

**Lee Burton, #5**  
**TALL XV**  
**Session 3 – Austin**  
**January 17-21, 2017**

**State Government: Issues and Policies “Leadership, Legislation, Laws”**  
**Tuesday, January 17, 2017**

**Atmospheric Water Generation Demonstration:**

**Mr. Moses A West**  
**Joey Estrada**

It was so great to get back together with our cohort for what would undoubtedly become another jam-packed eventful week. To start off, we were welcomed at Camp Mabry military base to be introduced to an innovative machine that actually takes atmospheric water vapor, runs it through a filtration system, and delivers potable water! I had no idea this was even possible. We all know that water is a crucial part of our daily lives and with 1000 people moving to the State of Texas every day, we must embrace any and all forms of water generation. It’s exciting to see such technology coming into play for that effort. Housed in a simple shipping container, the AWG5000 is the most advanced system in operation and can produce up to 2200 gallons of potable water per day in an energy efficient manner!

Coming from an area of the State, Shackelford County, that has no reliable groundwater aquifer, water security became a very real concern to us during the previous drought. The lake that provides our water supply reached as low as 12% of capacity which had many residents fearful for our future. Technology like this on the horizon gives me great hope for situations like that going forward.

**Legislative Overview:**

**Mr. Joe Cox**  
**Ms. Cristina Cornejo**

After checking into our rooms for the week, we walked over to the Capitol Annex which would become our classroom for the next couple of days. It was nostalgic to walk the same halls as so many of our State’s historical leaders from years past. The granite structure gave a me a great sense of pride in our State as we took in its beautiful design. Just like our State, the quality construction conveys a sense of something that is built to withstand the test of time.

Mr. Cox and Ms. Cornejo represent Texas Agrilife’s External Affairs. They gave us a brief overview of things on their agenda for this current Legislative Session. They highlighted what would become a recurring theme from all our presenters about the fact that this current fiscal budget will be somewhat tight given the reduction in State revenue from a depressed energy market in our economy from years past. Nevertheless, their efforts continue to provide value to agriculture by simply educating our State Representatives on the endeavors of our State’s

food and fiber sectors. With so many of our leaders representing urban settings, it's very important that we keep the rural areas on their radar for decision making.

**"Agriculture priorities for the upcoming legislative session":**

**The Honorable Kyle Kacal – District 21**

Mr. Kacal is from the Brazos Valley area of our state. He claims to be the only active production ag representative in our Legislature. He is a graduate of Texas A&M and the TCU Ranch Management Program. One of the things he was sure to point out was his concern for the people that really don't know what we do and how we do it in ag. He's a strong proponent of "advocating" through social media efforts in order to broaden the production mindset into the urban societies. A few of the current issues he sees for this session include:

- Balancing the State budget
- Increasing weight limits on trucking
- Fight against high-speed rail for its impact on private land owners
- Chronic Wasting Disease in deer herds
- Cotton overspray issue

It's comforting to know we have a voice in Austin to shape policy in favor of our rural communities. Kacal showed us in the room that our voice is critically important and I was inspired to do a better job of making my voice heard both publicly and politically.

**"Immigration and Border Issues":**

**The Honorable Ryan Guillen – District 31**

A representative from the deep South Texas region, Mr. Guillen has intimate knowledge of the border issues faced by our State. However, it seems to be a very sensitive issue among his constituents due to the fact that he didn't want to discuss too much of the issue and instead diverted to talking about the current legislative budget at hand. He echoed much of what Kacal mentioned in regard to fiscal constraints and property rights issues. He does feel like legislation regarding "sanctuary cities" would likely pass.

**"Agricultural Issues facing Texas":**

**Mr. Jason Fearneyhough – TDA**

As the Deputy Texas Commissioner of Agriculture, Mr. Fearneyhough hit on some of the broad topics their agency is dealing with. At the time of our meeting, the new USDA Ag Secretary had not been announced which caused a lot of uncertainty in his department due to unknown issues of focus. (Interestingly enough, I'm told our commissioner, Sid Miller, was actually on the President's short list for that position. As we would learn later in the week, it ended up being announced that Sonny Purdue of Georgia would be named the new secretary.) A few issues he did mention included:

- Immigration issues with seasonal farm labor needs

- RoundUp Ready cotton and drift issues onto other crops
- The Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)

In his closing remarks, he exhorted our group of young leaders to let our voices be heard. We have a lot of issues at hand that impact our ability to produce, but the future is bright given the talented young leaders to deal with them.

