Kate Fred
August 7, 2020
TALL XVII

TALL Narrative 1 - College Station, TX

First of all let me start by saying, what an amazing experience and opportunity these next two years in the TALL program are going to be. Coming from an agriculture production background, I can tell that my knowledge is very strong in one particular area of agriculture, so I am very excited to have the opportunity through this program to broaden my awareness of the other aspects that make up agriculture and that are as equally important as production. Not only will we have the opportunity to learn about many different agricultural key issues, theories, policies, etc. through the speakers the TALL program will bring to us, but also through my fellow cohorts. Each of us come from different walks of life and different backgrounds, so being around each other will provide us with my great opportunities to learn from one another as well as work with people we may have never gotten the opportunity to work with. I thoroughly enjoyed our first session at College Station in July. What an eye opening experience it has been so far, and I am looking forward to seeing what the next sessions have to offer.

Day one we hit the ground running and wasted no time diving in, learning, and being informed about different agriculture aspects. We started the session by listening to Dr. Mazurkiewicz talk about the Land Grant Mission, History of Extension and the Texas A&M University System. As someone who did not grow up knowing much about or being active in the different extension programs, I found this to be very informative. I personally enjoy history, so I appreciated Dr. Jim including the history of extension and how it came about. Next, we traveled to the Texas A&M Forest Service. I did not know before we visited the Forest Service how involved they are with wildfires, controlling and prevention. As someone who has grown up in the panhandle of Texas, I have seen my fair share of wildfires and the damage they can produce. My biggest take away from our visit to the Forest Service was hearing about all the amazing technology they use to

help predict when a wildfire might begin in an area, which then allows them to send alerts to towns and areas if need be. Tuesday evening was the etiquette training and meal. I have not gone through an etiquette training before, so I thoroughly enjoyed this presentation and meal. I was most interested in hearing and seeing which etiquette rules I already new, which ones I had wrong, and which rules were new to me. For the most part, the etiquette rules I knew were correct, but I did learn some new ones. For example, how to correctly hold a white wine and a red wine glass, as well as the host is the one responsible for the bill and it is not polite to argue over the bill.

Day two started off with Dr. Bruce Akey with the Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory. I enjoyed learning about the amount of testing the TVMDL is involved with as well as the level of testing they do. Also, all the different animals they test on. Our lunch for the day was at the Royalty Pecan farm as well as a few different speakers. Before this session, I did not know much about the pecan industry, so this was very fascinating to hear and learn about. Being a history buff myself, I liked hearing all of the history that the pecan tree has behind it, especially learning about the Native American background to the pecan tree. For example, the Native Americans had pecans figured out and learned to live off the pecans during the winter. Also, that so many of the different varieties of pecan trees have a Native American name. I also had no idea how long of a life span pecan trees have. I am so glad Blair shared her knowledge and love of pecan trees with us. The owner of Royalty Pecans had a lot of great advice, such as “your wealth is in your youth.” What a great quote. I also enjoyed getting to see and walk through part of the pecan farm. Our dinner and presentation Tuesday evening was provided by STgenetics. This place was fascinating! My favorite part was learning about how the labs go through the sex sorted semen process at STgenetics. I had no idea that they could actually separate the x and y chromosone by using dye as well as very high tech innovations. It is very interesting that through the semen sorting they are able to specifically produce with IVF a female bovine or male bovine. It would have been really neat to see the IVF and ET process. I am also glad

the owner of STgenetics Juan Moreno was able to be with us for dinner and speak to us. What an interesting guy to hear from!

We began day three with the TAMU Challege Works and team building activities. I had no idea going in to the challege works session what to expect since we were not going to actually be going to the challenge course. Even though we completed this via Zoom, I thought we went and worked through several activities that allowed us to get to know one another better as well as see how well we can work as a team. The ice breaker games were great so that we could hear different things about each other that we did not know, but the team building games werre probably the better out of the two. It was neat to see a bunch of different people who have not been around each other much come together and figure out how to complete the game/challenge. After the challenge works session, we had the pleasure of listening to Sam Sommer at Blue Bell. I did not realize how much history was behind the Blue Bell company, which I enjoyed hearing about. For example, I did not know that Blue Bell started out as a butter creamery. I also learned that the flavor homemade vanilla was created to taste like the old fashioned make on the stove vanilla ice cream. Also, something I have not thought about before was how big in the ag industry Blue Bell is in from dairies, to sugar, to the nut industry. For dinner Thursday evening, each cohort was sent with an individual dinner host. My dinner host for the evening was Cody Whitten. We also tagged along with cohort Lance and cohort Bryson as well as their dinner hosts. Mr. Whitten took us to his steakhouse J. Cody's, which was delicious. I really enjoyed getting to meet local producers and a restaurant owner. It was interesting to hear Mr. Whitten tell about how COVID has affected the restaurant business in 2020.

