

Lance Gilliland #9

Session #4

April 19 – 23, 2021

Session 4 – South Texas; Corpus Christi & McAllen, Texas

Monday, April 19

It was finally time again for all the cohorts of TALL XVII to meet up for another session. This session took everyone to South Texas starting in Corpus Christi, Texas and finishing up in McAllen, Texas. We all knew it would be a full four days of interesting topics.

We all met up just a few miles outside Corpus at Smith Gin in Odem, Texas. This gin is managed by our very own Tyler Cross. He along with the owners were gracious enough to allow the cohorts to park our vehicles there housed in the shop out of the weather for the week.

As we all arrived you could feel the excitement in the air as for the first time yet, we all loaded up on the big tour bus which will be taking care of our travel needs for the entire week. Once we got all the luggage and cohorts on the bus, we were off to our first stop for the day, Kiewit Offshore Services. When we arrived at the 500-acre facility, we were welcomed by George, a civil engineer that has been employed at Kiewit for 29 years. He would be our tour guide as we drove around the facility. Kiewit employs approximately 5500 employees on this yard alone. The company is based out of Omaha, Nebraska and is a 100% North American company. The company is a \$10-13B revenue earner in the oil and gas industry. It was interesting to learn that Kiewit builds most of the offshore oil and gas rigs we all see out in the ocean. They will build from the ground up and include everything necessary to stay on the rig until work is completed including the full living quarters. All the steel they use will come from Japan, China, and some from South Korea. Most of the raw material will come in from barge or ship. Kiewit has about 3000 feet of shoreline which is governed by the Port Authority of Corpus. They are a typical manufacturing plant meaning that they must track and identify every piece of raw material that comes into the warehouse. The biggest structure they have ever built is 25000 tons and yes that is a rig out in the ocean. Another interesting fact is they also were contracted by the government to build some of the border wall, and still had some piled up on the yard since the shutdown occurred. Although this was not ag related it was still remarkably interesting to know where the oil and gas rigs were built before they went into production in the ocean.

Next, we were on our way to Welder Wildlife a few miles down the road. As we traveled, we had the privilege to listen to Bobby McCool who is the Texas AgriLife Extension Agent for San Patricio County. He gave us an insight about the ag. production in the coastal bend. He said there has been a tremendous number of changes going on in the county and it begins with the housing industry and the way the land around them is moving and changing very rapidly as more and more people are moving to San Pat.

County. One of the big driving points to the changes is Exxon putting in a large plastics plant that is ultimately bringing a lot of revenue to the county. A steel dynamics plant is also being built and combined with the Exxon plant has consumed about 2500 acres of farm and ranch land that the county will never get back.

We finally pulled up to the Welder wildlife refuge center where we were welcomed by Dr. Terry Blankenship who is the foundation's director. Welder wildlife foundation started in 1954 and consist of 8000 acres. At the center they specialize in research and education programs. Over the years they have worked with about 63 universities and several schools providing out of the classroom and into the field experiences for students' grade school and up. Since the foundation started, they have invested over \$7 million for programs such as these to educate the young people. Along side the research and education programs, the refuge is still a working cattle ranch. For years they owned their own cattle, but about 5-6 years ago they decided to lease out the cattle grazing but Dr. Terry still governs where the cattle are grazing. As we drove around the ranch, it was obvious that brush management was an issue. The mesquite and Huisache trees are very thick and appears awfully hard for them to control, but they do implement 2 kinds of management, aerial and IPT (individual plant treatment). He said both are effective in their own way, but it is still awfully expensive. Deer is the main type of wildlife on the ranch which they manage to keep the deer population down to 1 deer for every 12 acres of land. They do not offer any commercial hunting; however, they have had a few youth hunts over the years. The driving tour finished up at the centers rotunda where we were welcomed by several area businessmen and women. This might have been the most exciting for me because the shrimp boil and social was taking place. I love boiled shrimp, so this was certainly a treat for me. After socializing a bit and waiting on the shrimp to be served we sat in the rotunda to listen to an outstanding line-up of individuals. The first group was remarkably interesting, Producer Panel – Making things better by getting involved. The panel consisted of the moderator, Jeff Nunley from the South Texas Cotton & Grain Association. The panelist consisting of local producers and ag advocates were Matt Huie, Jon Whatley, Jon Gwynn, and Tony Robertson. These men were highly informative about what is going on in politics that directly or indirectly affect the ag. Industry. They all gave a very enlightening lecture of what leadership means and what each of us cohorts need to do moving forward.

