



Matt Gruhlkey, #11

**TALL XIV Session 3 – Austin, TX / Sonora, TX
January 20-24, 2015**

***State Government: Issues and Policies
“Leadership, Legislation, Laws”***

West Texas Session – Sonora, TX

TUESDAY, JANUARY 20, 2015

TALL XIV Session 3 began as we all met in Austin at the DoubleTree Guest Suites Hotel. It was really good to see everyone again and catch up on each other’s lives over the last three months. It was even easier to restart past conversations and begin to continue to strengthen the bond between all of us.

Oath of Office Ceremony, Texas State Capital, South Steps

TALL XIV Session 3 began with a tremendous opportunity to partake in a new era in Texas history as Governor Elect Greg Abbott and Lt. Governor Elect Dan Patrick each took the oath of office. The weather was perfect as thousands of people crowded around the Texas State Capital steps to witness the events. The crowd was diverse and large as we all listened to the inaugural speeches. The pageantry and respect for the office was very event on this day. It felt a little like we had all stepped back into Texas history and were witnessing an event from long ago. I was struck by the peaceful transfer of power that took place and what a privilege it was to live in such a great State that has been blessed by God and His blessings. The cannon salute at the end and the great barbeque lunch afterwards set the tone for the rest of the week. I was an honor to dress up and take part in such an historic event.

Overview of Legislative Seminar

Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz and Joe Cox, Assistance Vice Chancellor of External Relations

It was great to again be around Dr. Jim and enjoy his humor and his passion for agriculture. Dr. Jim gave us a brief overview of what to expect for the week and who we would meet and how to present ourselves. Mr. Cox gave us a great overview of how business gets done in the State Capital. I enjoyed his wit and positive attitude. Given his credentials and experiences, he truly was humble and sought to show us the inner workings of the Capital and politics. He outlined the 140 day session which only occurs every 2 years. We learned that Texas is the 12th largest economy in the world. Changes to the statutes of Texas were designed to be slow and methodical. He shared that the system in Texas was designed to “kill” bills in an effort to get just the right legislation for the betterment of Texas. Mr. Cox highlighted that staying connected with the staff of Representatives and Senators was just as important as knowing the Representatives and Senators themselves. I enjoyed hearing Mr. Cox speak and the wisdom that he had to share with all of us.

Kyle Kacal, Representative – District 12

It was good to meet a fellow Aggie who represents District 12. Immediately, Mr. Kacal grabbed our attention with his great smile and positive attitude. We learned that he grew up in agriculture and was involved in the beef cattle business. He gave us a great overview of the issues that he felt needed to be addressed in the upcoming meetings in Austin. Water would, of course, be a very big topic that encompassed all Texans. Animal disease traceability and new employees within the Texas Dept. of Agriculture were issues to deal with as well. Also, the issues of D.O.T. and transportation would certainly need to be addressed over the coming years to manage the tremendous population growth in Texas. Finally, Mr. Kacal shared his most important message..... that we all need to share our story about agriculture. We all must tell others of the great service that agriculture does for everyone. Agriculture must get better at this or we risk dire consequences.

George P. Bush, Texas Land Commissioner

I had the privilege of providing the introduction for this speaker. It was a great honor to meet a member of the Bush family and learn about his unique experiences growing up around so many great men. Mr. Bush’s past spoke of a great education, military service, private sector success and great charitable achievements as well. Mr. Bush was very humble and truly wished to serve the state of Texas with his talents. He highlighted some of the pressing issues that he would address.... Protect military veterans, protect private property rights, being a custodian of state history and serving the State first before self. I was impressed by his poise and selflessness.

Bryan Shaw, Chairman, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality

Mr. Shaw gave us a brief history of his background in environmental affairs in Texas. The list of his accomplishments was very long and certainly qualified him for his current position at TCEQ. He is in a role that most would not envy. He has the task of balancing private sector growth with the protection of the environment for the good of all Texans. He gave a highlight of the issues that he sees as the most pressing for his organization..... water rights (junior vs. senior), odor issues and how to manage them, EPA’s new rules on coal fired plants, etc. Mr. Shaw truly seemed to have a servant’s heart and was certainly qualified to be a success.