Our last and final day of this session was filled with several different and compelling speakers. Up first, we listened to Dr. Greg Pompelli speak about cross-border threat screening and supply chain defense. He said that their goal is to use technology to help stop threats at the border. It is amazing to me all the things technology is used for these days and how much it can help a human do their job even better. It will be interesting to hear more later on how the tracking technology will help

keep imported products safe for our country when coming across the border. One of the last and most fascinating speakers we listened to was Jim Olson. What a life Mr. Olson has lived, and I am so glad he came to share with us stories from his days with the CIA. He said that no part of our country is immune to threats including agriculture, which is probably so true but also a little scary to think about. He also said that one of the best ways to keep our country safe is through intelligence. I knew the CIA did a lot to help our country keep the threats at bay, but to hear it from a retired CIA agent was something else. Everything Mr. Olson spoke about was interesting, but I found it very captivating to hear that he and his wife worked as a tandem team. Just by listening, one could tell just how much he loved, respected, and appreciated our country and of course still does. To live your life in complete secret is something I will never understand, but what an honor to hear from someone who did for the sole purpose to protect our great country.

The first session was only a glimpse as to what the next two years will bring. It has me excited to meet different people and learn so many different things, especially different areas of agriculture that I do not know much about. I believe this will be an eye opening experience, and I look forward to it.

TALL XVII
Tyler Cross #5
Session#1

TALL XVII, for me, had a less than ideal start. With Covid-19 infections spiking in Nueces County, and working with several at risk individuals, I made the decision to participate via Zoom. Jennifer did an excellent job in facilitating that option for those of us unable to attend in person, and I am very appreciative of that. While Zoom is a great tool that allows people from all over the world to meet virtually and share information, the in-person connection is lost. The bonds and friendships made in person do not happen the same through a screen and microphone. I very much look forward to meeting everyone in person and having the opportunity to develop my leadership skills within an industry that I am so passionate about.

Tuesday was an eye-opening experience for me. The reach of the Texas A&M University system, as well as the services and support it provides, surprised me. Even as a graduate of Texas A&M, I was unaware of the scope of the TAMU system. The TAMU system was made possible by the Morris Act in 1862, which created an agency to establish state universities that would teach agriculture, military, and mechanics. In 1887, the Hatch Act created the research arm and the first experiment station was established the same year. Cooperative extension came in 1914, under the Smith-Lever Act. This act gave birth to the Extension Service in Texas. The current TAMU system land grant mission has 4 parts; 1) teaching 2) research 3) extension 4) service, and gives out $1.8 million per year in scholarships.

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service was created as the extension arm of the TAMU system. Although it is based in College Station, 83% of their employees operate outside of Brazos County. They are a complex organization that is diverse in culture and language to serve a multitude of agriculture industries throughout the state of Texas. During the Covid-19 pandemic, they have had to adjust their operations, change the way they perform their mission, and change the way they spend their funds to help with disaster recovery. They have epidemiologists and other experts that are working with

other agencies to fight Covid-19. They are also delivering personal protective equipment and testing equipment to the places that they are needed the most.

The Texas A&M Forestry Service was created in 1915 to conserve and protect the resources and land in Texas. The Forestry Service was the first in the U.S., as part of a land grant institution, to specialize in fighting and preventing wildfires. They work with the Texas Division of Emergency Management in All-Hazard state emergencies. The original mission of the Forestry service was to extinguish forest fires but was expanded in 1993 to include fighting all active and potential wind land fires. The operations center, which is in College Station, is utilized for statewide situational awareness. The operations center effectively uses technology such as satellite communication, web-based meetings, and a briefing room to manage multiple situations in multiple locations. They also use the Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (WRAP), a tool that is available to both government and public individuals. The WRAP helps to identify potential fire problems, high risk areas, and facilitates predictive services so that resources can be more effectively allocated and prioritized.

