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TALL XVII: Session 6 Narrative

California: August 29-September 3, 2021:

“Employment, Emigration, Environment”

For our sixth session, we all jet set west to the Golden State to learn about Agriculture in their neck of the woods. We would hear tales of caution, innovation, and celebration over the week we were there, and have plenty of words of wisdom to bring back to Texas with us.

Monday, August 30:

Our first presentation was a virtual tour of Bayer Crop Sciences. We were guided through the Entomology Department by Mr. Tad Smith who showed us a fresh batch of foreign army worm eggs that had hatched over the weekend! We then got to see the interior labs which were set up for Covid containment purposes with the USDA during the pandemic. Mr. Smith shared with us that the biggest problem the industry faces is trying to bridge the gap, cost and education wise, between biological and synthetic pesticides.

Next we got to meet with Karen Ross, the California Secretary of Agriculture. She gave us a rundown of the top ten California commodities: Dairy, almonds, grapes, pistachios, cattle, leafy greens, berries, tomatoes, walnuts. She shared with us that the extended coastline makes for a Mediterranean like climate that is the reason why they can grow such the wide array of crops. She then spoke at length on all things water and SGMA, which we would hear about for the remainder of the trip.

After Secretary Ross, we met with George Soares, who is referred to as the “Godfather of California Ag Lobbying”. He is a Pistachio grower and used to be in the dairy business. He spoke about the history of Ag in California, but his main topic was that Agriculture needs to be more aware of its Branding and how to better reach the Non-Ag Public, a topic we all need to be reminded of from time to time.

From the Department of Ag, we traveled to the California Farm Bureau where we first heard from Emily Rooney with the Ag Council of California. This is the equivalent of the Texas Ag Council, which we heard from in our January TALL session. They focus on state level policy matters, and deal with everything from labeling to transportation. She said the 3 main issues facing California Ag are “Water, Labor, and Water”.

We heard from Shannon Douglas with the California Farm Bureau. She gave us good insight into the state’s wildfires, sharing they’ll burn until it rains in November. She expounded, though, stating it hasn’t been all bad results from the fire as they have helped increase recognition for the need for grazing of federal lands. She also shared Farm Bureau is quite involved in California politics, with 7 lawyers and 8 lobbyists.

From Farm Bureau we headed out to Heringer Estates where we heard from Steve Heringer. He and some of his associates spoke to us about water, of course, but also about the dams and canal systems California utilizes to supply water throughout the state. After they spoke, we had a reception in their beautiful renovated Wine Barn and heard from past participants in the local area community from the California Ag Leadership Program – a lovely close to a great first day in California!

Tuesday, August 31:

Tuesday started off at Pearlcrop, a state-of-the-art bulk almond processing facility. The owner spoke to us about how he started the business from scratch and became a giant in the industry through hard work and perseverance. He then walked us through a new product line they were about to launch, an almond protein powder, and the painstaking amount of time and capital it took to get to this point. It was an eye-opening

look at how much goes into the launch phase, when something could still very well fold in. However, big risk could equal big reward was his point, and seeing what he had created from scratch, point well taken!

From Pearl, we went to Lodi Farming where we got a tour of an Apple Orchard from owner Jeff Colombini. He gave us an in-depth history of Apple-eating trends and taste in the U.S., told us how Texas used to have a bit of an Apple growing industry, but Texas root rot killed that industry, and shared with us that most Apples with sunburn when above 94 degrees. After our tour we got to walk the Orchard, snag some pics, and have lunch before it was on to the next stop!

The next stop was my favorite of the entire trip – The Yellowstone of California: Mapes Ranch. Man, this place was beautiful. And at over 100 years old it was storied in history, with over 42 great grandchildren from the original family now involved. To keep an operation that large going, they have diversified into industrial, commercial, and residential investments to diversify as well as the regular farming and ranching operations, which include almonds, walnuts, cattle, and so much more. And the most unique thing about the Ranch is that it is *the* most prolific irrigation district in the state, being that they have the most prolific water rights possible: spill rights, riparian rights, and irrigation rights, which is unheard of. So, they are positioned well in the worst positioned state in the country, water wise. A great and knowledgeable stop!

After Mapes we went to Generation Growers, which was established in 1956. Roger Van Klaveren is the 5th generation to work this operation which is now on a 10-acre facility (priorly 4 acres). Their Sales area is northern calif mainly Bay Area, and they grow perennials to 15-gallon trees (crepe myrtles, day lilies, azaleas, etc.). In total, there were 600 varieties of plants on the property.