Ryan Guillen, Representative District 31

Mr. Guillen gave us all a very good overview of all the pressing issues for the State of Texas and outlined what would likely pass and what would not pass. Despite being a democrat in a republican House and Senate, Mr. Guillen shows a true bipartisan spirit and has served many years in state government. I was impressed to learn that he won his firm race at the age of 24. We learned that Texas, due to success in many areas including oil and gas, has a budget surplus of \$7.5 billion. This was a very impressive number given the financial woes of many states in the US. He also shared that State of Texas has \$113 billion in total but a spending limit of \$107 billion per state law. Border security, oil and gas industries, water supply, tuition deregulation, open carry laws and many others would be the main issues of the next government cycle. I enjoyed hearing Mr. Guillen share his wisdom about how government in Texas involves much more cooperation between parties that at the national level.

2015 Texas Inauguration – Future of Texas Ball

The whole group had a great time experiencing the Texas Ball. It was a very festive event that allowed all of us an opportunity to dress in our finest attire and enjoy the beginning of a new administration. While hanging out with 5,000 to 6,000 fellow ball attenders, we were able to experience something that most Texans miss. It was a great night of music, conversation and experiences that will last a lifetime.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 21, 2015

Lois Kolkhorst – State Senator District 18

Ms. Kolkhorst was a very engaging Senator. She really seemed to care about the issues and sought to answer all our questions. Her area covers 21 counties in district 18. She expressed to us that the issues of health care, the issues of Medicaid expansion, the lack of mental health services in rural areas and health saving accounts were important to her. She expressed to us the concern she has about healthcare in the wake of Obamacare and how it could affect Texas. She told us that she certainly wants Texas to have great healthcare, but to balance that with personal responsibility and reasonableness. She gave us an in depth overview of how the State of Texas interacts with the US Government via Medicare, Medicaid and other programs. We really enjoyed hearing her speak. Her practical and down to earth approach to these issues was refreshing.

Kevin Patteson – Exec Administrator Texas Water Development Board

Mr. Patteson gave us a detailed overview of the functions of the Texas Water Development Board and it interacts with Texans across the state. Water certainly is a very important issue in Texas. Mr. Patteson explained that the TWDB has 3 board members appointed by the Governor. It is comprised of 16 regional planning groups across the state. These groups decide which water projects are pursued in the state. Bonds are issued to finance the projects and the loans are paid back over 20 to 30 year. Very specific criteria is required on all new water development projects. Mr. Patteson estimates that \$27 billion is needed to fund water development projects over the coming years. We were all amazed at the size and scope of water project needs in Texas and certainly now understand the great importance that water plays in the future of Texas.

Michael Treagor – Economic development, Governor’s office

Mr. Treagor gave us an overview of how the office of the Governor seeks to encourage international business and trade with Texas. He discussed issues such as possible trade with Cuba, trade with Poland and other countries as Texas seeks to continue to show it to be a world player in trade and commerce. We learned that this department is the largest in the office of the Governor and is made up of 250 people. Texas One is a program that seeks to promote Texas to the rest of the world.

Glenn Hegar – Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts

I was very impressed with Mr. Hegar. He explained his deep history in Texas agriculture and how his family, through many generations, has had a vested interest in the success of Texas. Mr. Hegar explained the role of the comptroller and how this office influences business at the state capital. I had no idea how important the estimates for the health of the economy, from the state comptroller, were to the budget process. Mr. Hegar enlightened us on how the oil and gas industry as well as agriculture have positively influenced the revenues for the State of Texas over the last few years. He also elaborated on the effect of lower crude oil prices and how that affects the budget that will be passed in the upcoming congressional session. Mr. Hegar seemed very down to earth and truly listened to our questions and took great interest in what we had to say as well. He has a servants’ heart and is a real asset to the State of Texas.

Texas Ag Council Meeting

We all made our way over the Texas Ag Council meeting and were able to listen in to issues affecting many groups across Texas. Many ag groups from all over the state gave their input on important issues. We could tell that this organization is very helpful to the cause of agriculture. We were glad to be a part of the meeting and meal following. Lindsay Kennedy from TALL XIII gave a presentation on the trip to Brazil that their class took. She did a nice job describing the richness of Brazilian agriculture and how the group was affected in a positive way by this international experience.

