adapt, especially with specialty crops. California also has a fast-growing dairy industry in number of cows and volume of milk. However, California does their own pricing, and their pooling and pricing system reflects what was created 50 years ago which has caused many dairy producers to leave the state. She said more than 80 percent of their milk production goes into manufacturing cheese and other products.

Secretary Ross said that the tree nut industry is growing in California. But another crop, marijuana, has brought about some issues for the state. Medical marijuana can be grown in California. She said the tax revenue is promising, but it's "hard to get excited" about it because of the competition for resources.

As for the water situation, Secretary Ross aid the status quo, the 50-year-old delta system, is “not sustainable” and was built for a population half what it is today (California is the most populous state in the nation). She said they must work with water districts and others to develop other systems and determine ways to store water. She said that some desalinization projects are coming online, and technology is making that much more realistic – we can learn from Israel, she said.

However, Secretary Ross said, since so few people in California work in agriculture, it’s much more difficult to get people to understand its importance.

California Cattlemen Association – Justin Oldfield

Justin Oldfield, vice president of government relations for the California Cattlemen Association, told us about the state’s vibrant livestock industry, which brings in \$2.83 billion in cash receipts annually. Cattle are the number 4 commodity in California, and there are 5.3 million cattle in the state. Dairy and beef combined make California the second-largest livestock state in the nation. Ranchers own or manage 34 million acres. 53 percent of California is federally owned.

Some challenges for the industry, Oldfield said, include business and input costs, regulatory impacts, cattle markets, consumer confidence, land use, and future generations - a lot of people want to be in the industry but there's no room for them, he said. Another issue is labor.

Tuesday, October 15, 2013

Tour of Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta

We began our day early with a morning bus tour of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. I took some of the most beautiful photos during this portion of our trip! Ara Azhderian, water policy administrator for the San Luis Delta Mendota Water Authority, and Jason Peltier, chief deputy general manager for the Westlands Water District, joined us for this tour.

A little background: most of California’s precipitation occurs in the northern half of the state, but the high water usage, along with the people, primarily are in the southern half. In fact, southern California consumes 80 percent of the water in the state while northern California produces 75 percent of the water. However, drought certainly has been a significant limiting factor.

In the late 1880s, a system of dams and reservoirs was built, and water moves through canals and aqueducts. Fresh water from the 700,000-acre Delta supports 25 million Californians and 3 million acres of land used for agriculture, and generates \$400 billion annually into the state economy. This area includes the famous Napa Valley. The Delta is inverted, which is unusual.

Some challenges for the Delta include invasive species, pollutants, and even recreational activities.

Jones Pumping Plant and Tracy Fish Facility – Byron, CA

These two facilities work together to move water while protecting fish. The pumping plant lifts water almost 200 feet from the Delta into the Delta-Mendota Canal, which flows more than 100 miles southward and into some of the rich agricultural areas of California. The plant is capable of pumping a total of 8,500 acre-feet of water daily. Nearby, the Tracy Fish Facility ensures that threatened and endangered fish are out of the way of these tremendously huge pumps, which in turn ensures compliance with regulations.

Ingomar Packing Company – Los Banos, CA

Tomatoes everywhere! It’s easy to just pick up that can of diced tomatoes or tomato paste without really thinking about the processing behind it. Ingomar Packing Company is where that magic

happens. They are 100 percent grower owned and operate two plants. Many of the tomatoes they process come from growers in the San Joaquin Valley – how’s that for locally sourced?!

Woolgrowers Restaurant/California Water Issues Briefing – Los Banos, CA

I typically send our itinerary to the rest of my office so they can see our activities for the week. The first comment from my boss was that he was looking forward to my report on the Woolgrowers Restaurant! I posted a picture to Facebook and Instagram and immediately got several “likes” from my friends in the cotton industry who had visited there before. It definitely lived up to the hype! While we were there, Mike Wade, executive director for the California Farm Water Coalition, talked to us about water issues. Farming in the San Joaquin Valley has drastically been impacted by poor regulatory decisions designed to save fish, which certainly is noble but has cost producers water that could have grown feed for livestock and a variety of crops designed to feed people. According to a document provided by the CFWC, water supply cuts in just two months sent 237 billion gallons of water to the ocean, enough to irrigate 260,000 acres of farmland. It’s regulations like these that have cost billions to the SJV growing region, which is responsible for producing half of the nation’s fruits and vegetables. And when you lose that much water, coupled with a drought...it certainly isn’t a pretty picture. But the CFWC provides factual information about how water is used in agriculture. The information packet Mr. Wade distributed is quite impressive and certainly could be a model for how we communicate our agricultural issues.