Wednesday, we were able to hear Dr. Akey speak on the Texas A&M Veterinary Diagnostic Lab (TVMDL), where he discussed the history of the program, operations, and impact in today's environment. Dr. Ragsdale addressed many of the issues facing agriculture today, including healthcare impacts, logistic issues, and land loss. Bart Fischer and Joe Outlaw finished the morning by discussing the Agriculture Food Policy Center and current market issues and trends.

The Texas A&M Veterinary Diagnostic Lab (TVMDL) was established in 1967 in College Station for Livestock and Poultry. In 1975, a second diagnostic lab was opened in Amarillo to service feed lots and large animal customers. In 1991, poultry labs were established in Center and Gonzales. The TVMDL is the only state agency performing veterinary diagnostic services which serves an array of local, national, and international customers. They offer a comprehensive variety of tests (over 650 available), and work to develop new tests for different veterinary problems and species. All fourth-year veterinary

students spend time at the diagnostic lab, and they also offer a microbiology residency program for Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. On top of these services, the TVMDL also provides performance enhancing drug testing for both horse and dog races. The TVMDL works extensively with the USDA on a National Animal Health Network, which was established after the 2003 anthrax letters were sent to members of congress.

Texas A&M AgriLife Research's goal is to deliver life-sustaining and industry-changing impacts to the agriculture industry. They are performing projects, such as vertical farming, to help mitigate logistic issues when transporting fresh greens, as well as improving yields to combat the loss of land in agricultural production. AgriLife Research operates on a $236 million budget, of which 10% stems from private funding. Private funding for projects typically come from companies with stake in the agriculture industries, and who are looking for new technologies to improve their products. All results of projects that receive private funding are published for public knowledge, but the release of the results may be delayed for the funding party to apply for a patent. Private individuals can also participate in Public Engagement Research Support (PERS), which can be in the form of an endowment or building.

The Agriculture Food Policy Center (AFPC) was established in 1983 to evaluate the farm level impacts of governmental policy changes. The center primarily serves agriculture committees in, and is funded by, congress. Studies on policy changes are conducted using 94 agriculture operations in 30 states. These studies have shown agriculture commodity prices have been in a decline since 2013, and currently sit in "no man's land", meaning the prices are low, but not low enough to trigger any government payments. They have been working on getting the WHIP+ program in for the fiscal year 2020, which adds quality loss payments due to drought and excessive moisture. They have also worked to help develop trade MFPs to help offset ongoing trade issues with China. The AFPC has also worked with congressional committees on phase 3 of the CARES Act, to roll out the Corona Food Assistance Program (CFAP). It is estimated that the agriculture industry has lost $6-8 billion due to the pandemic, and CFAP is scheduled to pay out up to $16 billion directly to producers who have realized a 5% price decline. While uncertain

what it will look like, there is speculation that there will be programs to help producers for the 2020 crop.

According to the AFPC, for U.S. prices to hold where they are, 75% of U.S. cotton and 30% of U.S. corn needs to be exported. Corn exports drive all other commodities in U.S. agriculture models and have been tailing off in recent years. While China has committed to buying more agriculture commodities from the U.S. in the most recent agreement ($32 billion), they are not a large importer of U.S. corn, so prices may not increase as much as many people think. Overall, if China lives up to their Phase 1 agreement, the U.S. will see an increase in prices, although it is difficult to determine to what degree. There should be some price stabilization due to the USMCA trade deal. Texas exports $130 billion in agriculture products per year, 1/3 of which goes to Mexico and Canada. The agriculture sector should see a $2.2 million per year increase under the USMCA than was realized under NAFTA. The U.S.-Japan trade agreement was salvaged from TPP, and slashes $1 billion in tariffs on U.S. agriculture products being exported to Japan, although it leaves in place many barriers to the exportation of rice to Japan.

Thursday included the team building workshop, Sam Sommer and Mark Patranella gave a history and operational overview of Blue Bell, Jim Prewitt had got to know everyone, Carmen Fenton gave her take on the beef supply chain and how it has been affected by Covid-19, and Dr. Jim discussed agriculture myths and facts. Participating in the team building exercise via Zoom further reinforced the person to person interaction that is being lost due to Covid-19. Although I was still able to participate, I was not able to make the same connections as those that were there in person.