**“Appropriations, Budget Transparency and Reform, Higher Education and Priorities for the 85<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session”:**

**The Honorable John Raney – District 14**

Serving the Bryan/College Station area, Mr. Raney was asked to speak to us given his representation over Texas A&M and the Texas Agrilife home office. He gave a shortlist of issues he is working on to include:

- Transportation issues and the possibility of increasing the fuel tax
- Medicaid
- Teacher retirement

With the budget shortfall this session, he feels like it would be a challenge to make the budget balance given the demand of the State. He called us to get active in the process. We have a voice and need to let it be heard. An interesting note made was there are 25 representatives serving Harris county alone. Compare that to only 30 reps that have 4 counties or more in the rural areas of the State. Rural Texas needs all the help it can get to communicate the message to the urban population. This reminded me once again of the immense value of a program like TALL.

**“Conserving Texas Land for Future Generations”:**

**Ms. Blair Fitzsimons**

I have been aware of the concept of conservation easements as a tool for limiting urban development of our State’s natural landscape but this was a very informative explanation that clarified some of my assumptions about their initiatives. Ms. Fitzsimmons pointed out that we are continually losing our Ag lands at an increasing rate over time. This program encourages conserving our precious resources to meet several goals:

- Water conservation
- Preservation of land
- Protecting working lands
- Affordability of land for next generation

In concept, a landowner can opt to sell the development rights to the land in exchange for covenants placed on the land in perpetuity. My issue has always been in limiting what a landowner can practice on their land, thus handicapping its tenants in generations to come. I was enlightened by the fact that each agreement can be written specifically to the goals set

forth by the land owner. This makes the idea more palatable to me given the changing production practices that farmers and ranchers must continually adapt their operations to in order to remain competitive. It does reduce the value of a future sell, but can also make it more affordable for a buyer with limited capital. With the urban encroachment on the uptick, it's comforting to know more about programs such as TALT serving to maintain our existing ag lands.

**"Your Beef Checkoff Dollars at Work":**

**Richard Wortham**

After a long day of political discussions in our State's Capitol building, it was refreshing to sit down at a table of delicious beef fajitas for dinner, courtesy of Mr. Wortham and the Texas Beef Council. Mr. Wortham spoke to us about how the checkoff dollars (\$2 per head on every beef animal sold) work to market our State's beef product to consumers and provide educational services to producers. As a beef producer, I can attest that I've seen the value of this industry initiative work well in the favor of producers. I am proud to pay into that program and Mr. Wortham helped define the reasons why. One particular note of interest was the economic impact from our international exports. He pointed out that we as Texas producers receive \$250 per head value due to exported steers. I knew exports were important, but had no idea it was that much value! For me, this statistic further emphasizes the need to maintain fair international trade policies for the beef industry.

**Wednesday, January 18, 2017**

**"Duties and Responsibilities of the Natural Resource, Appropriations and House Administration Committees":**

**The Honorable Trent Ashby – District 57**

As an East Texas representative, Ashby serves on the Natural Resources committee. Since Ashby is a native of my hometown of Henderson, I can attest that he grew up with the strong work ethic and appreciation for rural values that any kid would be born and raised on a commercial farming and ranching operation. His service and leadership gives a strong voice to agricultural interests in Austin. He told us there are about 1000 people moving to Texas every day! With the potential for droughts, water security is a major issue. According to Ashby, Texas has a 50-year water plan in place. Most of the legislation around water is from grass roots leadership through local water districts. Surface water is basically owned by the State. Ground water, on the other hand is owned by private landowners.

Now, for policy movement we, with an interest in rural policy, must take into consideration the benefit of our urban neighbors in an effort to garner any support. However, the scales can tip too far in the wrong direction. A major issue coming into play are private interest groups buying land with water rights but not regulated within any local ground water districts. The landowners then have full right to sell that water to the urban areas. Folks against this practice are afraid of drawing down the aquifer too much. This is where the value in having an

established groundwater district to regulate this issue is needed to not only serve the cities but to also protect their hometown neighbors. Ashby feels like this is the best way to establish policy.