We ended the day with a reception sponsored by Mapes Ranch where we heard from Modesto area CALP participants and got to meet with local Ag leaders, once again a great way to round off a nice day.

Wednesday, September 1

Wednesday morning we were welcomed with a lovely breakfast by the Almond board as we heard about all they do; and with as big an industry as they are in California, boy do they do a lot! To put the growth of Almonds into perspective: the Almond industry hit 1 Billion in 2002, and grew to 3 Billion by 2020. Since they are such a behemoth within the nut world, they allot a substantial amount of funds to expanding industry best practices and take into account kernels, hulls, and the tree itself that absorbs co2, not just the almond, when gauging the impact of their industry. There was also talk of Reputation and Industry Management that we all walked away from bettered and prepared to take back to our own industries, something I think we all were unaware we would be gleaning from almonds that morning, but thankful for nonetheless!

After the Almond Board we headed to Hilmar Cheese, a renowned California Cheesemaker. We got a tour of their impressive facility and then were invited in for lunch in their Visitors center. The Visitors Center was a whole separate ordeal, in and of itself. It is a space Hilmar offers solely based on its passion for Agriculture because it is not branded for Hilmar, so it doesn't necessarily benefit them. There were exhibits for children to learn about the cheesemaking process, the dairy industry, and so much more. A great thing! And, we also learned that Hilmar has expanded into Dalhart, Tx and Dodge City, Kansas. Booming away!

From Hilmar we had a series of stops in the Los Banos areas. First up we went to Del Bosque Farms where we heard from Joe Del Bosque about Immigration and Labor. He shared with us that his parents were immigrants growing melons and he grew up in the culture. If its fresh fruit, it's picked by hand in California, so labor is a huge issue. He calls it Human Resources, because they are an asset, not just a job fill. He said that contrary to popular belief, Farmers go above and beyond to treat their workers very well so they will come back the next year because there is value in having Labor that is familiar with your land and operation.

Next we went to the AgCenter, where Doug Bruner is trying to get a concept off the ground that is essentially a one stop shop for all your Ag needs. It is a neat thing they are doing there involving various ventures and vendors, at its core a marketing center. A very nicely built center with big ambitions!

After that we heard from two women who are in the thick of farming and water battles, Sarah Wolff and Darcy Vlot. They painted a vivid picture of just how intensive and extensive it is to properly go about the permitting processes for water, the subsidence their area experiences, how necessary water recharge is, and how it pays to partner with outfits that are larger than you just to survive sometimes. And, as a recurring theme as we had heard before, that you must evolve your operation in order to survive.

Thursday, September 2:

Thursday morning, we met with HMC Farms, two brothers who are utilizing the technology of the “Burro”, which was absolutely not what I thought it would be (an animal), but a little robotic machine that moves fruit boxes from humans picking the fruit, to trucks at the end of rows for efficiency purposes. They said it had been a game changer for their operation, and it was neat to see the excitement in their outlook for the future of their farm with the plan of widespread implementation on other farms for their Burro!

After HMC was The Big Show: King’s Canyon National Forest where we got to hike through the Famed Sequoia Trees. This was something I had never known I had always wanted to do – for it was awe-inspiring. The park rangers who took us through explained the two theories of Park Management in Preservation (letting nature run its course) v. Conservation (active land management). They shared with us that Kings Canyon National Forest has 600-800 trees PER ACRE, and that this is why they have as many fires as they do. We learned that Sequoias can reach 300 feet tall and 50 feet wide at the base and 3,000 years old; truly majestic beings. We all took approximately 500 pictures and got lost in the magic of it all for a few hours, a much-needed, restful stop after the hustle and bustle of the last few days.

Our last stop of the evening and trip was at the Lassotovitch Ranch, a beautiful scenic outlook in the middle of a valley of rock ridges. Lassotovitch is a cow-calf red angus operation that also has 100 acres of citrus. Mr. Lassotovitch is having to haul in water at the moment, and just like everyone he said he is in survival mode. We had a taco truck dinner, socialized a bit and then headed back to the hotel as most of us had very early flights out. It was a great trip and we all very much enjoyed it.

Lance Gilliland #9

Session #6

August 30 – September 3, 2021

Session 6 – California

Monday, August 30

We all arrived in Sacramento, California yesterday so that we can began early this morning. The original plan was to arrive at Bayer Crop Science to tour the facility and learn what new research they are working on, but instead we went to our second planned stop which was the California Department of Food and Agriculture to listen to Tad Smith over ZOOM. He is a scientist for Bayer Crop Science. Tad gave a tour of the facility and very briefly spoke of some of the research they were doing. It was very unfortunate that this was done over ZOOM because we could have gotten a lot more out if this.... blame this one on COVID.