The time has finally arrived... Shrimp is served. After the blessings we all sat down and dug into the fresh shrimp that was nicely prepared for us. The shrimp came complete with sausage, corn, and potatoes. A big thanks to the San Patricio County Farm Bureau for providing the shrimp boil to us, it was awesome. As we ate, we had the opportunity to listen to Mike Cowley of CoBank and Daniel Bluntzer from New Frontier Capital Markets. Mike spoke about the ever so important energy, electric grids & Ercot. This was the hot topic on everyone's mind especially after the freeze the whole state had to endure back in February. That week, temps dropped below freezing for the entire state. This truly compromised the energy sector and ERCOT forced rolling outages. This caused a lot of people to go without power for extended amount of time causing damage to property and even death to people, pets, and livestock. All ERCOT board and upper management should have been fired over that but instead they all resigned. As the night came to an end, the cohorts loaded the bus to head to the hotel to get some much-needed rest for the next long day ahead of us.

Tuesday, April 20

So finally with the bus, we were on Mazurkiewicz time, meaning the bus departs at 7:30 am sharp and do not be late or you will be left. All of us were on the bus with time to spare as we were welcomed with breakfast tacos sponsored by the Corn Producers Board. We ate as the bus took us over to the Port of Corpus Christi where we had our speakers for this morning session. First up was Robert Sweeney, president of the Gulf Compress. Before Robert began his career with the compress, he was the CEO of the Boer goat association and prior to that he was with the Santa Gertrudis Association. The Gulf Compress was formed in 1950 by one family then later was purchased by 48 cotton gins. The first warehouse was in the middle of Corpus Christi and consisted of 40 acres, 38 acres of that under roof. In the late '80s, another warehouse facility was built out by the airport. Over the years, the number of cotton gins who used the Gulf Compress declined to 18 gins. A surprising fact is that the port of Corpus Christi was originally dug and built for the transport of cotton, then later the need for the port by the oil and gas industry as well as other materials and commodities. On an annual basis, the gulf compress handles about 700K bales, but it is not the biggest in the state. They begin receiving about 70k bales a day late July to about the 1st of January and are usually empty by May, today they only had 30K bales in warehouse. Sometimes when they are empty, they might warehouse other products for a short period of time to bring in additional revenue. Keith Smith is the vice president of operations for the Port of Corpus Christi. He emphasized that the relationship with the Gulf Compress stretches far beyond 100 years. Mr. Smith gave us an informative presentation about the Port's history and some of the future projects that are taking place such as a bigger and taller bridge to replace the smaller bridge that is next to the Texas State aquarium. In addition to the bridge, they plan to dredge out the canal a little deeper to allow for bigger ships coming to port. Keith turned the floor over to Eddie Martinez, the manager of Trade Development for the Port of C.C. Eddie enlightened us with a broad overview of the port. It was started in 1926, there is 36 miles in the channel that is manmade. It started out at 25 feet deep and now it is at 47 feet. They have plans to dredge it out to 54 feet at the tune of \$676M dollars, \$403M from federal funds and \$273M from the port of C.C. Also known as the Energy Port of the Americas is the largest industrial energy hub and the gateway to global markets. In 2020, the port moved 630M barrels of crude, that make this the largest U.S. port in revenue tonnage. There is a total of 6,314 vessels moving through this port a year. He shared some very astonishing facts with us, but I was so intrigued that I was unable to write them down.

Another big user of the port is Valero, which was founded here in Corpus Christi in 1980, but is now headquartered in San Antonio. Darcy Shrader, public affairs manager for Valero shared some interesting key points of the refinery giant and the two major elements they specialize in, refinery and renewable diesel. To date, the company has 15 refineries, with 2 being here in Corpus. In addition to Darcy, we had the privilege to listen to Joe Almarez, who is the agency director at the refinery for carbon capture. They have 13 ethanol plants and just now got into the renewable diesel sector. It was interesting to listen to him and see his slides on how they separate the CO₂ from other gases and once it is separated dehydrated, compressed, and then transported in a super critical state in pipelines, trucks, and ships. This was all interesting, but it was time to load the buses for a quick tour around the port and then onto lunch at the Water street seafood restaurant where we had a fabulous fajita lunch sponsored by Hartzendorf Gin.

After lunch we traveled out to the OSO Bay Wetlands Reserves. This was neat because it is surrounded by residential areas and really serves as a park and learning centers for all the kids. It is owned by Corpus Christi and maintained by the employees. Our time there was relatively short, we just walked the nature trail and listened to the employee tell us about the history of the reserve. There were more drylands there than wetlands.

We loaded up and headed out to the Texas A&M AgriLife Mariculture Research Center. Here they specialize in oyster farming, breeding, and growing the oysters as well as growing the algae that they feed the oysters. The wealth of knowledge that Dr. Juan Landivar and Chris Hollenbeck on the research they are doing here was unbelievable. We had the privilege to also meet, Mr. Brad Lomax, who is the owner of Water Street Oyster Bar and Restaurant. He farms all his own oysters that he sells in his establishment. Mr. Lomax was the 1st in the state of Texas to be issued an oyster farming license, in fact the license shows only the number 1. We walked and toured this facility to learn all we could about oysters in the short amount of time we had.

