

Cassidy Nemec (#18)
TALL XIX
Session 1 — College Station, TX
July 23-26, 2024

Introduction

I want to start by saying what a blessing it is to be part of the TALL family and community after hearing about the program often since I was young. I spent a lot of time in the Brazos Valley growing up and consider it one of my homes. I am immensely grateful to be part of a program that values agriculture, community, and leadership, and I can't wait to see what lies ahead.

Day 1

Right from the start of our first session together, we had a full schedule. After some great opening remarks from Dr. Jim and a wonderful welcome from Dr. Rick Avery, Director of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, we introduced ourselves and began the first of many great presentations.

Ms. Tammi Frederick, VP of Food Safety & Quality at HEB, enlightened us on the history of the stores and their commitment to Texas agriculture. She spoke about mitigating risk on the quality assurance and food safety side of things as well as their proud membership in the Go Texan program. I thought her comments about leveraging great people with great products and great ideas spoke volumes on HEB's commitment to how they involve the Texas community. I think Dr. Jim said it best when he said "HEB is a great store, but it's also a beautiful Texas story."



I really enjoyed Dr. Jim's presentations on Land Grants and Ag Facts & Myths. Learning about the Morrill Act of 1862, Hatch Act of 1887, and Smith-Lever Act of 1904 forming the teaching, research, and Extension arms of what we have today was nice to put together. That, in addition to his emphasis on the need for involving local people with current and future issues and changes, made an impact on me. I will absolutely be adding a few (or a lot) more questions to my list of questions I like to ask producers and industry people for articles. I also believe the value of having the ag facts and myths information to share with those curious about agriculture is unmatched.

We ended the evening with an etiquette training and meal with Dr. Susan Quering. She was phenomenal in explaining numerous etiquette concepts (not just for the dinner table) that would only help us throughout life. As someone who didn't feel I ever had the best table etiquette no matter how hard I tried, this was a great learning experience for me.



Day 2

We began the second morning with Dr. Amy Swinford, Director and Veterinary Microbiologist for TVMDL (Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory). She spoke extensively on the avian flu and other diseases of concern in animals across the state. I thought it was interesting to learn about how the transmission from birds to dairy cattle emerged. Dr. Swinford said the virus is already mutating, and they would be concerned if it mutated enough to have the ability to travel through the respiratory route (i.e. easier to go to humans and between people). It was then stunning to me when she said anything it might cause or transmit from then on would make COVID-19 look mild in comparison. Definitely an eye-opener to keep an ear out for these kinds of things!

Mr. Stephen Cisneros, Executive Associate Director for Texas A&M AgriLife Research, then presented about issues facing agriculture and the research in and around their 13 centers across the state they are doing to combat those issues and strengthen the industry as a whole. He spoke on how they seek to maximize what they can do with what they have and work with others well. I liked that he said they continue to partner with those on the ground and keep open minds and ears so that they are better able to engage their constituents on their key areas of research.

The famous Dr. Joe Outlaw then gave us an update on the Farm Bill and national politics at large to wrap up the morning. I have been able to hear Dr. Outlaw speak multiple times now and always enjoy hearing his perspective on what is going on in our country and around the world, especially with my interest in the policy side of agriculture. I learn a lot from the Southern Ag newsletter he and other experts across the country contribute to, and I look forward to hearing more from him in the future. My biggest takeaway was when one someone asked what the biggest challenge is that we're facing in the state and country. Dr. Outlaw responded quickly with "an uninformed and apathetic public on where their food comes from." I've known it for a while, but it always hits me how critical my line of work in journalism and publishing can be in the overall success and progression of agriculture. It can be difficult thinking you're just writing things down or sharing information someone else said, but it's important to remember not everyone is informed on XYZ topic or that they may see a new side to something that motivates them to try something new or share that information to even more people.

Jumping on the bus to head out to the Brazos River Bottom was next on the agenda. I am a bit biased as I grew up walking many of the fields in this area alongside my dad, but I found this to be one of my favorite places to visit during this first session.

We were fortunate enough to pay a visit to Mr. John and Mrs. Connie Giesenschlag's farm, have a tasty lunch, and hear from other area farmers including Mr. Jay Wilder (TALL XIII — pictured here with Mr. Joe, his dad), Mr. Dennis Thomas, and Mr. Jason Wendler. So many of the struggles they face are felt across Texas, and the challenge of land loss and water scarcity remained a common theme. Mr. John emphasized the alarming (hourly) rate at which we are losing farmland that can't be replaced and that "everything has a story." I do always enjoy sitting and listening to those stories.