**“A Visit with our own State Legislators”:**  
**Senator Charles Perry – Senate District 28**

After a morning in the classroom, we split up to visit our own political leaders. Several of us reside in District 28 and teamed up to pay a visit to Senator Charles Perry. Perry was very welcoming to us and was quick to let us know they were working on a very tight budget this year and wouldn't have a lot of discretionary spending available for special interests. Thankfully, we were not there asking for money from the State this time to which I think he was relieved. We simply wanted to establish an introduction and tell him about the TALL program. I now feel like the ice is broken and would not have any problem going back to him in the future to discuss issues I feel need to be addressed by those in his capacity.

**“Duties and Responsibilities of the Railroad Commission of Texas”:**  
**The Honorable Christi Craddick**

The Railroad Commission was put into place initially to regulate the Railroad industry. Now it has evolved into a regulatory agency for the energy sector of the economy. They insure the environment is being protected and that waste from operations is disposed of properly. With 680 employees across the State, they see that proper permits are in place for drilling and mining activities and that they are being followed to specs.

We've all been aware of the recent controversies surrounding “fracking” of oil wells in recent years. Craddick noted that we have actually been “fracking” wells now for over 50 years and horizontal drilling has been a normal practice since the beginning of the industry. However, it was George P. Mitchell that found a way to combine the two practices for extraction of Natural Gas.

The future looks bright for economic development in the oil and gas realm. Though the industry is in a downturn in the market, there are currently half of the Nation's drilling rigs in Texas and 250 of which are working in the Permian Basin area. The industry is in good hands with leaders like Craddick steering the ship.

**Texas Ag Council Meeting**  
**Chairman Darren Turley**

I'm thankful to have had the chance to sit in on the Ag Council meeting while in Austin. This is a group of leaders representing nearly all the interests of the Ag industry in one room to discuss issues and develop solutions for ag to have a common voice for issues management. Current issues they are watching include:

- The transportation issue and the effort to increase weight limits on freight

- Water district disconnect about sharing water between districts
- School finances in the move towards open education with the potential impact to small rural school districts

Comprised of about 50-60 different organizations, they meet weekly during the session and monthly during the interim period to visit together about key issues. I thought it interesting to hear they are being joined by more and more people who aren't in ag but just want to learn more about the efforts. Just as we have been hearing from others, they echoed the need for an Agriculture voice in Austin to continue to protect our livelihood.

### **TALL XIV Cohort International Seminar to the EU**

**Mr. Lee Chastain**

Mr. Chastain certainly set the bar high with his videography of the previous cohort's travel to the EU. He put together some amazing pictures and discussed what they learned and where they went. It made me anxious for what lies ahead on our coming trip to China in 2018.

### **TALL Alumni Meeting**

**Ms. Tanya Forester, TALL XII**

We had the chance to see what lies ahead for us after our TALL experience. The dedication of past students is truly a strength of this program. They sacrifice energy and time to give back to this awesome organization that provides so much value to our professional development.

### **"A Tribute to Texas Leadership" – TALL Alumni Reception**

**Austin Club**

This was an awesome experience! Dr. Jim and the TALL Alumni sure know how to put on a quality event. I believe we become who we surround ourselves with and this was an opportunity to be surrounded by some of our State's most respected leaders. This particular evening, I was able to be joined by my wife, TALL XI Alumnae, for a fun evening of networking and catching up with old friends. The guests came from many different areas of industry leadership to be honored by the TALL foundation for their support of this high-quality program. After a brief welcome and introduction from Chancellor John Sharp, Texas A&M University, we then heard from our State Comptroller, Glen Hegar. He enlightened us on the current figures for this budget cycle and voiced his support for the ag industry. The awards were then handed out to a few distinguished guests and we as a class had the opportunity to make our introductions and offer our gratitude for their support. Bob Stallman, past president of American Farm Bureau, was then recognized for his service to ag leadership. An event like this certainly energizes me to look outside my little box and continue in the footsteps of those leadership giants before us.

**Thursday, January 19, 2017**

**“Texas Oil & Gas Association: Duties, Issues, and Initiatives of the Industry”:**

**Mr. Todd Staples**

Mr. Staples serves as the president of the Texas Oil & Gas Association. He opened with a charge to leadership. That a leader should possess a vision with honest and fair integrity. He called us to get involved in the process. This was particularly felt when I asked him about the highway infrastructure problems I witnessed during my residence in the Eagle Ford Shale boom town of Pleasanton, TX. He said issues are best solved locally and when there is an issue of such, the best thing to do is get involved in the fight.