Next stop was the Texas Parks and Wildlife Redfish Hatchery center. Here they will spawn redfish, Sea Cod, and Flounder on the 60-acre facility with 39 surface water acres to raise the fish to fingerling size to turn back into the waters of the gulf. TPWD teamed up with the CNP plant and the CCA for the funding of what they do here. They take orders from different areas that are short of fish. Currently they have an order for 15M red drums but only have 800 available. They had to cut that order short so they could focus on replenishing the sea trout. TPWD are ramping up production of the sea trout to re-stock the coastal waters from the freeze that killed over 3.8M fish. The sea trout suffered the worst however the red drum and black drum fish survived the hard freeze okay.

It was now time to make our way out to the Scott Frazier Farms where we were welcomed by Scott Frazier and his family along with several employees of Texas Farm Credit. Together they put together one incredibly special evening with an excellent steak dinner sponsored by Texas Farm Credit. We socialized with one another and had a few adult beverages which was well deserved after a long day. After we were all full and the sun was down, we loaded back on the bus and headed for the hotel for the night.

Wednesday, April 21

Bright and early, we rolled out of the hotel, moving even further south, destination, King Ranch and Kingsville, Texas A&M university at Kingsville. We met up with Brandon Benton at the north gate of the King Ranch Laureles division. Brandon is the general manager for the King Ranch South Texas Farming operation having held this position for only 2 years. The farming operation began in 1975 and Brandon is only the second general manger since it was started. Brandon began to tell a little about the history of how the farming got its start. In 1976, Bob Kleburg broke out the 1st 6000 acres to farm. Later in the mid '80s they started clearing about 40K acres and today they are still clearing out land. Last year they cleared 2500 acres and this year they plan to clear the same amount. After the land is cleared, it spends the first three years in milo and then the fourth year it is ready for cotton. They do this because all the

trash that is on top of the ground from the clearing, after the third year of plowing and turning the ground, all the trash is decomposed. Currently there is approximately 70K acres in farmland, 30K of those acres are rented out to other local farmers. The ranch kept 40K with 50% in cotton and 50% in milo. King Ranch has their own cotton gin and grain elevator in the center of the farming operation. The average size block of land farmed is 925 acres with some being more than 1500 acres. Brandon has 28 men working for him, most being on the ranch their whole lives, in fact the only two supervisors are the sixth generation on the ranch. In addition to the traditional farming of cotton and milo, they began turf grass farming. Most have heard about the King Ranch turf grass; well, this is where it comes from. They have achieved the award of being the largest turf grass producer in the state with production of 200MM sq.ft. of sod a year.

After we dropped Brandon off, we continued onto the Caesar Kleburg Wildlife Research Institute and the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management. When we arrived, a hot breakfast was waiting on us. After the wonderful meal, Dr. Mark Hussey, president of Texas A&M Kingsville, gave us an overview of TAMUK. He explained that this was the oldest university in south Texas with the majority of the 6500 students enrolled are from South Texas. Dr. Hussey did not talk too long as he wanted to give plenty of time to hear from all the great speakers, he had lined up for us. Next to talk with us was Mr. John Prukop with Prukop Farms. John farms west of Edinburg growing all vegetables such as carrots, melons, beets, kale, etc. John had several firsts in his farming career, he was the first to introduce drip irrigation to south Texas and the first to bring seedless watermelons to Texas. In addition to his farm in Texas, in 1981 he bought land in Mexico but to do that the Mexican government made him have a Mexican partner with at least 10% investment. On the Mexico farm he grew papaya, corn, and melons. He also ran Brahma cattle and meat goats. He owned this farm up until 2006. Over the years prior, it was not uncommon for him to get calls for ransom money for release of his kidnapped employees. One day he and his son arrived down in Mexico on the way to the farm, John noticed they were being watched very closely by the cartel. The cartels are strong in Mexico and were not to be messed with. When John and his son returned Texas, the farm was sold. John said it was getting too dangerous down there and it was not worth it.

Next was Rich Machen from the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management. He began by stating South Texas is a mess, 200 years in the making. What he meant was the harsh environment South Texas has become over the years has really been hard on management. The major contributors to the changes of the south plains are the removal of the bison which were eventually pushed north, implementation of fencing which made the end of free-range grazing, the introduction of exotics which has over-run the native wildlife. Now south Texas can be too thick for beast and bird because of poor land management, but the King ranch is trying. They set an annual budget every year for brush control. They are clearing the land for cattle, deer, and quail. Rich teaches all of this to his class of future ranch managers. The institute has a main goal; prepare managers for complex ranching operations and their vision is to prepare leaders who will make a positive difference in ranching. Here at the institute, ranch management is a 2-year Master of Science degree. Before graduating the program, each participant will have a summer internship at cooperating ranches which include some like the Parker Ranch in Hawaii, Sooner Cattle company, and Desert Cattle and Citrus.