TALL Alumni Meeting

Tanya Foerster started off the meeting as the new President of the TALL Alumni Association. Right away we all knew that her energy and enthusiasm would translate to an effective presidency of the TALL Alumni Association in the year to come. The meeting proceeded with old and new business and then we were able to hear an update on legislative issues from the Chief of Staff for Senator Charles Schwertner, Thomas Holloway. He reminded us that 96% of all farms in Texas are owned by families. The Texas congress must pass a balanced budget per law. And main issues to discuss in the upcoming session were water, roads, taxes and property rights. In addition, we were able to hear from Gaye McElwain, Director of Public Outreach, for the Texas Railroad Commission. Ms. McElwain gave a great presentation on what the Railroad Commission does on a daily basis as well as the oversight it has. I was amazed at the reach of the Railroad Commission. The 428,000 miles of pipelines across Texas that fall under the Commission’s purview was amazing. The monitoring of oil and gas production and the other duties performed impressed upon me the service to Texas that this Commission performs. With 807 employees statewide, the Commission has a large footprint but quite a bit of territory to cover as well.

“A Tribute to Texas Leadership” - TALL Alumni Reception

We all had the pleasure to be part of the annual TALL Alumni Reception in Austin. We were able to meet and mingle with quite a few TALL Alumni and very distinguished guests. The food and drinks provided for a great atmosphere to make connections with many important decision makers. As we all sat down for the program, Dr. Jim once again set the tone for the event in his positive and passionate way. We heard remarks from distinguished guests such as Doug Steele (Director Texas A&M AgriLife Extension), John Sharp (Chancellor, Texas A&M University System), Bill Dugas (Vice Chancellor and Dean of College of Ag & Life Sciences), and Sid Miller (newly elected Commissioner of Agriculture). It was a privilege to hear comments from all these great leaders in Texas. After all our group introduced ourselves to the crowd, Dr. Jim opened up the podium to Jim Prewitt who recognized the honoree of the Texas Agricultural Lifetime Achievement Award. Mr. Marcus Hill was given the award. I thoroughly enjoyed his remarks and wisdom and his ability to remember small details about the many people he had met over the years. Mr. Hill was very deserving of the award.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 22, 2015

Lt. General Joe Weber – Texas Dept of Transportation

General Weber was a great start to the day. His enthusiasm and common sense were refreshing. His many years of service to Texas A&M as V.P. of Student Affairs was impressive. General Weber gave us a great overview of the Texas DOT and how large of an organization it is. The size and scope of operations involved and the over 200,000 lane miles of state Highways to maintain was impressive. I had no idea that the State of Texas had 52,000 bridges. And General Weber pointed out the sobering fact that 3,500 people die each year on Texas highways. He wants to greatly reduce that number, if not eliminate it. The DOT, under General Weber seems to be an organization committed to doing an efficient job to allow Texans the freedom to travel safely across the state. General Weber's commitment to the safety of his employees was very admirable. After hearing General Weber speak, I have a greater appreciation of all that DOT does to make Texas a great state.

Joe Straus – Speak of the House

Our group had the distinct privilege of hearing briefly from Mr. Straus. He was gracious enough to give of his time to us despite the very busy week in Austin following the inauguration. He gave us an overview of what issues would come up before the Congress and how both the House and Senate might vote on them. I was impressed by his professionalism and his humility. His background in animal agriculture in Texas was good to see. We need leaders in Austin who understand ag and its implications for the State.

Jason Fearneyhough – Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture

It was great to get to meet Mr. Fearneyhough and learn about his background in agriculture in Wyoming. He had a positive attitude that exuded confidence and humility at the same time. He brings in a wealth of experience from his past positions and certainly can share his great ideas with the State of Texas. He seemed like a great fit for the job and truly has a servants' heart. I look forward to seeing where Mr. Fearneyhough goes as his career progresses in Texas.

Trent Ashby – Representative District 57

It was good to get reacquainted with Mr. Ashby. I remembered his positive leadership at Texas A&M while we both attended there. Mr. Ashby gave us an overview of how he came to politics and what issues he sees coming to the floor for discussion and vote. He gave us a great overview of the budget process and also how natural resources have positively affected the State of Texas. Mr. Ashby had a positive attitude and quiet confidence. When you combine that with his humility and work ethic, he will likely go far in politics.