Blue Bell was started by a group of local producers, to give them a place to take their excess cream. They made butter and sour cream products, and in 1911 began making ice cream. Through the years, Bluebell has been able to maintain total control over the supply chain of their product. By doing this, they ensure the product stays at zero degrees from production to the store shelf. Most companies that sell product in a grocery store pay for shelf space. Blue Bell does not follow this same model and lets sales drive shelf

space in grocery stores. Because they do not pay for shelf space, they are often limited in the amount of shelf space they are allotted by the grocer. In order to ensure that they are able to get the better selling products on the shelf, all Bluebell ice cream uses the same UPC code. 50% of food dollars spent in the U.S. are spent outside the home, i.e. restaurants. Due to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, more of that money is being spent in stores, driving an increase in Blue Bell sales.

Carmen's discussion of the beef supply chain and Covid-19 was enlightening. Issues that the beef industry is facing, particularly in the beef processing plants, are issues that we are now seeing in the cotton ginning industry. State associations, like the Texas Cattle Feeders Association, play such a significant roll in agriculture throughout Texas, by working within their industries to come up with solutions that can help others, not just in their industries, but others throughout the state.

The impact that agriculture has on the state of Texas, and the world, is substantial. Farmers produce enough food and fiber for 165 people each, and have a $100 billion impact on the economy, over half of which comes from cattle. This is no small feat, considering 98.6% of agriculture production operations are still operated by individuals. With a growing population, and land being taken out of production, farmers today have to be more efficient and sustainable, which Texas producers are leading the world in both. The U.S. loses 175 acres per hour of agriculture land, pushing for the need for increased yields. At the same time, GMO products are getting a bad reputation, even though those products allow for an increase in production and lower pesticide and chemical application rates.

On Friday, we learned the national security value of agriculture, and the threats to it that we fight every day. Dr. Pompelli discussed the Center of Excellence for Cross-Border Threat Screening and Supply, Andrew Natsios gave an overview on international issues, particularly with China, Jim Olson gave an intriguing perspective on fighting threats to national security from first hand experience as a clandestine agent in the CIA, and Dr.

Gause enlightened us on issues within the Middle East. All these topics were particularly stimulating, due to the ongoing trade issues with China and wars in the Middle East.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted some major issues with U.S. China relations, particularly the need for more pharmaceutical production in the U.S. Currently 85% of medical necessities are made in China, particularly in the Wuhan area. The Covid-19 tests that are currently being imported to the U.S. from China are estimated to be only 80% accurate. There is also evidence to suggest that Covid-19 was a present issue in China as early as August of 2019. Satellite pictures showed an increase in hospital traffic and intercepted communications in China showed discussions of Covid-19 symptoms during that time frame. The delay in reporting stems from the Chinese government incentivizing low numbers of infections during any outbreak. Their data is intentionally skewed to hide a potential pandemic rather that publicly identify it.

Agriculture is inherently important to our national security. Any country that has to rely on another for food, is at risk of being cut off from their food supply. The Chinese have operators inside the U.S. stealing technology, recruiting other operators and attempting to attack our financial system. On top of this, our relationship with Russia is the worst its been since the Cold War. With all of the instability in the world, it is more important that ever to defend U.S. agriculture and our nations food and fiber supply. To do this, we must have the best intelligence agents and spies that work around the world to protect the nations critical infrastructure.

While I knew the importance of Texas agriculture and that we faced threats as an industry going into the first session, I was unaware of the degree of the threats. As an industry we face challenges from marketing, such as anti-GMO campaigns and sustainability certification requirements, to technology theft from international players. Agriculture needs to be protected, not just for personal job security, but for the security and independence of our nation. It is not enough for those of us in agriculture to merely work in agriculture, we must be pro-agriculture.

Stephen Erik Loyd #17
TALL XVII
Session 1 - College Station, TX
July 21-24, 2020

Since being selected to become part of the TALL XVII Cohort, I had been anticipating returning to what I like to call my second home, College Station. While the COVID situation may have been a hindrance to seeing some people and visiting some places, and the wearing of the masks being a little bit of an inconvenience, Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz did an amazing job of making this session as good, if not better (in my opinion because of our cohort) than any previous session.

Welcome, Expectations, A&M Extension

We began this session with a welcome address by both Dr. Jim and Dr. Burkham. They both stressed the importance of the TALL program and how, essentially, great things are expected of us all. By being chosen to be part of this program, we are among the elite in the agricultural field and are expected to be leaders in our communities. After having a few moments for everyone to introduce themselves and their background, it became very clear that this is a very accomplished cohort coming from a wide variety of locations and agricultural backgrounds. I learned a lot from all of the different speakers we had the privilege of listening to, but I believe I learned just as much from my fellow cohort members. Dr. Jim also stressed the point that we are now part of the TALL "family."

