



**TALL Class XV
Session One
College Station, Texas**

Kyle Watts #23

Opening Remarks and Welcoming

The anticipation of the first session had been taking place for many weeks. It was good to finally have made the trip to College Station to kick off the newest TALL Class. The welcoming started prior to entering the conference room. I distinctively remember running into one of our classmates, Clifton Castle, on the elevator as Tom Miller and myself were going to our rooms to drop items off. I remember the level of excitement of meeting Clifton and how welcoming he was.

Dr. Jim, Dr. Steele, and Mr. Prewitt all created a high level of excitement and satisfaction for me as they talked about the program and how great it was. With over 400 nominations, and 40 interviews, I was one of 24 members to be selected into the program. I realized quickly that I was within a very diverse group of people. The average age of our class is 39, therefore these are a lot of people with life experiences. The diversity came not only through ag industry, but with geographic, background, age, and experience diversity as well. One thing we all had in common was the passion for agriculture. As big as Texas is, I quickly realized how our connections overlapped.

I appreciate Mr. Prewitt's, Chairman of the TALL Foundation, time for coming to kick off our first session. His passion for agriculture and ambition to see people succeed is very remarkable. I enjoyed his stories he shared with us and his commitment to our program and agriculture.

Texas Department of Criminal Justice Agriculture Today

I did not have any idea the magnitude of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's agricultural operations. Mr. Todd Swick did an excellent job presenting. The biggest take away for me was how self-sufficient the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is in production for their facilities. With 139,294 acres in production, they are able to operate within a \$69.4MM budget and produce a return on investment of 50%. This means give them a dollar, they will give you a dollar-fifty back. A lot of tax payers, including myself, likely do not realize how much this program benefits tax payers to reduce the overall cost for the prison system. Not only is the financial benefits impressive, there are other benefits such as learning a trade whether it is mechanics or vegetable crop production. One of their programs was dog training. As part of their dog training program, they are able to train dogs to detect cell phones. This is one of many examples in the size and scale of their ag operations. I enjoyed hearing the comment regarding the prison system is the only farm that knows exactly where every one of their combine drivers are located at all times. Needless to say, I was impressed with the presentation.

Welcome and Overview of Texas A&M Forest Service

We eventually loaded the bus and received our first experience of counting off for our roll call. We will have lots of practice between now and graduation to sound off. We made the trip to the Forest Service building. Mr. Tom Boggus, State Forest and Director of Texas A&M Forest Service, welcomed us to the Emergency Operations Center. I was impressed by the center and the technology that was presented during the meetings. Many people overlook the forest service and think it only pertains to the Piney Woods of East Texas. Our speakers spoke more on the Central and South Texas wildfires and how they were mitigated rather than the Piney Woods forestry operations. The struggle is constantly changing as urbanization takes place closer to high risk areas. Ranching operations have shifted over the last 50 years which has created more fuel for wildfires during the peak burn season. Conditions are favorable for widespread forest fires with high rainfall early in the year, followed by dry and hot conditions during the late summer and early fall.

In addition to Tom, Mark Stanford, Don Hannemann, Curt Stripling and Hughes Simpson all spoke to our group. The vast majority of the center that we learned about at the time pertained to tools available for the general public, and also to municipal decision makers from local city to state levels. One of the newest tools to the center was the sand pit. This was a tool that used computers, projection tools, and ground walnut shells to provide a 3D demonstration of various scenarios from fires, to flooding. I was very impressed with the technology and tools presented by the forest service.

Etiquette Training and Meal

Our evening wrapped up with a great presentation from Dr. Susan Quiring. Dr. Quiring is an etiquette and ball room dance instructor. I was sure to take mental notes on this as my wife was going to quiz me when I got back home on this training. She was pretty excited I was going to experience this type of training. I quickly realized the importance of good etiquette and table manners. I seem to always finish my meal first. Little did I know, this meant that I was coming across as lazy and lacking interest. Although that may not necessarily be how I feel, I don't want my guests to feel that way. I could sit through the training for several meals and still learn something new. I liked that Dr. Quiring explained why we do things, rather than just saying this is how it's been done. This was a very good experience. She even provided us with a cheat sheet as a take away.

Ag Media Training

Our Wednesday morning started out with communication training. Dr. Deb Dunsford and her team of graduate students welcomed our class. Their goal was to help us to better understand the pressure of the media during an interview situation. Our scenarios were very good examples of how the media interview is conducted around a less favorable situation. My group happened to be the first group to present. Our situation pertained to a hypothetical assault of a student at a 4H event. We were asked to defend our reputation and answer any questions that the media may throw out to us. It was very engaging and eye opening for me. My take away message was you may not always have the answer for their questions, however be professional and always follow up with them if you say you are going to do so. Also, I learned

to think about what you are going to say before you say it. I would like to have the same training performed at the end of the session to see the progression of the class.

Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Issues Facing Agriculture

Dr. Jim did an excellent job of lining up key leaders with Texas A&M AgriLife. Dr. Craig Nessler, Director of Texas A&M AgriLife Research, spoke to our class regarding his program. Dr. Nessler has had a successful career of leadership and results of which he is continuing on within Texas A&M. Dr. Nessler spoke on sustainable agriculture and how the word has been misused within our industry. The term overlaps into four different criteria to include economic viability, environmental and natural resource stewardship, social acceptability, and resilience to shock. This conversation about the term of sustainable agriculture came up later on during the week at our host dinner. I was better able to discuss how the word has been misused within the industry. The research within the system is very unique and applicable to many parts of the world based upon the diversity of not only with our climate but with our different types of geography and soil conditions presented all over the state. Many research institutions outside of the Texas A&M system are limited to their research criteria based upon the limited climate and soil types.

Lunch and Program

Our lunch was hosted at Royalty Pecans. It was a buffet style lunch with quick overviews of operations by some key producers in the area. Mike Adams, managing partner of Royalty Pecans, gave us an overview of their operations and some of the struggles that the pecan industry is facing. Royalty Pecans is on the forefront of research and trying to improve their overall operations. They are realizing that a lot of the focus has been above ground on the trees to include water and sunlight, however they have shifted a large portion of research and efforts to below ground practices. This will help them to produce a consistent crop and begin production at 5 years rather than 7. John and Connie Giesenschlag, prominent producers in the area, along with TALL Alumnus Lynn Angell of Monsanto Company and John Smith of Citizens State Bank, provided lunch to us. Royalty Pecans helped to break up the heat of the day with their tour of their beautiful welcome center.

We loaded the bus and traveled to Wiggins LLP- Watermelon Warehouse, Inc. We were welcomed by Mr. Wiggins and his son, who provided an overview of their operation. I was impressed with their production capabilities to include 100MM pounds of watermelons. They are diversified in their production region to include farms from Mexico to Hempstead, Texas. This allows them to have a longer growing season based upon the weather and climate. I thought it was quite interesting when I asked about their cull seconds. He indicated they sell those to local guys operating out of their pickup truck at roadside stands. So needless to say, you can likely get a better watermelon at Wal-Mart, rather than a second on a road side stand. Wal-Mart asked Wiggins to box in their own Wal-Mart boxes. Wiggins and the big box store agreed upon a mutual Texas Watermelons box to prevent future logistical nightmares of redirecting trucks if required. I have already noticed Wiggins Watermelons in our local grocery store.

Tour Blue Bell Creameries

We loaded the bus and made the road trip to the finest ice cream producer in the world. We were welcomed by Mr. Paul Kruse, CEO of Blue Bell. It showed a lot of Mr. Kruse's character and humbleness to give the tour and open his operations to any question that was given to him. Oftentimes, the CEO of a large company is too valuable to give a tour. Not in Mr. Kruse's eyes. Our tour was conducted in two different groups and reunited at the end for questions and answers. Throughout the meeting, a lot was mentioned to the recent Listeria outbreak. Some of the challenges faced by Mr. Kruse included firing 1,500 people including 2 of his daughters. It was very impressive to learn of the loyalty of their employees that returned to Blue Bell. Mr. Kruse told stories on the loyalty of his customers as well. One included the first half gallon going to the family of recently passed customer. The customer was buried with the ice cream container. It couldn't have been planned any better than to finish up the tour with unlimited ice cream provided by Mr. Kruse. A kid in a candy store expression pales in comparison to Kyle Watts at Blue Bell. Definitely a rewarding tour. Mr. Kruse and his business is first class.

Challenge Works

Thursday morning kicked off as we were welcomed bright and early to the TAMU Challenge Course. Evidently this is a largely kept secret within the campus. Bob Gantt is the program coordinator. We started off with a few exercises to get to know each other which included reinforcement of our classmate's names. This is likely one of the few times we would be able to dress in shorts and a t-shirt. I realized quickly why we were able to dress casually. The crowd followed the shade as much as possible. We broke into two groups where we really enforced the importance of communication in leadership. The exercises were also aimed at problem solving and collaborative decision making. We had lunch under the pavilion and then went off to the ropes course. The ropes course consisted of several trust building exercises to include the tallest rock climbing wall in Texas. Extra precaution was taken due to the Texas heat. I enjoyed climbing the wall and other exercises. The ropes course reinforced communication practices that we learned earlier in the morning.