Last to speak with us this morning was Dr. Hewitt with the wildlife research institute. He started with the abundance of different vegetation south Texas has to offer unlike other parts of the state. The wildlife institute was established in 1981 in honor of the great Caesar Kleburg, who was known as a hunter conservationist. In 2009, the state legislation named him the father of wildlife conservation in Texas. He loved cattle, horses, quail, and his bird dogs. He worked for the King Ranch from 1900 to his passing in 1946. He was also the first commissioner for the TPWD. Today the institute has on staff 17 scientists, 13 of which are PHD level scientists and about 30 working on wildlife conservation as well as training wildlife professionals. This morning session was full of deeply knowledgeable men in their respective fields and was a privilege to have been able to hear each of them speak.

We are all now loaded on the bus heading for the Rio Grande valley, first stop near the Progreso international bridge at a business called Grupo Chapa Quiroga. This business ships grain across the border by the truckload. On Mexican highways, a weight limit is not in place so these trucks will hook up two trailers for a combined weight of ~300K pounds. This company buys approximately 400K metric tons of grain with about 70% of the product going to three Mexican companies which consist of an egg producer, Tyson, and a beef company. There was a language barrier, and it was very noisy where we were, so I did not catch the exact names of the companies. It was interesting to hear a little about their business, but more interesting to see all the trucks loaded down going into Mexico. After they concluded speaking to us, we had some extra time before we had to head back to the hotel, so some of us cohorts went into Mexico for a little sight-seeing.

This evening was incredibly special because we broke out with different dinner hosts. After several hours for dinner, we all met back at the hotel to unwind and talk about our day. It was late and we had another packed day ahead of us, so it was time to get some much-needed rest.

Thursday, April 22

At 7:30am sharp, we all loaded the bus heading to Frontera Produce in Edinburg, Texas. When we arrived, we were welcomed by Trevor, who gave us the tour and told us all about what they do. Here at Frontera, they package and ship all kinds of vegetables, but mainly tomatillos and peppers. They also do onions, but they keep that at separate facility. Frontera always tries to keep up with what the wholesalers and retailers are wanting, for example Wal-Mart's newest demand is for aloe, limes, and mangos, so they will change the packing to meet their demands. Interesting fact is the retail stores get the best quality then followed by the food chains. Seventy percent of all Frontera packages is shipped to retail outlets. Once Frontera gets the produce, they try to get it out within 2-3 days. It usually takes 6-10 days to get to the shelf of grocery stores from the farm. On our way to the next location, we stopped by an onion field that was being harvested. This was remarkably interesting to me as I have never seen a field this large full of onions. The onions were picked, chopped, and bagged all by hand. In this field, about eighty men and women were scattered out picking and bagging the onions. The workers try to get 100 bags a day and were paid \$1.15 for every 40–50-pound bag they harvested.

Next, we were off to the riverside club where a river boat was waiting on us. We were all anxious to get on the Rio Grande river, probably because we thought we would see some immigrants trying to cross. Well, we lucked out I guess because we did not see any, but it was a good tour. We got to see some of the border wall which made everything that us north Texans saw on the news come into perspective. A couple of our speakers were constables for two precincts along the river and border. Although we did not see any cross, the constable said they have already apprehended 259 immigrants this week. Majority of them are from Guatemala, El Salvador, China, Argentina, and Bangladesh, and the shocking thing was some were small children. One of the constables picked up a ten-year-old from Bolivia, thru translation the young boy said he has made the journey by himself. So, despite what the media and social media says, it appears to be a real problem down along the border. I am not sure what the right thing is to do, but something must be done. Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez joined us for lunch. He certainly addressed the problem they are facing stating that they need the help and voice of every Texan to make a change.

Dante Galeazzi with the Texas International Produce Association (T.I.P.A) was also here to spread his knowledge of the agriculture present down in the valley. South Texas's biggest crops are watermelons, onion, grapefruit, and tomatoes. He said with 65% of all the produce coming in from Mexico, the valley serves as the origin point for all of it to be packaged, assured for quality, and shipped across the United States. He went onto say that every supermarket comes to and relies on South Texas for their produce. The main thing TIPA focuses on is trade, transportation, and labor. Currently, labor is not a big issue in the valley, but it will become more challenging moving forward as factories are being built all along the border on the Mexico side. Most of their funds will come from a membership drive at a 3-day conference called Viva Fresh Produce Expo.

Lone Star Citrus Growers was next on our agenda. Texas Grapefruit is the majority they produce, and package here followed by Valencia Oranges. Unfortunately, due to the freeze their season was cut short. They are usually in full production from October through the end of April, but it ended abruptly on Valentine's day. However, they were still running the juicer plant making mainly grapefruit juice. Lone Star Citrus Growers have 2 operations, the production side, and the packing side. They started in full capacity in 2007 and hit a high point in 2015 whereas they sold an astonishing 2.135 MM cartons. On normal days, they can package ~25k in a day or 130K in a week. With all the citrus coming from the Rio Grande Valley, it was devastating when Mother Nature hits hard. The year before a hurricane came through wiping out about 30% and then the freeze knocked it down another 15%. They are estimating a 2-crop loss that will equal \$310MM dollars in lost revenue.