Dr. Jim then gave us a brief history of the Land Grant and Extension services. As an Aggie, I was well aware of the university and education side of Texas A&M, but the extent of the work done on the extension side was very impressive. Additionally, the Extension Service seems to be growing at a rapid pace, which is definitely needed in a period where agriculture is facing important issues daily.

Texas A&M Forest Service

We all then took the short drive out to the Texas A&M Forest Service Operations Center. After being split up into three groups to accommodate for the proper social distancing, we were met by Mr. Tom Boggus, State Forester and Director of the Forest Service. He explained how they monitor the entire state for fires and use the best technology available to react as quickly as possible. With only about 500 workers statewide, the Texas A&M Forest Service must use their leadership abilities to gain partnerships with local fire departments to successfully fight the fires.

Mr. Don Hannemann and Mr. Curt Stripling teamed up to explain the TXWRAP Portal and the Ranch Wildlife Response Plan. Both of these programs are designed to follow the same concept that Mr. Boggus laid out, which is to partner with local farmers and ranchers. TXWRAP allows the Forest Service to locate where the highest risk is for a possible fire, while the Ranch Wildlife Response Plan allows farmers and ranchers to set priorities on their land in case of a fire.

Mr. Stanford, the fire chief, then spoke to us from the command center, which looks like NASA Mission Control. The amount of up to the minute information that they have available statewide, including the location of their own planes, is impressive. He showed us the terrible results of fires, much like the Cross Plains fire several years ago, and how the Forest Service is trying to partner with smaller communities through the Ranch Community Wildfire Protection Project in order to implement protection measures for those communities.

The final stop at the Forest Service was to meet with Ms. Gretchen Riley. She gave us a short demonstration of the TXForestInfo.com website. This is a very detailed website, made available to the public, which can be used to locate all sorts of information, such as what kind of trees are within a certain city, as well as a map my property tab.

Etiquette Training

A chief detail that was instilled in our cohort from the very beginning was the fact that we are professionals, and as such we should act and look appropriately. Many of the major business deals are made over dinner, and these are usually not done at the local McDonald's, so a course in etiquette only seemed appropriate. Dr. Quiring did a great job explaining the reasons why we use silverware a certain way, and she did it with humor and patience, which was appreciated. I am sure we were all very grateful to have learned the proper way to eat soup, which I had been doing wrong for most of my life.

Responsibilities of the Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory

We began our Wednesday with Dr. Bruce Akey, Director of the Texas A&M Verterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory, speaking to us via ZOOM. He started with giving us a little background into agricultural employment stating that 1 in 7 Texas work in agriculturally related jobs. He then gave us a brief history of the TVMDL starting with its inception in 1967 up to its current status as dealing primarily with Bio-Safety Levels 2 and 3. The lab he was contacting us from was a BSL-3 Lab dedicated to animal testing and response. This is another example of trying to do their job in connection with local veterinarians in order to provide the best and quickest lab results that are also highly accurate. The fact that they have 650+ tests for livestock, companion animals, and exotic species goes to show how important the TVMDL is, especially for Texas.

Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Issues Facing Agriculture

Dr. Ragsdale spoke to us regarding the amount of research that AgriLife participates in yearly across the entire state. I had been aware of some of these tests because of the test plots that I had seen at a friend's cotton fields, but was unaware of their scope. Since Texas has such a diverse climate, Texas A&M AgriLife is able to replicate many of the growing conditions worldwide for research purposes. Dr. Ragsdale touched on the areas that they are focusing on for the upcoming year, including vector borne diseases, digital agriculture, plant breeding, vertical agriculture, and water resources. An interesting note that Dr. Ragsdale pointed out with regards to digital agriculture was its

partnership with Microsoft. While they wanted to fly drones over cotton fields with sensors placed throughout the field, Dr. Ragsdale mentioned why not just measure the actual cotton. Sometimes technology can get in the way, but it is definitely important for the improvement of agriculture. I especially liked the Aggie Corn created in Lubbock, which is something I can get behind.