Overview & Bus Tour of TEEK Emergency Services Training Institute

We were welcomed by Mr. Mike Wisby, Associate Division Director of the TEEK Emergency Services Training Institute. This was a busy week for Mike and his staff as they were conducting fire school on the campus. Their capacity to train is much greater than your conventional fire training for municipal career firefighter's fire departments. The training taking place while we were there pertained to oil and gas. The entire department is self-funded by fees charged and industry donations. They have the ability to train on special issues pertaining to hazard waste, airplanes, and many other unique situations which makes their training very unique. They are the largest operation in the world to provide this type of training.

Social Program

The evening event took place at the state of the art Thomas G. Hildebrand, DVM '56 Equine Complex. This was a beautiful facility. Our class was welcomed by a wide variety of influential people within the college

and ag industry in the area. A photographer was lined up to take our individual pictures for the TALL XV brochure. I enjoyed the opportunity to meet and greet with as many people as possible prior to the event getting kicked off. I enjoyed the live music and fellowship. From there Dr. Jim, Dr. Steele, Mr. Pruitt, and Dr. Boleman spoke prior to our keynote speaker Brigadier General Joe Ramirez. General Ramirez's presentation was outstanding. I was very inspired listening to him and his story that he told. The most touching story pertained to honoring the life of a fallen soldier. I looked around the room and saw many people wiping tears away during the presentation. The story led to an outcome that eventually General Ramirez was reunited with the family as the mother sent her third child to be involved in the leadership and guidance of General Ramirez.

Our class was able to make our first set of introductions to the guests. Luckily I was number 23 so I had plenty of time to rehearse what I was going to say. Dr. Jim had set up dinner arrangements for each of the class members to meet with a dinner host within the community. This is the first dinner arrangement I had attended with this setup. Needless to say, I was very impressed to see the great support of the community and industry leaders with the TALL Program.

Setting the Context: Strategy, Policy and the Fate of the Nation

Friday morning started out at The Bush School of Government and Public Service with a presentation from Dr. David McIntyre. Dr. McIntyre had a very impressive career of leadership and service. He spent 31 years in the Army followed up with service to Homeland Security. Part of the presentation pertained to terrorism which has increasingly become more of a widespread term and threat in the world. I was always under the impression that a terrorists' main goal was to kill. However, I learned that was not necessarily the goal of terrorists. The goal is to create a panic within a country where the people do not trust in their government and leadership to protect them. The panic becomes widespread which can quickly erode the feeling of unity within a country. I wish we would have had more time with Dr. McIntyre.

Government and Public Policy in Today's World

Our next presentation pertained to public policy and was presented by Kenneth Meier. Kenneth spoke on regarding the upcoming election. He mentioned that from a political science perspective, he felt the outcome would be Democratic President, Republican House of Representatives, and filibuster Senate in which nothing would be accomplished over the next term. However, then he mentioned it was only political science and he would not have predicted the current ballot. It will be interesting to see how the next 6 months play out. One of the big concerns mentioned by Dr. Meier was that agricultural importance is becoming less with every election which creates less favorable restrictions on US producers.

Responsibilities of the TVMDL

Dr. Bruce Akey, Director of Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory, was the last of the four directors to present to our class. I did not realize the magnitude of the research that take place under the leadership of Dr. Akey. The research not only pertains to animals and pets, however also pertains to humans. Dr. Akey's team researches how humans are impacted through animals and insects. Some

examples of these are Mad Cow Disease, Chronic Wasting Disease, and Zika Virus. Dr. Akey strives for quick and accurate responses. The program is accredited and certified through a few different associations throughout different audit processes to ensure to the end user that the results of testing and lab work are accurate.

“Behind the Scenes” Tour of the George Bush Presidential Archives

Our last stop of the session took place at the George Bush Presidential Archives with a tour from Matt Lee. Matt was very passionate about his job. He had been with the archives for 18 years at the museum, joining the team shortly after the museum had opened. Matt’s job is an ongoing process since President Bush is still alive. I didn’t realize that the archives were limited to square footage based upon legislation. Therefore, one of the concerns is where they will store all the documents within the building. The building contains both classified and declassified information. Part of Matt’s job is to send classified documents to the appropriate declassification center where the document classification status would be determined. All of the documents during the President’s term are considered to be tax payers documents. This also holds true of all of the gifts that are received during a term.

Closing Remarks and Adjourn

Lastly, we took our group picture in front the Freedom Horse Sculpture as had been done for the previous classes. Dr. Jim wrapped up our session to reinforce what was said during the welcoming session. He encouraged us to interact within our community, helping both those inside and outside of the ag community to better understand the struggles we face in our industry and what can be done to support it.

Final Remarks

I enjoyed being able to connect electronically with our class after arriving back home. Jennifer Blackburn had created a TALL XV member group where cohorts could share photos and connect from Facebook. This will help me to remember names and get to know more about my fellow classmates to be able to connect more at our next meeting. I really am looking forward to the next two years with the TALL Program.

A very special thanks to Dr. Jim and his staff for the excellent job in putting the program together.