This was an interesting day with all that we heard, but now it is time to get to the hotel to freshen up if needed and then go to a dinner and reception hosted by Mr. Albert Chapo and other past TALL alumnus. They had the party planned out perfectly. We had a mariachi band serenade us while we socialized with one another over some refreshing south Texas beverages and then we dug into some of the best fajitas I had ever eaten. It was certainly a fun night to wrap up the long week.

Friday, April 22

Our last day, took us to another packaging plant in Raymondville, Texas. Pajora Packing is a family business that is in the onion business. They are the grower, packager, and the shipper. They contract to Wal-Mart quarterly. The season is short, basically only six weeks, so they also partner up with other growers to package their product for them as well. They plant their onions 4 inches apart so that they can grow the bigger onions which is what the buyer wants. The onions are planted in 4 lines on a 40-inch row, with approximately 159K onions per acre. The onion cannot be mechanically harvested. They are picked by hand and the workers are paid on a piece rate by the box. We toured the facility which was amazing to watch the machines move the onions across the conveyor belts to the awaiting laborers who are either bagging or boxing the onions and then palletizing them for shipping.

Wrapping up the South Texas session, we stopped at Armando's Custom Boot Company. This boot company has been in the Armando family for quite some time. Most of all the old cowboys down in this area are wearing custom boots made by the senior Armando or the junior Armando. He showed us around his shop to show us a little of what it takes to make a custom pair of boots. At the end of his presentation, he welcomed any of who wanted a custom pair of boots to step up and sit down as he would measure every critical point of your foot to make you the perfect pair of boots to only fit your foot. A few of the cohorts stepped right up and did just that.

Overall, I was incredibly pleased with what we saw and learned this week down in Corpus Christi, McAllen, and the Rio Grande Valley. As always, I leave wanting more and wish we could stay longer. A big Thanks to all the sponsors, alumni; past and present who was responsible for making our travels down to the valley possible.

TALL XVII Session #4 Corpus Christi/Rio Grande Vasleey- April 19-23, 2021

By Big John Leifester, #14

There is truly nothing like South Texas. The amazing scenery that changes within two hours of each other is unmatched next to the hospitality shown to our cohort. Our first time to have the bus and I felt like we were able to grow closer as a group with it. As the cohort started the afternoon in Odem, TX at Smith Gin, Dr. Jim and I were in Rockwall to pay our respects to the late Jim Prewitt, a wonderful supporter of the TALL program and an even better friend to those who got to know him, over the years. What started the trip as sadness in the loss of a great leader of agriculture, morphed over our trip to South Texas into much more deep seeded appreciation for the agriculture industry we choose to work in.

The group started with a tour of the Kiewit Offshore Services. The massive size of the equipment and the drilling platforms they produce is stunning. The amount of coordination and logistics they use to build these platforms is incredible. These giant behemoths that rise from the ocean floor are a far cry from how they started, and Kiewit has taken the construction of these and made it into a beautiful symphony of movement and progress.

Down the road via a bus ride, the cohort welcomed on staff from Welder Wildlife to take a tour through their preserve. They discussed some of the issues they face in a sometimes-marshy landscape that has feast or famines rain events. They have learned to adapt and develop land management practices that have helped them preserve the native species throughout the years. They discussed how the implementation of barbed wire cross fencing and lack of fire events have dramatically shaped the landscape into a shrubby wildland versus the coastal savannah of yesteryear.

We were fortunate to be able to listen to the driving tour and producer panel as Dr. Jim and I drove south from North Texas. It was great to be able to feel like we were there as we raced to beat rush hour Dallas traffic and get further South. The producers on the panel talked about how they have assumed leadership roles in their communities and segments of agriculture that fit their interest and time commitments. The resounding theme of their

message to the group was to build your leadership style that will fit you and your family. After all, that is really who we need to run everything by. One doesn't join a volunteer organization themselves; their family also joins by having to split time with them and their passions to give back.

We were greeted the next morning by leadership and entities of the Port of Corpus Christi. The port touts some amazing statistics in revenue that are comparable to the Port of Houston. There is a massive dredging operation taking place currently to allow the port to extend their capabilities to larger ships for more commerce. That dredging along with a new taller harbor bridge will allow the Port of Corpus to be continuing to grow to meet the needs of the industries it caters too. As we left the port presentation, we boarded a bus to take a driving tour through the port. There is a large majority of oil & gas trade around the port, but we did see other industry such as wind energy parts, aggregate being shipped in, as well as grain being exported.