With regards to industry regulation, he mentioned that the oil & gas sector knows it should be regulated, but wants it done with sound science and sensible measures. Texas leads the world in oil & gas ventures which gives us much energy security. With a good system for development, this industry provides not only energy security, but also National security. When asked if he thought we could/should move towards energy independence as a State/Nation, he offered that we need to embrace the value of free trade with other parts of the world. Mostly due to the fact we produce a different type of oil that must be blended with imports for the desired oil type of our refineries.

**“The Responsibilities and Function of the General Land Office of Texas”:**

**The Honorable George P. Bush**

“Remember the Alamo!” That is what the GLO is working on currently. Recently, the management responsibilities of one of our State’s most historic sites was transferred into the care of the GLO. With 2.5 million visitors annually, the Alamo is slated to get a face lift. Plans can be viewed at [reimaginealamo.org](http://reimaginealamo.org).

In addition to historic preservation, the Land Office is constantly focused on protecting State and private rights for land owners from federal control efforts such as the recent BLM litigation along the Red River, Endangered Species Act with its overreaching control, the Antiquities Act, and the recent fight against EPA’s WOTUS effort. Organizations like this give Texas land owners someone in their corner to preserve and protect one of the things that makes this State so great...private land ownership!

**“Rural America Strikes Back – Functions and Duties of the General Counsel of the Texas RNC”:**

**Mr. Eric Opiela**

Mr. Opiela provided a fascinating summary of this past Presidential race and the power of the rural votes. Since I am from a rural area and hold political views consistent with the majority of rural areas (being more conservative than progressive), I was left with a motivation to go back to my town of Albany and get involved in local leadership. Allow me to explain. According to

Opiela, there has been a big divide between the strength of rural and urban economies during the previous administration. Jobs were actually lost in rural areas whereas they remained stagnant in urban areas. Therefore, rural areas experienced a loss of productivity with the same paid in wages causing the weakened rural economy. If jobs are lost then people move, school attendance drops causing more jobs to decrease and the cycle continues. This plays out in public opinion and the incoming administration played to that in the campaign.

The current situation in politics sees rural areas becoming more republican while urban areas become more democratic. Regardless of political preference, if one values their rural town and its long-term sustainability, we have to insure our politicians see the value of their rural-area constituents and not just pander to the masses in the urban areas. If Texas were to change to a democratic majority, it would lead to the death of the republican party nation-wide, according to Opiela. That scenario is becoming more of a possibility with each political cycle. Reason-being, voter turnout is easier to achieve in our urban sector than rurally. An increase in Texas means an increase for the democratic vote.

If agricultural production is going to remain strong, our rural areas must remain strong. For now, that is an incentive to build support for conservative values so we can protect our beloved small town America and conservative values.

#### **“Responsibilities and Duties of the TxDOT and the state of Texas Infrastructure”:**

##### **Mr. James Bass**

I found the figures offered by Mr. Bass very interesting. Texas infrastructure contains 53K bridges, 3400 miles of Interstate, 80K miles of roads and 195K lane miles. This is all managed by 25 regional offices throughout the State providing employment to 12,000 Texans. Perhaps the most staggering figure is that it costs taxpayers \$8 million per lane mile to build and maintain our roads! This is primarily paid by vehicle registration fees and the motor fuels tax. I had never considered that \$0.20 of every gallon of fuel I purchase goes 25% towards the education system and 75% to roads (an additional \$0.183 from gasoline per gallon goes to the federal tax).

I was also intrigued that an alternative to the contested high speed rail development is the idea of an elevated freight corridor along existing corridors in the state to relieve our highways of freight traffic.

I have gained a new perspective when it comes to intrastate travel after hearing from TxDOT.

#### **“Responsibilities and Duties of TCEQ”:**

##### **Dr. Bryan Shaw**

So I have to say that my perspective of TCEQ changed after this presentation. My respect for Dr. Shaw and his duty to walk a very diplomatic line in his capacity is great. I have always viewed the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to be a limiting factor on the efforts of

farmers and ranchers to steward our precious resources. I viewed TCEQ as another agency that is driven more by propaganda than science and fact. Though I still contend there are governmental agencies that fit that description, Dr. Shaw understands agriculture having had much experience in production through his family's operation and is a great steward of his role in regulation. In agriculture, we need to embrace the fact that having sound regulatory agencies behind our practices leads to consumer confidence. This particular agency is doing well to fulfill that need by establishing sound principles that accomplish the goals intended by its creation.