Our next speaker was Karen Ross, California Secretary of Food and Agriculture. California is a big state and very diversified with a long-extended coastline which gives the Mediterranean climate perfect for growing all the crops California is known for growing such as citrus, tree nuts, olives, melons, grapes, and other vegetables. To sustain their agriculture in the central valley, they must have a highly advanced water system which is very important considering the drought the entire state of California is currently experiencing. One of the big issues California legislatures passed and was the hot topic among many of the leaders speaking to us was the Proposition 12 which changes the housing requirements of poultry, swine, and veal calves. It will cost the industries a lot of money to make these changes.

Our last speaker of the morning was maybe the most interesting man we might listen to. George Soares, attorney and partner of Kahn, Soares, & Conway, LLP. In addition, to his day job, George has a feeder operation and a pistachio farm south of Fresno also where he once owned and operated a dairy. George got out of the dairy business because of people(labor) and the water issues. These two combinations he said was just not worth it. He believes that farmers are over-farming California with the lack of water however the farming revenue in California stands at \$50 billion.

As the morning session wrapped up, we loaded the bus to travel over to the California Farm Bureau where lunch was waiting on us delivered and sponsored by Sutter Health. We all enjoyed our sandwiches as Emily Rooney from the California Ag Council to us about what the agriculture community is facing and the challenges ahead of them. The main issues are nothing we have not already heard this morning; water, labor, and prop 12. Emily also stated that trucking was an issue in the entire state of California as well as other parts of the nation.

Next was Scott Beckstead of the Center for Humane Economy and Animal Wellness Action. Basically, he and his organization were closely related to PETA as the focus was to pass laws to protect animal cruelty. Other than that, all he could talk about was minks and mink farming. Most of the class was not very interested in this speaker at all, but on the other hand it was interesting to hear from the "other" side.

To wrap up the afternoon speakers, Shannon Douglass, California Farm Bureau 1st vice president and alumnus from the California leadership #46. California Farm Bureau is interesting in the fact that they do not have farm bureau insurance. They have seven full-time lawyers which two of them only deal with water issues. In addition, the farm bureau staffs full-time lobbyist; four state and four federals.

We loaded up the bus once again to travel to Heringer Estates, a generational winery. Mr. Steve Heringer gave us a brief history of his winery and the water issues he and his family have faced over the years. We had the privilege to taste his wine made from the grapes that he grows in his vineyard. We enjoyed our dinner as we heard from the alumni of the California Leadership group which is a footprint of the TALL program. What a fun and full day we had of learning just a part of the California Agriculture.

Tuesday, August 31

We began this morning at Pearl Crop, owned and operated by Ulash Turkhan. Pearl Crop is a nut processing facility making nut oils and protein powders. They have five plants: Stockton, Linden, Lodi, Ripon, and Modesto. Pearl crop serves all the California nut region consisting of 55 counties and over 200 customers of which 80+ are almond only growers and 65+ walnut only growers.

After Pearl Crop, we loaded the bus and departed for Lodi Farming. There we met Jeff Colombini, president of Lodi Farming. Jeff farms over 3000 acres of apples, cherries, olives, and Walnuts. We stopped in the apple orchard which was the most interesting for me as I have never seen an apple tree let alone an apple orchard. Jeff grows all the varieties of apples; gala, fuji, granny smith, pink ladies, and honey crisp. The apples were being harvested as we were there. This was neat to see. The harvest for the cherries starts about the 10th of May to the 8th of June. The olives will harvest beginning the 1st of November until the 25th of November. Walnuts are harvested starting in late August ending late November.

Lunchtime again, so we gathered up our box lunches and departed for the Mapes Ranch. Bill Lyons, owner, and president of the Mapes Ranch met us at his headquarters to give us an overview and tour of his ranch and farming operation. Mapes Ranch is a multi-generational ranch consisting of 3600 acres. They run approximately 2500 head of cattle from yearlings to the cow/calf operation. In addition, to the livestock, they grow alfalfa, walnuts, almonds, and corn. Bill drove us around the ranch where we saw every operation of the ranch. Bill left us but said he would catch up with us later for our happy hour social at a local wine bar.