Safer a wonderful lunch in downtown Corpus at Water Street Seafood, we boarded the bus to tour the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve. The city has created a neat blend of classic park with a nature conservancy feel for the citizens of Corpus Christi to use. Walking trails are lined with native plant species, while there is a modern playground and activity center for the kids to use. The wetlands are actually the way the city slows water runoff and captures it after large rain events. It fills the wetlands and slowly drains to the bay offering an ecosystem unlike any other around so diverse of animal species and plants alike.

We loaded the bus and popped down the road to the Redfish Hatchery and Oyster Farming centers for research. We met with the team that is studying oyster production and helping to create a great industry for the local area. They are leading the way to introduce larger scale oyster farming to the coastal bend area. At the redfish hatchery, the team is studying the effects the species habitats have on production and survivability. They help to repopulate the states redfish count by breeding and releasing redfish along the coast and in four lakes across Texas.

We wrapped up day two with a wonderful steak dinner and social sponsored by Texas Farm Credit. They had all the fixings and the fellowship we were able to do was greatly appreciated. Scott Frazier's family welcomed us and their hospitality was great. Scott spoke about his role in the coastal bend agriculture industry and how he has adapted to help grow with the times.

Wednesday we headed furth into South Texas and took a driving tour through the King Ranch Farm to see what they are doing to help broaden the scope of the King Ranch brand. They farm corn and this revenue source has allowed them to maximize the value per care of land versus when they only ran a cattle and horse program.

We were treated with a breakfast at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Center. We visited with Dr. Mark Hussey, President of Texas A&M University Kingsville and he explained the growth their programs have seen over the years. Their ranch management program is developing well rounded leaders in the field and I was impressed to hear they have working internships with different ranches across the United States to give their students a chance to work and practice on a large-scale operation. We also heard from Mr. John Prukop about his time farming both domestically and internationally in Mexico. He discussed the highs and the ultimate lows that led him to cease his international operations due to the rise of the cartels.

We traveled south along Highway 281 to the Rid Grande Valley. Wee were passed along the route by one of our hosts, Mr. Albert Chapa, TALL X; who had just come from delivering a load of cattle that morning up north. These hosts and organizers of our session are in the thick of the agriculture industry and take time away to help make sure our cohort has the best experience possible. We met up with Albert near the Progresso International bridge where we learned about the export of corn into Mexico. It was a site to see the tandem trailer semi-trucks lined up to load with corn to take into Mexico, one right after another.

We departed the bridge and headed to the Old Hidalgo courthouse where we learned about how the valley gets its water from the Rio Grande River. It is very interesting to see these large canals diverting water inland to help farmers irrigate their crops. The water control starts

near Big Bend and through a series of dams along the way, regulates the water flow for use downstream.

That evening, Travis Ward and I were fortunate to have dinner with Cruz Salinas, of UTPA. He worked for the USDA and then took a position with UTPA assisting with teaching small acreage farming to residents. He helped setup hot houses and worked teaching crop production to schools through independent school gardens. Teaching the future generation of farmers through hands on cultivation was Mr. Salina's passion and he beamed with a sense of pride telling his story. I have said all along that this program humanizes the industry and Mr. Salina's is a prime example of what a leader in agriculture really is.

The next morning, we loaded up on the bus and headed to Frontera Produce where we received a tour of their storage areas. Walking among the boxes of mangos, limes and peppers, we got to see the beginning distribution point of the farmer's hard work. After our tour, we stopped at an onion field where we they were harvesting a field of onions. About 90 workers trimmed and sacked onions for pickup by skid steer to load on cargo trucks to head to the cleaning shed. Most all the vegetables in the valley are hand-picked to minimize damage to the crop and highlights the need for labor in the region.

We headed as far south as one can go to the Riverside Club where we boarded a boat to tour the Rio Grande river. Our boat captain gave us an informational tour of the river and we were fortunate to hear from Customs and Border Protection about their duties they perform to help keep our industry safe from foreign pests. Representatives from Hidalgo County Constable Precinct 2 were there to share with us the battle they are facing with human smuggling and drug trafficking. It really taxes their resources and puts a strain on the Border Patrol as well when people cross illegally. Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez also visited with our group to talk about the county and what they are doing to make Hidalgo County a great place to reside.

We headed northwest to Mission, Texas to take a tour of Lonestar Citrus Growers. The citrus industry in Texas was tremendously impacted by the snow this February and the damage will be felt for years to come. They toured us through the process they use to ripen the fruit as well the impressive usage of the whole fruit that they breakdown so there is no waste. The fruit

is cleaned, sorted by size and packaged for sale at supermarkets. Those fruit that aren't as "pretty" are juiced and their rinds broken down for cattle feed. It was a very informative tour to say the very least.

The final night in the valley, the red carpet was rolled out once again at a reception hosted by Albert Chapa, Ramon & Jorge Alvarez and friends. The down-home atmosphere was welcoming and included a wonderful dinner, mariachis, and dancing. I cannot thank them enough for the hospitality they showed our group.