RPAC – custom almond hulling and processing plant – Los Banos, CA

From Woolgrowers, we went to RPAC, a custom almond hulling and processing plant. Almonds are exclusive to California, where 82 percent of the world’s almond crop is grown. When you visit the RPAC website, they have a line that says, “We love almonds, we process almonds, we package almonds, we sort almonds, we sell almonds, we eat almonds, we sleep almonds, you can get almonds here.” That’s definitely the truth! Their facility handles almonds from the time they come off of the tree to the time they’re shipped. Most of the processing is automated, making their labor costs more manageable. However, one portion that isn’t automated is their grading – because of their high safety and quality standards, people still ensure that these almonds are good to go into our food supply. The process we saw as described by tour host Paul Parreira reminded me a lot of peanut processing. Demand for almonds has only been increasing, and it was California’s number one state agricultural export in 2012. California Secretary of Agriculture Karen Ross said in a Los Angeles Times article, “It feels like almonds became rock stars overnight.” However, again, the rapid increase in acreage coupled with drought and regulations means that water availability will continue to be a significant issue for this industry.

We continued down the highway into Monterey (beautiful sunset!) and enjoyed an evening on the water.

Wednesday, October 16, 2013

Dole Fresh Vegetables and Food Safety – Soledad, CA

Now, I purchase a LOT of lettuce, bagged and whole, and always look for the Dole label. This tour only strengthened my appreciation for this brand and their high commitment to food safety and product integrity. Nye Hardy, senior food safety manager, greeted us and took us directly to the harvest fields. She mentioned first that those who are involved in harvest (the “dirt”) do not work in the plant, which makes sense from a cross-contamination standpoint. This was the first signal that we were about to experience an incredible operation of which very few people get to see behind the scenes, as we did, clad in our hairnets (even for beards!) and gloves, even in the field. Again, food safety is paramount.

Walking down into the field, we passed by rows and rows of colorful lettuce, ready to be harvested. Hardy said they constantly monitor fields for pathogens and also wildlife. They test food in the field and if they find three pathogens, they'll plow the field. We watched as workers harvested romaine lettuce, deftly and skillfully removing the outer leaves and placing the rest into a box, ready to be packaged and delivered as soon as possible to markets.

From the field, we went to the Dole Frsh Vegetables Value-Added Plant, where we saw bagged lettuce going through the packaging process. Their hard work makes it easy for us as consumers to swing by our produce shelf and pick up a bag of lettuce, ready to go straight from the bag to the plate with absolutely no effort.

Creekside Farms, Greenfield, CA

For the past 25 years, Creekside Farms has been producing quality flowers and herbs and selling natural artisanal wreaths and garlands. Let me tell you...the smell was incredible! Today, you can find Creekside Farms' handiwork sold worldwide and in stores such as Williams-Sonoma and Pottery Barn. They produce their wares from field to finished wreath. This family-owned operation has made some tremendous strides in their relatively short history!

Scheid Vineyards, Inc., Greenfield, CA

We couldn't visit California without a winery stop! Scheid Vineyards, a family-owned operation, has been producing grapes for more than 40 years. Today, they own 4,200 acres of vineyards and sell the majority of their production as custom-made wines to other wineries. Six people on their vineyard crew have been with the operation for more than three decades. We were treated to a tour and tasting, and the sheer magnitude of their operation was impressive – as was the wine!

Dinner at Harris Ranch with California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association

We boarded the bus and headed to Harris Ranch for a special dinner opportunity with Don Cameron with Terranova Ranch, and Earl Williams, President and CEO of the California Cotton Growers and Ginners Association. The cotton industry in California certainly has taken a hit in the past several years, with significant acreage decreases due to several factors, including water availability and pricing which has caused producers to grow other crops with a higher demand and better prices, such as almonds, instead of cotton. For example, in 1981, California cotton growers planted more than 1.5 million acres of cotton – all upland – and produced 3.5 million bales. In 2013, it is estimated that only 93,000 acres of upland cotton were planted with 315,000 bales produced.

However, high-grading Pima cotton has become an opportunity for California growers. Pima also is known as ELS cotton, which stands for extra-long staple, and is used in finer fabrics and garments. California growers began growing Pima cotton in substantial amounts until the late 1980s, when they started with 900 acres. In 2013, 187,000 acres of Pima cotton were planted and 610,000 bales were produced. Although Pima production has been more stable than upland, planted acreage still is decreasing. In 2011, California growers planted 274,000 acres of Pima cotton.

The marketing effort behind Pima cotton has been excellent, as key partnerships have been forged through Supima, the promotional organization of American Pima cotton growers, with retailers including Brooks Brothers, L.L. Bean, Lands' End, and major department stores. The Supima brand ensures the highest quality standards, and the Supima® trademark is the consumer's only guarantee that a product is made of 100% American Pima cotton.

It was very kind of Terranova Ranch and the CCGGA to sponsor this dinner, and provide an enjoyable evening for us while learning about the California cotton industry!