NAFTA, Tariffs and National Policy on the World Stage

Dr. Bart Fisher and Dr. Joe Outlaw, co-directors of the Ag Food Policy Center, joined us via ZOOM to talk about the direction agriculture is facing on the world stage. The Ag Food Policy Center, established in 1983, is designed to conduct unbiased analyses of government proposals, lays out feasible options, and discusses the impacts, both good and bad, relative to a baseline.

Both men went into detail regarding different programs and responses to the COVID crisis including the Market Facilitation Program and the CARES Act. While some of these can be quite beneficial, it was clear that trade with other countries are vital to the success of the agricultural market here in the United States. In the most basic terms, we can't be isolationists. It is of their opinion that if we do not export 75% of cotton produced, the prices will plunge.

It was an important note that China and the ensuing trade deals or tariffs or whatever comes next with them is vital to the success of our own economy. Many of these trade deals that President Trump has renegotiated or completely taken away had been negotiated by presidents in the past. With no one to stand up to the Chinese regime, they will run things as they see fit and in a way that benefits them. President Trump is hoping to change some of those terms, especially with regards to agriculture.

Royalty Pecans

When we arrived at Royalty Pecans, we were almost immediately greeted with a nice refreshing rain which helped cool things off a bit. After introducing ourselves to quite a few former TALL members and supporters and settling in for a very nice meal, Mr. John

Smith of Citizens State Bank talked about how much he supports TALL and what a great opportunity we have. He also mentioned, along with other staff from Citizens State Bank, some of the recent help they were able to provide for their local customers. Blair Krebs, a fellow TALL Cohort XVII member, then gave a great introduction to the pecan industry, especially with regards to how much Texas is a leader in the industry. This introduction led into a talk given by the owner of Royalty Pecans, Mr. Mike Adams. The attention to detail Mr. Adams has with regards to how he runs his company is very evident, but he is also a great speaker and a visionary for agriculture in general. An interesting take away was that he said "we have always done it that way is the most limiting words a person can say." As technology improves and increases in functionality, we must find a way to adapt or be left behind. On our way back to the hotel, we were able to drive through the orchard and hear from the orchard manager about the irrigation practices and general care of the trees, which is extensive.

ST Genetics

Mr. Jim Hiney, Marketing Manager of ST Genetics met us outside as we drove and once again were split into three groups to help provide the necessary social distancing. We began with looking at a few of their breeding bulls that they collect semen. Gustavo Toro showed us much of the data regarding the types of cattle used in their semen processing. He also showed us the medical bolus that is used to help measure temperature changes within the cattle. Mr. Victor Gonazales gave us a brief tour of the holding pens and working pens. Mr. Hiney then showed us the actual lab where the genetic work is being done. It is impressive the work that they are doing, especially with regards to sex-sorting genetics and with a 90% accuracy for deciding which sex will be produced. At the end of the evening, Mr. Juan Moreno, CEO, met with us and talked with us a little about the background and growth of ST Genetics. A very interesting and scary point he brought up was that 85% of voters live in cities and are 2-3 generations removed from any sort of agricultural production. It is these people that will decide the future of agriculture, so we must try to educate them on the issues. We finished the evening with a great taco truck meal provided by ST Genetics.

Challenge Works

Once again, due to COVID, we had to adjust the normal Ropes Course and bring it inside. The Challenge Works session was essentially a few hours of team building exercises for our group to better learn our strengths and weaknesses. We had to complete numerous tasks designed for us to work as a team and communicate effectively between each other. It was a lot of fun and we had a lot of laughs. I believe, at least for me, this became the point during the week where we really began to bond as friends more so than just classmates.

Blue Bell

This was another somewhat disappointing session due to the fact that we did not get to tour the factory itself; however, Mr. Sam Sommer, CFO, was able to provide us with some great information via ZOOM. Beyond the basic history of the company, which began in the early 1900s, Mr. Sommer pointed out that Blue Bell does not pay for shelf space and has multiple products using the same UPC. This allows them to capitalize on whatever their most popular flavor in that particular store is and stock accordingly. Also, with the COVID crisis and the run on the grocery stores, they were able to ship straight to the stores, allowing them to not slow down in production or miss out on opportunities due to being backordered.

TALL Responsibilities and Expectations

Mr. Jim Prewitt, President of the TALL Foundation, came to speak to us and once again reiterate that TALL is a family and that we are expected to rise to the occasion, so to the speak. His talk was definitely on the side of being motivational, emphasizing that only 1% of people are real leaders who make things happen. I believe it is a lot to live up to, but worth the try, at the very least.