The final day of the session, we headed north to the town of Raymondville. We stopped at Pajaro Packaging, an onion farm and packing shed. The brothers have invested in their operation to use automation and machinery to help offset the normal high labor demand of a packaging operation. There were sorting and cleaning machines, and they even had a machine that palletized the sacks of onions for distribution. It was very high tech and a great example of overcoming the labor shortage that our industry and the rest of the country is currently experiencing.

Our last stop was at Armando's Boot Company, a second-generation handmade boot company. They explained the process of boot making, from the sizing of the customer's foot, to the production of the actual boot. You must be patient if you want a handmade pair of these amazingly crafted boots. Their wait time from initial sizing to delivery is about 13 months.

This session was a much-welcomed change to the previous sessions. We got to take advantage of riding the bus and getting to know more with our classmates. Up until now, we would convoy in personal vehicles through our sessions. The bus allowed us to learn more about one another and to build lasting friendships in the industry while strengthening our cohort's bond with each other. Thank you to all who helped make this session amazing for our group. We are all looking forward to what our July session will bring and the other sessions to come.

A New Thread

Being my first visit to South Texas, one could say I was skeptical at first. Nothing can shatter a stereotype like a personal visit with those living it. Agriculture, ways of life, and preservation was completely separate from what I considered familiar. The ability of the organizers to showcase the different aspects of each area was outstanding. Learning, *and remembering*, that we are all cut of the same cloth and are bound through our love of agriculture helps me to see clearer with every session.

Beginning at the Smith Gin in Odem, TX, we were welcomed by the hospitality of cohort member Tyler Cross. He provided a quick overview and orientation as we parked our vehicles and loaded up the bus. Yes, loaded up the bus! As excited as we all were to be together again, the ability to network and not drive personal vehicles seemed to dominate each conversation I overheard. The trip was set for a different type of comradery than we had been used to. There were definitely conversations picking up and starting up for the first time.

Kiewit Offshore Services welcomed us onto their impressive building yard to tour their massive engineering feats. To some, the connection of agriculture to offshore drilling could be a stretch. It was very fascinating to know that renewable energy and many other technologies used in agriculture start their life in engineering or defense applications. Being the largest road builder in North America was definitely a large feather in the \$10B in annual revenue company's hat. The large scale projects and cooperation between local, state, national, and international entities made an impact on my understanding of logistics. The majority of the bases were made

in Dubai or other lower cost markets and brought to Kiewit for assembly. The process takes multiple years and is quite the feat of horizontal integration.

The Welder Wildlife preserve did not disappoint. Even with the extreme drought that is being experienced in most of Texas, there were fabulous sights to see. From quail to deer there were grasslands, weesatch, and mesquite as far as one could see. This was apparently not the way that generations before encountered. The thicket too dense for beast or human was brought on much after Captain King was in the area. Coyotes, birds, and various vegetation dominate the land. There were photos displayed that showed clear markers of vegetation infestation. This created hard lands to graze and keep productive. The cost of weed control is high, weather through chemical, mechanical, or slash and burn. The controlled pastures and graduate research will surely help the area through the work of Dr. Blankeship in his library with actual books. The library was quite the focal point as the internet has kept the onslaught of book rentals at bay.

Then the shrimp boil was commenced. The generosity of our hosts was most welcomed as our food was spectacular. Several speakers, lead by the illustrious Jeff Nunley, talked about the importance of being involved in the industry. Not only on a local grassroots level, but on any level that makes sense for your gifts. Not everyone needs to be a lobbyist in Washington, but each of us need to speak up when we hear misinformation about Agriculture. As agriculturalists, we are called to a new standard of community where we stand for common sense in our churches, school boards, civic organizations, and youth leadership. The leadership displayed by our speakers was a shining example of a job well done. The overview of ERCOT by Mike Cowley was an incredible breakdown of where the future of energy will be headed. Markets were covered in depth and continue to show strong pricing. Completing the day with fellowship and what community can truly look like drove the points home.

The Port of Corpus Christi graciously hosted the TALL Cohort for the majority of day 2. There were many speakers that took time to show us where the future of Corpus Christi, oil and gas, and the Texas Coast in general is headed. Topics covered included carbon sequestration by oil and gas companies. This new and emerging market has been met with skepticism. The ability to liquify carbon dioxide and inject, or sequester, it in the ground seems to shift a problem rather than solve it. The environment is of utmost importance to everyone involved in agriculture. The passion of the city and port to keep the waterways safe and clean was highly evident. The plans to expand the port in depth and width will help to increase commerce in the area. After seeing and hearing more about the Texas Coast, we set off for more excursions.