Meeting with Senator Kel Seliger and Representative John Smithee

We thoroughly enjoyed the chance to spend time with Senator Kel Seliger and staff and the staff of John Smithee. A group of 3 of us went as a group to introduce ourselves to each office and express our concerns about issues coming before Texas in the upcoming session. Each office was happy to sit down with us during a busy time of the year to meet us and listen to our issues. This experience was very beneficial and taught us the process of gaining access to our Senator and Representative and how to be considerate of their time. It was a great experience.

Kody Bessent – Legislative Affairs, High Plains Water District

It was good to see Kody again. He was a colleague of mine while he worked as for Texas Wheat Producers in Amarillo. Kody gave us an overview of how laws of surface and ground water work in the State of Texas. We all learned a great deal about the intricacies of the law and how it affects all Texans. Kody was gracious and listened to our questions and answered them with clarity. I was once again reminded of the delicate balance that water laws play as we all weigh the needs of urban vs. rural and once region vs. another. Water will continue to be a very important topic (maybe the most important topic) as we move further into the 20th century in Texas. It will call for great leadership to manage the needs of many and still maintain freedom that is a hallmark of life in Texas.

Clayton Wolf – Director of Wildlife, Texas Parks and Wildlife

Mr. Wolf gave us an overview of what the Texas Parks and Wildlife does on a daily basis and how his role has changed over the years at the department. We had a great discussion of many topics regarding wildlife and how to manage it properly and still protect people and domestic causes as well. The vast number of species and ecosystems in Texas was impressive. It was a reminder of the vastness of Texas and how special a state it really is. Mr. Wolf had a direct and no-nonsense approach to his job that was refreshing. He approached his job with reason and wisdom. It's great to have servant leaders such as Mr. Wolf serving Texas.

Mary Luedeker – Texas Animal Health Commission

Very good presentation by Mary. She gave a great and detailed explanation of the role of Texas Animal Health Commission and how it tries to safeguard agriculture and the public in times of crises such as disease outbreak, wildfires, hurricanes and other disasters. I learned a tremendous amount from Mary's presentation. Prior to that day, I really had no idea how the Commission fit into the governmental framework of Texas. It put my mind at ease that great people such as Mary were serving Texas and protecting agriculture and the public on a daily basis and preparing Texas for disasters that might come to our state.

Reception at State Capital – Lt. Governor’s Reception Room

We had the privilege of having a great reception at a very historic room at the State Capital. The history of the room was very evident as we all entered. We were very appreciative of Senator Schwertner’s sponsorship of the room for our event. The Texas Poultry Federation as well the Texas Pork Producers provided great hors d’ oeuvres and drinks for the event. We had the privilege of listening to great man who served many years at the Capital, Mr. Mike Morrissey. He shared his wisdom and knowledge about the inner workings of politics in Austin. It was very interesting to listen to him speak and answer questions. His vast knowledge and common sense were very evident to us all. We all enjoyed the event and it was a great end to our time at the Capital building.

Certified Hereford Beef Social

The night ended with a great event sponsored by the Texas Hereford Breeders, Certified Hereford Beef and Texas Beef Council. We all were able to slow down a little and enjoy great food and fellowship as we all discussed the events of the past week. It was a great time to unpack what we all had learned and discuss what lies ahead for our group as we look to Washington D.C. and New York City in April.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 23, 2015

“Psychological Types” – Dr. Richard Gant

As we started the day, we were able to enjoy a great breakfast sponsored by Texas Association of Dairymen. Then Dr. Gant began his session and he kept us laughing and paying close attention the whole time. As we took the Myers Briggs psychological test and shared our results with each other via activities, it was very eye opening to see the different personality types in our group. We had a great time learning from Dr. Gant how to relate to people of different types and how we can take these techniques and apply them at work and in our personal lives. I certainly decided that the team I am a part of at work will need to take this knowledge and put it to good use in our business activities.

West Texas Session - Sonora, Texas and beyond

This was an optional part of the trip, but many in the group chose to participate. Immediately when arriving in town, we were treated with great courtesy and friendship. Our tour of the Ice House Museum in Sonora was great. It’s as if we stepped back in time to see how life was for the first settlers of the area. And the dinner following the tour of the museum was very good. We had a chance to meet local Sonora leaders in agriculture and hear a great speaker during the meal. Mr. Bob Malone, former CEO of British Petroleum, gave us a great speech. He shared his wisdom and past experiences from his long and varied career. We all enjoyed his talk immensely and appreciated his willingness to answer all our questions.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 24, 2015

Texas A&M Research Station – outside Sonora

We all loaded the bus and headed for the Research Station early Saturday morning. It was a cool and clear morning. We were treated to an authentic chuck wagon breakfast. The food and company was great! Everyone enjoyed the warm hospitality.