COVID, Consumers and the Beef Supply Chain

Mrs. Carmen Fenton, another one of our cohort, spoke to us about how the increase in Covid cases affected the supply chain, especially with regards to the packing plants. As the Communications Director for Texas Cattle Feeder's Association, it was obvious

that her phone had to be ringing off the hook with people concerned about where their animals could be taken. For many customers, especially those in the cities, the cattle feeders and packing plants are somewhat of a forgotten step on the way to have a good steak dinner. Mrs. Fenton is on the front lines dealing with the problems associated with COVID and the shutting down of what we as cattle producers would certainly consider a necessary business.

Agriculture Myths & Facts from a Texan's Perspective

Dr. Jim used some of this session to discuss into a little more detail the responsibilities of TALL and what would be expected of this cohort during and after each session. He, then followed up with a few facts regarding agriculture and possible misconceptions. One issue that gets a lot of attention is the use of the term GMO. Dr Jim pointed out that GMO has been done for years and even since the beginning. The example he used was that wheat had once been a wild grass.

Dinner with Hosts

After we spent a little time getting our photos completed and having a few drinks with the cohort, we each split off with a different host to have dinner. I had the pleasure of joining Mr. Jim McCord and Mr. Vince Patranella. They took myself, Christi Chadwell and Randy Carpenter to dinner at Casa Do Brazil. It was a great evening of good food and even better conversation. Both of these men are well accomplished in their own particular fields, but have a few moments of one on one time allowed us to see both of these men on a more personal level with real lives and interests that may or may not be associated with agriculture. My favorite example is the fact that Mr. McCord keeps the stats during the home football and basketball games for Texas A&M.

Center of Excellence for Cross-Border Threat Screening and Supply Chain Defense

Dr. Greg Pompelli met with us first on Friday morning to discuss, on the most basic level, what goes on at the border. The CBTS, essentially, is focused on monitoring traffic at the border and to detect and respond to biological threats that could affect

our own health or that of agriculture and economy. This is a very interesting and somewhat unknown organization, at least to me, that works behind the scenes to make sure our agriculture products remain healthy and nothing comes across our border that we are unaware of.

International Affairs and Moving Forward

Professor Andrew Natsios, Director of the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs, joined us via ZOOM to help trace the direction our country in going post-COVID, especially as far as on the international stage. He stated that all countries around the world, including China, are suffering economically due to the COVID crisis. It is not just an American issue. Also, we needed the money that was provided to individuals, as well as business, to help stimulate our own economy; however, unfortunately the debt problem will be the next big problem we have to face. Professor Natsios did state quite a bit of data and statistics as to studies done with regards to COVID, and some of these were quite a bit speculative. I believe it is our duty to questions some of this data just to, hopefully, reach the truth.

A Different Kind of Undercover

Mr. Jim Olson never disappoints. I was extremely lucky and blessed to have had Mr. Olson as an advisor and professor during my time at Texas A&M so I was well aware of his background. He, along with his wife, made a huge sacrifice and commitment to our country, and we can never repay him for his service. The most important takeaway, other than his opinion of Tom Clancy, is that he knows we will be attacked again, and it will probably be done through some sort of cyber attack. Also, the best and most effective protection for our country is intelligence, which can only be garnered through spies.

International Relations in the Middle East

The final speaker of this first sessions was Dr. F. Gregory Gause, Department Head of the International Affairs Department at Texas A&M University. He focused our attention to the Middle East and the volatility of the oil industry. While the Texas Railroad

Commission was giving quotas for oil production in the state of Texas, oil prices were generally fairly stable; however that changed after many of the regulations were lifted. In our current international market, Saudia Arabia is used mostly as a swing producer with their ability to raise or lower production to help stabilize the market. This concept works well as long at Saudia Arabia wants to play along and does not get upset by Russia or The United States. With the technology boom happening, oil is and even more important commodity, and it is something we must keep a close eye on if we are to succeed in the global market.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

This first session of TALL XVII was nothing short of incredible. I had the opportunity to be surrounded by a gifted group of men and women across the whole state and then be able to listen and learn from some of the best agricultural leaders currently residing in the Brazos Valley. If, as Dr. Jim pointed out, this was just the beginning and things only get busier as the sessions continue, I am greatly looking forward to the next session in the panhandle.