Making a stop by the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve was a welcomed break before the new Texas oyster market was explained in great detail. The operation, research, and employees were very passionate about their mission at the Oyster Farming and Mariculture Research Center. To hear about how the oysters are sources and cared for expands my line of thinking. The ability to feed micro algae and control where the millions of oysters go was amazing. After the hatchery stage, there was a farm several miles in the bay. There the oysters would grow into their maturity and be ready to eat. There were a couple types of oysters in the bay area ranging from North to South. The differences were sweetness vs saltiness and size differences. There are definitely new and exciting things happening in this space. The preservation of the environment and keeping a good environment was reiterated several times. The change in salinity from a freshwater injection or a salt water extraction by a storm could destroy months of work. The ecosystem is very important and difficult to predict.

Heading through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Hatchery, the environmental aspect became louder. The main goal of the hatchery was to ensure healthy populations of various fish.

Mostly trophy type fish, such as the redbfish. There were a number of stocking ponds, small scale tanks, and large tanks. The quote on the wall, "if it doesn't happen in here, it won't happen out there." Has been running through my head. Not only would nature have a hard time keeping itself healthy, but if there weren't good people doing good work... then who would? The passion for fish and wildlife is something I have witnessed before, and the TPWD definitely brought their "A" game every day.

This turning point of the trip really moved forward at the evening dinner at Scott Frasier Farms. Listening to seasoned veterans talk about life/work balance and the importance of involvement hit home for me. To hear from men and women who sacrificed time with their family to better their family was an eye opener. It truly isn't a trade off, more of a complimentary relationship. This was the best catalyst to our focus over the next few days.

Driving through the King Ranch was an experience. The top notch level of farming that was displayed was no surprise. While not too in depth of the famous ranching operations, the King Ranch will be a cherished site visit. This led to the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute where we heard from several speakers. Learning about the ranch management program and the focus on wildlife habitat in conjunction with commercial beef production was crucial. The highest and best use of our resources is essential in a world with ever limited inputs. The forward vision of people like Captain King and Caesar Kleberg. The removal of herds, fencing, wildfire practices, pests, and economics has shaped the plains and created an environment where the best use may not be the most obvious choice.

Hearing about labor challenges and border issues is one thing, but to see them first hand really drove it home. The idea has not been to prevent or hinder border economics, but rather to control them. This seem futile in any human environment. A quick visit to the Progresso

International Bridge, one will see private roads and grain trailers. In America, on one (100K) trailer is allowed on the road at a time. In Mexico, there are two allowed. So the result was a private road that is not subject to American traffic laws. Other examples exist where the common sense approach was taken to increase commerce. Loads are never empty; grain in one direction and aggregates back in the other. Ironically, as pointed out by everyone we met, Mexico is providing all the materials for the wall. The wall was interesting to me. I had always thought of keeping something out or in, but this is more of a fancy crossing walk. Basically, by making long stretches of wall with deliberate gaps, migrants are forced to certain areas where they can be assessed for proper treatment. To hear about the border issues and to see them firsthand from those who are on the front lines changed my idea of what is happening.

Sitting at the River Club, we got to hear from our cohort member Isaac Sulemana and the judicial office covering a significant part of the border region. The elected Judge, border patrol, constable, and other speakers; the issues of the border were spelled out. There are too many people seeking help and we don't have the resources to help everyone on our soil. The best thing we can do as humanitarians is help people achieve a better life where they are today; meet them there.

Labor and the citrus industry go hand and hand. In the South Texas area, there are not mechanical means to harvest grapefruits. They are sized by hand and plucked from the tree when the time is right. Of course, the great freeze harmed the industry. What was seen included young trees perishing and set fruit being damaged. It will take a few seasons to get back to normal levels. The facilities we toured had vertically integrated from trees to juice. The fresh industry was most lucrative with the juices being a secondary line when the fruit was not ideal. Citrus also included limes and many types of produce were in the area. From melons, chiles,

limes, and onions; many different laborious tasks were taking place. There is automation that has helped to thwart the labor crisis, but a robot is not always a perfect substitute.

No TALL trip is complete without the dinner and special guests presented to us throughout our time. The efforts of cohort member Giovana Benitez was appreciated at every turn. Mr. Albert Chapa rescued the bus singlehandedly, educated us all on the Rio Grande Valley, and more than likely is the result of certain driving ordinances. The fun and fellowship shared with the legendary Alvarez Brother's will be a cherished memory.

My takeaway from this session can be summed up in part; "...because of my belief in the great importance of the conservation of wildlife and its beneficial effects on the health, habits, and character, of the American people", Caesar Kleberg

It's not only the agriculturalist in Mr. Kleberg that speaks to me, but the impact that what we do today, in the here and now, has a direct effect on all American people. I contend this has now expanded to the globe and that if healthier, habit forming, and strong character were taught and adopted as a standard of living, then we will see a global rise of self-sufficiency and common sense. The ability to be happy, healthy, and successful is not dependent on anyone else, regardless of individual situations.