Dr. Charles Taylor

Dr. Taylor gave us a great overview of the history of the Research Station and the unique landscape around Sonora and how it required special management techniques to allow success. He showed us great old photos of a time gone by when many people would come for several days to learn about new management techniques and spent time together.

Water Conservation – Jim Polonis and Caroline Runge

Both Jim and Caroline gave a good overview of the complexities of the aquifer systems in the Edwards Plateau and how each required its own management system. We learned about the many facets of the aquifers and how the ground water and surface water laws affect the region. I learned a great deal about the huge impact these areas have on this part of Texas and the management and compromise required by all to preserve this resource.

USDA Wildlife Services – Alan Armstead & Stan Cottle

This presentation was very interesting regarding the predators in the area that cause major issues with the beef cattle and sheep/goat industries. The terrain of the area lends itself to tough conditions to protect livestock from deadly predators. The different techniques used to eliminate the predators were really interesting. The problems caused by wild hogs has been tremendous and poses a real threat to the area, as well as many parts of Texas.

Tour of the Sheep/Goat Facilities – Seco Mayfield & Dr. Erika Campbell

Both speakers gave a great background and current status of the sheep and goat industry in Sonora. Many changes have taken place over the years as market conditions created challenges to the status quo. The High Cross Vineyard is an example of adaptation to the current market conditions and local climate to create a more profitable business. The group learned that wool and mohair have different values at market, and each animal that produces the products have pros and cons in regard to production. It was interesting that at one time, 17 million pounds of wool was produced in the US each year, but now only about 1 million pounds is produced currently. In addition, meat goats have become popular as ethnic populations have created an increase in demand for that product. Both presentations were very interesting.

Dr. Charles Taylor – prescribed burning to control juniper infestation

Dr. Taylor gave us a great overview of the huge problem that juniper trees pose to the landscape and how prescribed burning at various intervals can really be effective. The group took a bus tour of the research areas where differing intervals of prescribed burning had been used to test the control of juniper trees. I was amazed at the vigor of the juniper trees and certainly understood the need to control them before they overtook the whole landscape.

Deer Breeding Facility – Dermody Ranch

The group proceeded to travel to the Dermody Ranch to learn more about their deer breeding facility. The operation was very well kept and organized. The owner gave a great presentation and explained in detail the process that they go through to select the very best stock for game ranches across Texas. The capital investment just to get started in this industry was impressive. However, the payoff could be tremendous if the right niche market could be found. The deer antlers on display was very impressive. There were some tremendous examples of normal and exotic antlers. I could see that the owner and staff truly loved what they do and were passionate about it. The group was able to take a tour of the animal processing facility where they handle live animals via a special handling system. It was very interesting to learn of the special precautions taken when dealing with wild animals.

X Bar Ranch – reception and meal

The final event of the week was a great reception and delicious meal at the X Bar Ranch. Stan Meador and crew provided a great setting to relax and get to know each other more. We were reunited with ag leaders that we met at the depot for dinner the night before and had a chance to introduce ourselves to the group. Stan gave a great presentation on his journey to where he is today and how his ranch has become a unique way to allow non-agricultural people to experience the great outdoors. We also were given a talk about Christoval Winery near El Dorado, TX. It was very interesting how the owners came about being in the winery business and to hear of their journey to incorporate a wedding chapel and reception hall with the winery.

Take away/Recap:

Another great session of TALL XIV! The trip to Austin and Sonora was another great experience for me. The exposure to many ag leaders in Austin and Sonora once again impressed upon me how vast and deep the footprint of ag is in Texas. It was a great privilege to be exposed to so much in such a short time. Our group was able to get to know each other even more and continue to build on friendships. I am once again reminded of the privilege of being in the TALL program. I am truly thankful for all the generous sponsors who not only donate their resources but also their time. I look forward to meeting again with my classmates in April 2015 in Washington D.C / NYC as we continue on this journey to learn more about ourselves, others and the great business of agriculture that we all call home.