### **"Responsibilities for the Comptroller, 2017 Revenue Estimates and 2017 Budget Projections":**

#### **Mr. Tom Currah**

At this point in our Austin experience, we've heard time and again that this current session is hard pressed by a tight budget. With only 140 days in the session to establish a 2-year budget for 2018-2019, our legislators lean heavily on the revenue and budget projections of our State comptroller's office. This particular cycle estimates \$224 Billion for revenue. However, since most of the funds are already designated through statute, discretionary spending is at a level of under \$105 Billion. A few points in regard to this projection include:

- The impact of oil and gas market decline
- In spite of energy sector, jobs have actually been added across the state
- This is due to Texas having a strong diversified economy
- The State "rainy day" fund was put in place to stand in the gap for commodity price fluctuations

To establish the "rainy day" fund, in the 90s, the State passed law that requires 75% of the State's oil and gas severance tax to be applied to the RDF and roads. Currently, we have \$10.2 Billion in that fund with an increase to \$11.9B by the end of 2019. Obviously, much can change over the next two years in our economy, but in spite of the unknown our State seems to have a very healthy system in place.

### **"Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Major Initiatives and Agency Responsibilities":**

#### **Mr. Carter Smith**

I now have a much greater appreciation for our State Parks and Wildlife agency. Mr. Smith is certainly passionate about our wildlife and natural resources under his care. He gave a lengthy explanation of the history of his agency; one that serves to steward all of our wildlife and parks. One thought I had was how the inception of regulating our game animals came into place. I have never known a time that there weren't bag limits on hunting game. However, there was once a time that people were free to hunt and harvest game at unlimited proportions. The State decided that if we were going to maintain the game populations, we would need to monitor and regulate that harvest number. I can imagine there was much controversy and push back as there is today when government steps in to regulate the activities of private individuals. This for one has been handled in a seemingly healthy manner to bring us to where we are today with healthy wildlife populations to be enjoyed for generations to come. Today, our State economy experiences the fruit of that effort through a \$16 Billion per year industry.

Although urbanization has caused the public to become more detached from our wild landscapes, TPWD helps to bridge that gap through another needed regulatory agency that is based on sound science and care.

**“Oversight and Responsibilities of the Texas Animal Health Commission”:**

**Mrs. Mary Thiel Luedeker**

Being in ranching, I have had first-hand experience with the TAHC on several occasions. They are to be commended on their efforts to manage outbreaks of pests and diseases in our State that could pose threat to our livestock production economy. The stated mission of TAHC is to protect livestock. Operated by 13 commissioners serving 9 industry groups, they are dispersed across 8 regions. Operating on a \$22 Million budget, they employ 185 people across the State. The two main issues they are currently trying to manage include the fever tick in South Texas and the issue of Chronic Wasting Disease. Though deer are not in their scope of livestock, elk do constitute a livestock issue thus the need to manage for CWD. In my opinion, with what I’ve learned about the fever tick situation, we have not devoted enough funds to this problem. The issue continues to migrate North. I hope we can get a handle on it before it once again impacts the entire State’s cow herd.

**Reception at the State Capitol, Lt. Governor’s Reception Room**

After a long day of hearing some valuable information from our speakers, we retreated to the Lt. Governors Reception room in the Capitol. Once again, as we walked through the Capitol, I was taken by the historical pride displayed by the paintings and design of our beautiful Capitol building. The reception room was likened to an art gallery with its antique-quality décor and classy design. We were treated to some engaging speakers and in a laid back setting while we dined on hors d’ oeuvres and wine thanks to the pork and poultry guys.

**“Insight into the Pork and Poultry Industries”:**

**Mr. Brandon Gunn – Texas Pork Producers**

**Mr. James Grimm – Texas Poultry Federation**

I am very grateful for these two organizations and their effort to support the TALL program. I love seeing competing industries within ag come together for a common goal to protect and serve ag as a whole. Their gracious sponsorship of this portion of our program is very much appreciated.