Next, we went next door to Wiggins Watermelons, and we got a tour of their facility from Mr. Jody Wiggins. I have some great memories driving around their fields when I was younger, so it was nice to get a tour of their headquarters. Mr. Jody referenced their input costs per acre being \$4,500-\$5,000 per acre to make their watermelon crop. While every operation is different, that stuck with me just knowing how much it costs the grower to keep their operations running right now.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't get a few lumps in my throat while driving through the rest of the Brazos Bottom and connecting to Bryan by way of Smetana. My dad's family settled in Smetana, right where RELLIS stands now, when they came over from Czechoslovakia many years ago. They moved across the highway when the old air force base came in, so it was nice to know I was so close to home for a minute and hear Dr. Jim speak about how Smetana got its name (the best deep, alluvial soils in the state = cream = smetana in Czech!).

After the ride, we landed at Sanderson Farms. I always wondered what was inside every time I'd drive by this plant, and I certainly found out that day! We learned just how many people are involved with the operation and where they have locations across the country. Allen Laughlin, Complex Manager at Wayne Sanderson Farms, discussed their merger with Cargill and Continental Grain and how they strive to maximize outputs with their current inputs. I thought it was interesting to learn how they also noted water is getting harder to find and appreciated the tour through their facilities.

Day 2 ended with a tour and dinner presentation at STgenetics, an innovative livestock reproductive services company. Mr. Jim Hiney was a great tour guide, and I appreciated hearing the history of the organization. I was blown away by the wealth of knowledge Mr. Juan Moreno, CEO of STgenetics since 1997, has in this industry. Learning everything from milk being the absolute most nutritious thing to consume on earth, to connecting

that to why India as the most populous country in the world has so many dairy cattle, to hearing the wildly impressive timeline of company successes and goals, made for a fascinating evening.

Day 3

The third day's plans changed slightly due to rain, but we were still able to squeeze in time for the TAMU Challenge Works Team Building activities. If we didn't know everyone's names by that morning, we did by the end! We had a good variety of activities that got us comfortable with one another and pushed us to work better as a group.

After lunch, we departed for our two bonus stops of the day, with the first being at the Brazos County Expo Center. Ms. Jacqueline Foster toured us around their facilities, and I was very impressed by the wide range of programs they put on, including the annual Brazos Valley Fair & Rodeo Ms. Avery Fisher spoke about, and offerings like meeting and event spaces.

We then met at Producers Cooperative Association in Bryan, the largest member-owned cooperative in Texas. We had a great tour of their feed and supply divisions and were treated to a panel with their senior leadership. I was extremely impressed with their team and how thorough they were in making sure we got all the information we could want while being there and how they are staunch champions and defenders of ag. A theme of urbanization breaking up farms came up and added to our ongoing theme of agricultural land loss. Their CEO Mr. James Deatheredge made the point that "we haven't taught the younger generation where their food and fiber originates." This was another great reminder of how crucial good communication and education is for the future of agriculture.

The day ended with the TALL XIX Welcome Reception hosted by Texas A&M AgriLife and going to dinner with our dinner hosts from around the community. I really enjoyed getting to meet some exceptional people at the reception and had the honor of having dinner at Gate 12 with Mr. Jason Wendler, one of the area's farmers and an old classmate of my dad. We were able to sit with others in my cohort and their hosts, also great area farmers. I am so appreciative of all the generosity that went into this evening!

Day 4

Friday began with an energetic presentation from Mr. Al Davis, Texas A&M Forest Service Agency Director. I liked how he said he tries to give a solution set to each problem they are facing, that the more they do in conservation, the more they can do to mitigate fires across the state, and how important it is to tell their story and teach safety. Mr. Davis's passion for what he does is easily felt, and I enjoyed learning about an agency I had not known much about beforehand.

We then had the honor to hear from Professor Andrew Natsios about the current state of international affairs and where we may be headed. I thought it was thought-provoking, with everything going on in our country and around the world, that he said, "Sometimes when you're in the middle of an event, you don't see the historical context of it." I will certainly be interested in seeing what is (or even is not) in school textbooks about this time over the next 50+ years. Overall, I was fascinated by his knowledge and experience in international affairs and was intrigued by his entire presentation.

Our last presentation of the week was given by Dr. Gerald Parker, Associate Dean and Director of the Pandemic and Biosecurity Policy Program. I thought it was interesting to connect this presentation back to Dr. Amy Swinford's talk on the avian influenza, but with more of a human focus. Dr. Parker ended by saying we do have the technology today to make analyses and confirmations in order to help make policy and act.