Thursday, October 17, 2013

Westside Salinity Issues Briefing/Farm Tour

Thursday already? We just got here! This morning started with breakfast at the hotel where Mr. John Diener, president of Red Rock Ranch, joined us to discuss Westside salinity issues. He noted that agriculture simply needs votes to stay viable; water demands are shifting. Seventy percent of the votes come from more heavily populated areas in the south, where there is little understanding of agriculture. Desalinization is next on the horizon for the state.

From there, we took a bus tour, beginning with the Harris Feeding Company, an 800-acre modern feedlot with the capacity to feed 250,000 head. Currently there are more than 100,000 head. The Harris Ranch brand is known across the state for its quality and value. The feedyard unfortunately has been a target for animal rights activists who say the feedyard is an example of “factory farming,” even going so far as to commit arson by destroying 14 cattle trucks in January 2012. The Animal Liberation Front took credit.

The remainder of the trip down the highway truly highlighted the diversity of agriculture in the area – we saw vineyards, cotton, lettuce, citrus orchards, and almonds. They do have issues with drift control, and they use ground spray rigs. Anytime any kind of agricultural chemical is applied, a representative from a government agency must be present and permits must be obtained.

Exeter-Ivanhoe Citrus Association, Exeter, CA

We continued on into Exeter and stopped at the Exeter-Ivanhoe Citrus Association. Mr. Paul Story, director of grower services for California Citrus Mutual, led us on a tour of the facility, where we again saw automation integrating with human interaction. When the oranges arrive, a crew of people check them for abnormalities and discard as necessary before the grading process. After grading, the oranges are packaged.

California Citrus Mutual – Exeter, CA

After the tour, we continued on into town for lunch and a conversation with Mr. Joel Nelsen, president of California Citrus Mutual. Let me first say that this man is very well known at the California State Capitol and has an unmatched passion for advocacy. He is no-nonsense and to the point, sharing his thoughts and opinions as candidly with us as he would with anyone else. California Citrus Mutual is the voice of the citrus grower, comparable to what we do for cotton here at PCG. In fact, reading through their material Mr. Nelsen distributed to us, I gathered ideas for terminology to use when describing our efforts here! California is the number one producing state of fresh citrus and second only to Florida for overall citrus production nationwide. It was refreshing to hear Mr. Nelsen talk about efforts across commodities to positively influence legislation for agriculture. Mr. Nelsen said that the California cotton industry is one of their allies. One of the most recent movements in the citrus industry have been seedless mandarins, commonly known as Cuties and other brand names, he said. Membership in CCM is voluntary.

Eurodrip USA, Madera, CA

We had a unique opportunity to visit Eurodrip USA, a manufacturer of drip irrigation products, to learn more about this method which is gaining popularity right here on the High Plains. Drip irrigation increases efficiency by delivering water directly to the plant underground.

Sequoia National Park

Our last adventure for the week was a trip to the Sequoia National Park. It took longer to weave our way through the park to get to our destination than it does to drive from Lubbock to Amarillo! But it was completely worth it. We made it to see the largest Sequoia in the world, the General Sherman,

just as the sun was setting. I marveled at how quiet the park was; it added to the majesty of our surroundings.

Friday, October 18, 2013

Overall Impressions

I think one of the biggest takeaways for me from this session is that I am just as guilty as the people I get so irritated at for not being knowledgeable of and “understanding” High Plains agriculture, and taking our food and fiber production for granted, when it comes to California. When I purchase a cotton T-shirt, or buy a jar of peanut butter, or snag that last loaf of whole-wheat bread from the shelf, I consider where it came from. But when it comes to food that isn’t in my own back yard, such as fruits, vegetables, and other specialty crops, I was much less educated and sadly even more unaware unless they’re Texas Ruby Red grapefruit or Floydada pumpkins – until this trip. Coming to California, an agriculture powerhouse even in the face of legislative and regulatory challenges, made me see agriculture in a different light. These growers are resilient yet innovative, doing everything they can to feed the nation and the world with limitations that producers in other states don’t have to deal with. Thanks to this trip, I am more appreciative of what we have here in Texas. It’s sad to hear ag leaders say they are more concerned about their state government than the federal government – that certainly is not the case here, although we do have our own issues, especially when it comes to water. One thing I can say about California, regulations or no regulations, is that it’s a scary glimpse into what Texas could become if we aren’t proactive. It reinforced my belief that local control is the absolute best way to manage our resources and protect agriculture, especially on the High Plains. We must stay engaged with our elected officials and ensure that we send our absolute best to Austin and also to Washington, DC. When we have visitors from California come to Lubbock with organizations like the National Cotton Council, as they do from time to time, I now have a whole list of conversation topics and can share with and learn from them as well. This trip was an incredible experience and I am grateful for the opportunity.