**“My Journey to State Representative”:**

**The Honorable Ernest Bailes IV – District 18**

Ernest is a TALL XII Alumnus. Having grown up on a dairy, he had strong work ethics instilled in him at a very young age. I remember knowing of Ernest though shared classes we had together in Animal Science at Texas A&M in the early 2000s. After college, he went on to establish a successful deer breeding service that is ongoing today. He answered the call to leadership for

his District and campaigned on strong conservative values. He never sought out to become a career politician, but seeing a need for conservative policy advancement, was led to his current role in the legislature. It's inspiring to me to see the values and beliefs I share with someone such as Ernest in action as he sets the bar high for other young leaders to not just fuss about what's wrong with this country, but actually do something about it.

**"The Texas Legislative Budget Process":**

**Mr. Mike Morrissey**

Hearing from Mr. Morrissey, it was clear that he is one of the valuable men behind the scenes in our State. He has held numerous positions along-side our political leaders for over the past 30 years. The faith and trust placed in him by those Governors and Lt. Governors is extremely impressive. Listening to him talk about the budget and the system he studies, it's clear he's one of the smartest among us. Very humble in nature, he went on about the intricacies of the mechanics of our economy and the challenges that face our decision makers. I developed a great deal of respect for our leaders in hearing from him because it shows how high profile leaders cannot perform their job without surrounding themselves with talented people.

**Friday, January 21, 2017**

**"An Overview of the Texas Dairy Industry":**

**Mr. Darren Turley**

After a delicious breakfast on behalf of the Texas Association of Dairymen, Mr. Turley addresses us on the state of the Texas dairy industry. Dairy and its byproducts are something that we enjoy every day. In fact, according to Turley, we will consume an entire football field size of pizza within our lifetime. Something that is good for cheese makers. It's also interesting to note that the Texas-area dairy sector is booming and currently investing in a \$1 billion expansion effort through a cheese plant going into Dalhart.

**"Psychological Types: Practical Applications":**

**Dr. Richard Grant**

One of the most memorable parts of the week, Dr. Grant lead us through the Myers-Briggs Psychological Type indicator exercise. We each learned not only the way we perceive the world, but also how others are wired differently. The value for me is in discerning the types of others and the value in communicating to those different types. This was an experience that gave me tools that should serve well in addressing a roomful of people or in everyday conflict resolution.

**West Texas Session – Sonora, TX**

**Friday, January 21, 2017**

This was an optional portion of this third session that I am so glad to have participated in. It was great to head to the country after a week in Austin. It really helped put the icing on the

cake to have spent a week thinking about policy that protects and serves rural areas, then to go and experience it provided good contrast to the week's experience.

### **Old Sonora Icehouse Ranch Museum:**

Our first encounter with Sonora helped set the tone by introducing us to the pride and history of the town through their local museum. Established in 1890, Sutton County was late in getting established as far as our State's history is concerned. It wasn't until the first water well was drilled in 1885 that it could be seen as an inhabitable place. Like most western areas, it sprung up as a ranching area from the strong forages for cattle, sheep and goat production. The museum memorializes these endeavors by preserving many old artifacts and equipment donated by area ranches.

### **Dinner and Presentation – Sonora's Historic Train Depot**

#### **Mr. Bob Malone**

Mr. Malone was by far the best presenter of our week. His credibility as a leader gained from his life experiences had us all captivated as we held onto every bit of sage advice he graciously had to share. Though he moved to Sonora to retire after a lengthy career as BP's Vice President for their American Operations, he now serves as President and CEO of the Sonora Bank.

His nature is one that is very humble and servant oriented. It was clear to me why he is so successful as he made a career empowering people and coordinating team efforts to accomplish goals. He spoke of the feeling of addressing Congress in Washington DC. He told us what it was like to negotiate with Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin. He gave us sound wisdom in leadership: lead from the heart, don't compromise values, safety is imperative, focus first on people, let them know you care.

With our upcoming tour in China, he offered wisdom in how to prepare. They are very high on establishing relationships before business. Since you can't really trust their authenticity, the best we can do to make it a good experience is to learn and understand their culture before we go.

It is clear that Mr. Malone has earned respect through valuing people and relationships. This was my takeaway from the evening. Put people first. Be genuine. In a side conversation, he revealed that he had prepared for 4 hours before addressing our group. Now he could have come in and only given us an hour and left to go back home to his home, but instead he made us feel important and that spoke volumes into my development as one that would aspire to be the same type of leader.