We wrapped up Session 1 by taking the iconic Freedom Horse Sculpture cohort photo outside of the George Bush Library and School of Government. It was brightening up outside after a very uncharacteristic cool and rainy July week across much of Texas. It was such a great time and learning experience in an area I hold dear, and I believe we are all looking forward to Session 2 in Lubbock and Amarillo!



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First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all involved with not only this session but the complete program. My hats off to Dr. Jim and Jennifer for the untold amount of time devoted to this and every session. Most importantly, I would like to show my gratitude to Mr. Jim McCord. Mr. McCord is a customer of mine through the feed business and is a wonderful individual who has always been very accommodating and helpful. His desire to give back to his community is only matched by his love for Texas A&M. In addition, he possesses a desire to show others the greatness of agriculture in the Brazos Valley and beyond. Mr. McCord's drive to produce high quality, reputable replacement heifers, market topping, high grading steer calves and superior quality hay set a splendid example of agricultural greatness for this area. I am looking forward to the next two years and becoming immersed in agriculture throughout Texas, the United States, and our grand finale internationally. It is our duty as progressive agriculturists to lead in telling our TRUE story of agriculture. This program will be a cornerstone of my foundation that will enhance my ability to continue advocating for Texas agriculture.

Tuesday afternoon 7/23

Our first session began on a dreary day in a hotel conference room. The unknown expectations and excitement of new possibilities were on everyone's mind. In my opinion, assigned seating was a clever idea to encourage the cohort to begin the process of meeting our fellow classmates and not reverting to old acquaintances. Dr. Jim welcomed the new cohort, and we hit the ground running. He quickly explained the program from initial inception to current expectations, and then Dr. Rick Avery welcomed us to the program and the system. After a quick break, Dr. Jim led us through a detailed explanation of the TAMU system. As a graduate of Texas A&M

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University, I had a slight knowledge of the complexity of the entire system. The ins and outs of this system are still daunting but make more sense now after his explanation. After a slight delay due to the weather, Mrs. Tammi Fredrick walked us through another Texas icon, HEB Grocery. HEB is a privately owned store that started in Kerrville, Texas, and now has stores in Texas and Mexico. I was unaware of their presence in Mexico until a couple of weeks leading up to our session. I was quite surprised to see a video about one of their flagship stores in Northern Mexico. Her passion for the retail industry, specifically food safety, really hit home to me. As a past TAMU meat judging team member and a meat lab employee, it was meaningful for me to see someone who is concerned about the welfare of their customers and wants to avoid a “black eye event” for the agricultural industry. Another interesting facet was HEB’s use of the Go Texan label and promotion of small locally owned products as well as procurement of produce throughout the state. I have been aware of their food pantry efforts for those less fortunate and their driving force in helping in times of natural disasters, such as the most recent hurricane. The company honestly believes in giving back and I am proud to shop with my local HEB. Moreover, she brought multiple in-house branded items for us to sample and then we had a birthday month drawing for the items left over. While my birthday had passed several months ago, my roommate Mike was fortunate to pick the Cowboy cookies and share them with me over the next couple of nights. He warned me he liked cookies but to be sure I get my share, or he may eat them all himself. None were left by the last day; we may have to watch him.

Our next presentation, AG Facts and Myths by Dr. Jim, was one of my favorites, but I am a little biased because I have given a remarkably similar presentation to county farm bureaus and youth groups. I have also been fortunate enough to have been chosen to present this at the Texas FFA teacher conference and new volunteers for the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. I was pleased to see I had a working knowledge of the topic when Dr. Jim and I used many of the exact same slides. I might need to borrow a couple of his other slides as well. This is the topic that I have covered for the last couple

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of years and motivated members of my county Farm Bureau board, as well as a state director of Texas Farm Bureau to push me to apply for the TALL program. This subject causes me stress at times but truly drove me to join. I need to call a special meeting with Dr. Jim to compare our presentations. This week, I was invited to present this subject at the Milam County Farm Bureau convention next month. The hard part is they only want me to speak for roughly 30 minutes. I will unquestionably have to restrain myself from getting on a soap box. After a break for a “Polish soda water” and a meet and greet with our new team, we reconvened for an etiquette dinner hosted by Dr. Susan Quiring. Ms. Quiring often attends church in our small town, and I had no idea etiquette training was in her wheelhouse but could guarantee without a doubt she would be excellent at it. She is always dressed to impress and full of enthusiasm. Having previous “training” in this area, I was not as flabbergasted as some of my classmates at the table. However, everyone around me was raised in the South and had a working knowledge of general manners. It is always good to have a refresher training and remember how important it is to be cognizant of how our performance at a dining event reflects on the TALL program and, in the future, our ability to convince others we know what we are talking about and are not just farmers. We closed the dinner and day with Dr. Jim’s expectations and requirements to ensure we had it down. Everyone was very tired but still excited, so we procured more “Polish soda waters” to finish the day, meet our fellow teammates and share or temper our excitement.