We departed the Mapes ranch heading to our next stop before happy hour which was a tour of Generation Growers. This plant nursery is owned and operated by Roger and Deanna Van Klaveren. This is a 10-acre facility that was established in 1956. Roger is a fifth-generation plant grower and nursery operator. Their main sales area is the Bay area of California. They grow perennials to 50-gallon trees with most of their products going to wholesale garden centers rather than the Home Depots and Lowe's.

We wrapped up the evening with a social hour at a local wine bar and then a very nice dinner at Galletto's.

Wednesday, September, 1

We have made it to the middle of the week and today started at the California Almond Board. Once there, we were welcomed with a nice breakfast buffet. While we were eating, Richard Waycott, CEO of the California Almond Board gave us a very informative overview of the almond board and the almond industry. The main topics he addressed was the responsibilities of the almond board and the main issues facing the almond industry. He also spoke about the almond production in California, where they are now and where they plan to go in the future. A very interesting fact is according to the FDA, almonds are the only "healthy" tree nut in the nut family. Richard concluded this segment of the day, and we loaded the bus and departed for Hilmar Cheese Plant.

Once we arrived at Hilmar, Denise Skidmore and Kody Stevens served us lunch and gave us an overview of the facility with an outside tour as soon as we finished our wonderful sandwich lunch. This is a top-notch cheese plant with a wonderful country store to serve the customers.

After lunch and the tour of Hilmar Cheese plant, we departed for Los Banos, to discuss the California water issues with Chase Hurley who is the general manager for the San Luis Canal Company. While here we had the privilege of enjoying a fresh cantaloupe in the field while they were harvesting these melons. We saw the entire process from picking to packaging. The quality control inspectors were in the field testing the quality of the cantaloupes as they were being picked by several dozen immigrants. This was very interesting to see their processes in action.

Somewhere along the way, we stopped at The Ag Center which is a large service center for all the farmers in the central Valley to help them solve various unique problems they face during each stage of their farm's growth. This center was like a compound as it had ten companies all in the same center. All of which is family-owned businesses, all with the same partner, Doug Bruner. Doug told us that his family owns and operates the largest dairy in California, but that was not Doug's passion, so he left the family farm to start his own business. First thing he did when he broke away was growing tomatoes. He started with 400 acres the first year. When it was harvested and all the dust settled, Doug had made a million dollars with his first crop. Now in addition to his involvement in all these businesses he still farms tomatoes, almonds, corn, and wheat. In addition, he runs 1000 head of cattle. A very interesting man, but it was time to depart for our next stop.

We traveled down the road for a while and finally ended up at the Wolf Farms where we were welcomed by Sara Wolf and her dad, Alan Wolf, and Daray Vlot. Sara and her family farm almonds in this water district and farm tomatoes, garlic, onions, pistachios, and almonds in another water district down the road. The water issues have always been an issue so Sara started a business to help farmers with their own water supply.

Daray Vlot was here also to talk about the water issues they face in their 30,000 head calf ranch. She says the water issues are very challenging at time they often think is it even worth staying in business for.

Both women were very knowledgeable with the water rights and how they can all work together to eventually make a change but at the end of the day, the water all depends on m other nature. The on-going drought the Californians are going through has and will continue being a big challenge or a hurdle to jump over.

We wrapped up the day with a nice reception and dinner at the School House restaurant that was hosted by the California Fresh Fruit Association. Ian Lemay gave a very nice overview of his association and the fruit industry of California. The meal and the hospitality of these fine Californians have been superb all week. Such a pleasure to meet these folks.

Thursday, September 2

As we prepared for the last full day of this week in California, I was very excited for today as we were going out to the Sequoia National Forest.

Our first stop though was at McClarity Farms established in 1887. Here at McClarity Farms they grow fresh market produce which is table grapes, peaches, plums, and nectarines. They also invented an autonomous wheelbarrow called the "burro". This machine is fully automatic and is used in the table grape orchards designed to go down each row allowing the picker to place the grapes on the burro, and it drives to the end where another worker grabs the grapes to package them. They currently have six of these machines in operation. We then loaded the bus and went to the orchard where they were harvesting the table grapes. This was very intriguing as we watched the workers very gently pick and package the grapes. They are picked, packaged, and on the store shelf in 72 hours or less.

Next, we had our sandwiches on the bus as we drove to the main attraction, the Sequoia National Forest. We met and were welcomed by Kelly Kucharski at the "big stump". She and her colleagues jumped on the bus with us as we drove to the main park at Kings Canyon National Park. We jumped out and went on a half mile hike as Kelly spoke to us about the history of the Sequoias and the forest. I was appalled with the size of these trees. I enjoyed every minute of this tour even though we were not dressed for the hiking experience, business casual attire is not adequate for this stop.