**Saturday, January 22, 2017**

### **History of Sonora Research Station**

#### **Dr. Doug Tolleson**

After a big chuck wagon breakfast at Sonora's Agrilife Research Center, Dr. Tolleson gave us a brief history of the region and the establishment of the station. It came about after the drought of 1915-16 when four local ranchers came together to finance the research station to advance ranching practices in the area. Many of our current practices in rangeland management were developed by research in Sonora. From nutrition to vet medicine to prescribed burn management they continue to set the standard for rangeland management and ecology for that area of the State.

### **TALT-Texas Ag Land Trust**

**James Oliver**

A good follow up to Blair Fitzsimmons' presentation in Austin, Oliver told about his experience in how he came to work for the TALT and benefits he's seen. A good example of this tool working well was in the case of a development area near Houston. A 1300-acre community is anchored by a 280-acre community farm. Termed an "agrihood" it is the first of its kind in the Houston area. The developers worked with TALT to sell the development rights for the farm acres to keep them in greenspace amidst a sea of concrete. I thought this was a revolutionary idea that may be something to consider as agriculture continues to evolve into the future.

### **Water Conservation**

**Mr. Jim Polonis**

Mr. Polonis joined us from the Sutton County Underground Water District. He gave us some insight into the aquifer in that area. The unique thing about the area is that water wells are hit or miss. There is access to large stores of water in deep channels of bedrock. Unlike other areas of the State where the water runs through gravel beds, a well here must be accurately placed in order to pump water a few feet to the left or right could yield a dry hole. Water is and will continue to remain a large topic of concern in an area with so little to offer in the way of rainfall.

### **Predation in the Edwards Plateau and Hill Country**

**Mr. Alan Armistead**

**Mr. Sam Epperson**

For an area with a strong emphasis on sheep and goat production, predation is a major challenge. Here, local land owners have come together to combat the issue through a local non-profit group to manage predators and feral hogs. It provides a good example of local folks coming together to solve a local issue.

### **Diversity in Agriculture**

**Dr. Erika Campbell – High Cross Vineyard**

Dr. Campbell came to the area as a grad student to study at the Sonora Research center. She met and married her husband and they assumed management of the family ranch. After struggle and hardship, they began to think unconventionally about the resources and have since pursued new markets. Primarily, they have established a vineyard for wine grapes. Campbell provided a thorough overview of their journey and challenges. I was encouraged by her pioneer spirit.

### **Stan Meador – X Bar Ranch**

A similar story, Stan came home after college to the family operation with the challenge to increase revenue on the ranch. He developed a nature retreat to sell the beautiful views and hiking trails of the ranch for people seeking peace and solitude. It works well with the ongoing hunting and grazing operations of the ranch. My mind was opened to alternative methods of capitalizing on our resources.

### **Facilities Tour of Research Center**

**Dr. Tolleson**

#### **Seco Mayfield – Wool & Mohair Warehouse Manager**

After lunch, we received a tour and an explanation of the wool and mohair markets. With the rise of synthetics in the marketplace, wool sales have declined in recent years. Mohair continues to remain in demand in export markets such as South Africa. However, angora goats are increasingly difficult to produce in the area. One theory offered is the animals have been consistently selected for mohair quality at the expense of their hardiness which has led to poor reproductive rates. Nevertheless, US supply of Mohair is still significant in the world markets.

Next, we loaded the bus for a tour of the burn plots that Butch Taylor monitored throughout his tenure at the station. On our way to the site, we had our attention called to a weather monitoring area. The station maintains a 100-year daily weather database since 1919. At the burn sites, we could easily see the effects of fire as a tool in woody vegetation management. We drove past several plots, each having been on a different burn regimen. You could easily see less and less brush encroachment with each subsequent plot as we viewed them.

### **JL Bar Ranch Resort**

We were very graciously invited out to this world-class resort in West Texas for an evening of relaxation. It was a great chance to socialize among our group along with some of the local Sonora folks. We were treated to an amazing meal along with refreshing activities. It was a great way to conclude an amazing week!

### **Conclusion**

As I noted earlier, I thought the West Texas portion of the session was a great contrast to the Austin experience. Meeting people like those in the Sonora area make me appreciate the rural

areas like my home area of Albany. With so much pressure on ag and increasing urban societies, I am encouraged to spend more time promoting our rural livelihoods at the State level of policy development. This experience has helped define for me the need to advocate that message. We cannot become complacent about our rural communities. We need to do more outside the box thinking to bridge those urban neighbors into our lifestyle that they move further away from. I look forward to getting more active in that effort, thanks to the TALL program!