Wednesday 7/24

The day started early, with a quick hotel breakfast and a return to the conference room; we began with a presentation by Dr. Amy Swinford. She informed us of the layout of the TVMDL and the myriad of issues they face and are concerned with in relation to livestock and even humans. Her concern with bird flu becoming mutated to human-to-human contact was concerning and reiterated later in the week. The fact that we, as a state, have provided such resources that operated and utilized by other states during

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Covid for testing was a thing to be proud of. Our next presentation was by Mr. Stephen Cisneros with Texas AgriLife Research. I have always heard about AgriLife research, mainly through their research stations and he provided a more in-depth review of all the items associated with AgriLife and how they intertwine with the entire system. The last hotel presentation was from Dr. Joe Outlaw, Co-Director of the Agriculture and Food Policy Center. While in college, I worked for a year in the Agricultural Economics department under Dr. Penson, and policy was always at the forefront. Dr. Outlaw provided us with a detailed and extremely truthful look at the details of getting a new Farm Bill passed and the dismal state we must work in. We all appreciated his to the point, non-sugar-coated, brutally honest approach. He is a wealth of knowledge and a tremendous benefit to have locally and on our side.

We took a quick break and then gathered for the bus to depart for the Brazos Bottom. We arrived at Giesenschlag farms for lunch, thanks to Citizens State Bank and the Tri-County Extension Field Crop Committee. Prior to my employment with Westway Feed, I was a Vice President for First State Bank of Bedias and had the pleasure of the generosity and community involvement instilled in all the employees of Citizens State Bank. In addition, I had multiple customers who were in attendance, and I have also worked with the county agents on projects before, this is one benefit of working in the local community. The program was informative and told the benefits and struggles of farming in the Brazos Bottom. All the producers involved had a unique story to convey that showed their passion and drive to continue developing future agriculturalists. Mr. Giesenschlag's business and story were memorable and his passion to help his community and agriculture was incredibly special. After questions, we made our way down the street to visit Wiggins Watermelons, this operation has always intrigued me due to its location. Growing up, I had always heard about Hempstead watermelons but never associated the Brazos Bottom with watermelon production. Over the last several years, I have observed the growth and changes at their location here and have purchased these watermelons in local and regional stores. This stop was informative about their

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product, packaging, and transportation processes, but was a little hard to hear everything in the warehouse. We then proceeded to an in-depth tour of Wayne Sanderson Farms, a well-known poultry processing facility. This tour checked all the typical boxes of a processing tour: biosecurity, hand labor, yet highly automated and innovative processes to ensure a high quality product to the end consumer. We started with a brief overview of the company and then proceeded to a tour by their staff. These tour guides informed us of items within that created efficiencies downstream to their customers as well as answering all the various questions we could muster. After our tour, we headed to ST Genetics and a tour, presentation, and dinner. I was actually accepted into Texas A&M as a Genetics major but changed before the start of the first semester. Therefore, this stop piqued my interest once I noticed it on the agenda. Touring the premises proved interesting; the technology they are using to further agriculture production is mind-boggling. I have seen various feed research bins to study production values, but incorporating the methane research at the same time will benefit our explanation to consumers of the true emissions from animal agriculture. Next, we toured the main part of the company, their semen sexting technology. This has become an invaluable process for many producers. After an excellent street taco food truck dinner, we got to the main event. Mr. Juan Moreno, CEO of ST Genetics, gave us a detailed presentation of the overview of their company and the bright future their technology will provide to the dairy and beef industries. His passion and drive to succeed was evident as he spoke to us and dared us to utilize all facets of technology to drive agriculture forward. I could have listened for hours on end, and it was evident that he possessed a great passion with tons of information to share. I hope to have the chance to visit with him in detail again. Upon leaving ST, it was a general consensus to meet for another round of “Polish soda waters” and discuss our jam-packed day.