We finished our hike and headed back down the mountain. We stopped at the Lassotovitch Ranch for dinner and an overview of the Sierra Resource Conversation District by Pete Lassotovitch who is the president and chairperson. Pete along with a few others so graciously hosted the TALL cohorts for dinner this evening. It was very nice, and the hospitality was excellent once again.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed this session. It was really an eye-opening experience to interact with these fine folks of the California central valley. California residents often give a bad persona based on their liberal views, but it was obvious the people we visited with this week were very similar to Texans. Now to fly home and wait for the next session to begin. Thanks to everyone who made this session possible.

THE CALIFORNIAN EXPERIENCE

The production aspect of California was a novel introduction for me. Having the understanding that San Diego and Anaheim afforded me the ability to say I had been to the Golden State of California was a misnomer. The great Central Valley of California is a highly productive Mediterranean climate ideal for over 400 crops. The value-added process of commodities such as almonds, tree fruits, stone fruits, grapes, and cattle operations were displayed throughout each in depth visit. The regulatory aspect and political environment were also discussed by nearly every presenter as they have reached nearly every aspect of daily life in California.

Prior to this experience, the limited exposure to the success and struggles of California were only rumors to me. Listening to Karen Ross, current Secretary of Agriculture, break down how the issues are not being addressed merely because of people. The predominate voices of the mega cities has drowned out the rural voice, nearly entirely. The majority is being listened to, but the narrative sold to them is misleading in many cases. Stories were told of middle-aged adults who don't understand milk comes from a cow or other basic farm level knowledge. The educational efforts made by the agricultural community have focused on school aged children who can then share that experience and curiosity with their parents. In districts with zero agricultural presence, cotton socks were provided to the needy population as educational and outreach efforts. The creativity of California is what has allowed operations to survive.

Regulations have become a major hurdle in agriculture, increasingly so in California. The voice of the majority is being spoken and represented. Unfortunately, the majority in California have a negative connotation towards agriculture. This is perpetuated through misinformation, false information, and targeted issues presented in a way to mislead the average consumer. The environmental regulations

exceed standard EPA recommendations. While there is severe drought in California, there is also water. The environmental community has been outspoken about the delta smelt; a fish introduced to the main delta area of the bay. The proper salinity of the water is essential to its survival and the freshwater that is used to flush the delta could be used to feed millions of people. The unparalleled natural beauty of Northern California deserves to be protected, preserved, regenerated, and managed properly. The landscape has changed regarding groundwater pumping, where literally the Earth has subsided. Regulations have restricted nearly every aspect of farming in California to which the producers have become creative in how they navigate these waters. Due to their success and creativity, they now face issues of lack of assistance because of their success. If anything, it should influence others to seek answers instead of criticizing further. The human element to production and need to participate in the political spectrum as a line item for many California producers.

The requests from the communities throughout the state should be better represented. The main source of water is an elaborate system of dams, ditches, and diversion methods aimed at catching the snowpack from the Sierra Nevada mountain range. One solution that has been proposed is to raise the height of certain dams, in some cases 10 feet, where more water could be stored and used when needed. These requests are yet to be acted upon. Wildfires ravage the state year after year and yet little forest management is being practiced. The reactionary response has cost billions of dollars and countless lives unnecessarily. The environment is changing as it always has and the methodology to minimize damage from natural disasters exists today. A healthy environment should be the focus of all. Focusing on specific aspects or one aspect in some cases, creates a focused approach to remediation at the cost of a healthy environment.

Farmers need water. People need water. Animals need water. Plants need water. These are not competing uses, as some would have you think. A healthy environment includes fresh air, clean water, and productive land. When we examine any ecosystem, we see cycles that recycle natural resources.

Plants digest carbon dioxide and release oxygen. Oxygen allows humans and animals to breathe. Clean water is essential to life and is filtered through evaporation and seepage. Management of natural resources is crucial for a healthy environment. Managing the forest means a healthier forest. The healthier forest creates a healthier waterway. The more plants on Earth, the better the quality of air, better fed population, and less loss of energy from the Sun.

There is no one on Earth that is not concerned about the environment in which we live. Seeing the smog of the bay area was an eye opener. The amount of trash and how poorly the city has treated the environment is uphauling. To see how precious land and water is to every producer we spoke with helped to reinforce that the highest and best use of natural resources is in the hands of the American producer. There are many lessons to be learned from California agriculture not only from a production standpoint, but a human approach that may help or hinder production agriculture.