Thursday 7/25

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This day started with great rain chances and a “roll with the flow” adaptability. We started at TAMU Penberthy building for our inside challenge course to enhance our team building. We spent the better part of the morning performing tasks, familiarizing ourselves with one another as well as easing outside our comfort zone. We met Chewbacca for the first time and fed on the energy the student leaders and Lorenza, our well-versed guide, had in store for us. Due to the inclement weather, we did not do the outside course, which was okay with me due to my dislike of heights. Instead, we made our way to the Brazos Valley Expo Center. This center is well known in the region for hosting countless events, from agriculture to sports to weddings. After a summary of the dilemmas in the initial phase of the Expo Center by Dr. Jim, the group was introduced to Ms. Jack Foster. Ms. Jack gave us the grand tour and told us of future plans and dreams for the center. You can truly tell how much this center means to Dr. Jim and how proud he is to have played such a pivotal role in seeing this event center from the initial thoughts to the current stages, with planning for the future considered as well. We then transitioned to Producers Cooperative for a tour of their facility. We are very thankful for them providing this on such short notice, but after having collaborated with Producers for the last several years, this is something that they believe in whole heartedly. Supporting the community and furthering agriculture are always a priority for their staff. We had a welcome from Mr. James Deatherage, followed by a sector snapshot from Mr. Everett Lowe for the feed division, Mr. Mark McMath for the agronomy and fuel division, and Ms. Hope Bay for the supply division. We then split into two groups and toured their complete facility. Mr. Everett joked with me that if he had to step away, he was confident that I could continue the tour for the others considering how many times I have had the privilege of being on their tour. We toured the mill, warehouse, and retail space, and some classmates pumped money into the local community for our cohort. We finished our time here and headed back to the hotel to quickly get ready for the reception later.

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After a quick break and change of clothes, we loaded onto the bus and departed for the reception at the AgriLife Center. Our cohort was well-dressed and ready for our evening. We partook in a “Polish soda water” and mingled with those in attendance. I knew several individuals in attendance and was able to discuss local events with them. Mr. McCord approached me and we discussed the program. I thanked him for his support, and we talked about cattle and the weather. Mr. McCord’s support to the program is a huge step in continuing the TALL program well into the future. After a brief program and introductions, we left for dinner with our selected hosts. I was fortunate to have Mr. Ross Hargrove as my host, and we had a wonderful dinner at Sushi Masa and great discussions about the Farm Bureau and life around Brazos County. I enjoyed our time and had a detailed conversation about changes in Brazos and Grimes County Farm Bureaus, developed a new understanding of his role within the insurance industry and may have a few small pieces of information that might come in handy during our cohort. Ross’s wife, Rachel, is a fellow member. We had our fill of sushi and conversation, and he dropped me off at the hotel, where I reunited with my classmates on the rooftop for “Polish soda waters” and a time of reflection and comparison of our evening. Chewbacca made a second and quite stunning appearance.

Friday 7/26

The final morning of our first session began with a short drive to the George Bush School of Government. Everyone was beginning to show the mental and physical drain from the prior days and settled in for our last few speakers. We had a great presentation from Mr. Al Davis, agency director for the Texas Forest Service. Mr. Davis’s military background definitely prepared him for this job. He was an incredibly detailed speaker and his desire for his team to be successful was evident, as well as caring for the people involved in the natural disasters he is destined to support. He possesses a strong work ethic and recognizes such in others. Our next speaker, via Zoom, was Dr. Andrew Natsios, director of the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs. Dr. Natsios’ speech

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was eye-opening and at the same time, a little unnerving. The current state of international affairs is quite unsettling. His knowledge of all areas of this subject was second to none. We will all pay closer attention to things internationally now that we have heard from him. Our final speaker for the day was Dr. Gerald Parker, director of the Pandemic and Biosecurity Policy Program at the Scowcroft Institute. If we had not been concerned by the comments of Dr. Swinford about biosecurity earlier in the week or the previous speaker about terrorism and international strife, Dr. Parker's presentation solidified our fears. The general population is primarily unaware of the dangers lurking in the biosecurity realm. After hearing his concerns, we may have left a little more nervous and cautious. The details our country goes to keep us safe are truly unknown to most citizens. We ended our first session with a traditional picture in front of the running horses' sculpture in front of the Bush School, even though it looked like we were blinded by the sun. We thanked Dr. Jim and Ms. Jennifer and wished everyone safe travels while saying goodbye to our new twenty-plus friends.

Overall, this was an extraordinarily successful first session; we learned to adapt and overcome the weather, formed bonds, met expectations, learned new things, and set our sights for the next two years. Once again, I am incredibly proud to have been selected as a participant in this wonderful, well-respected program and hope I can leave my unique mark on the future of Texas Agriculture. On to the next adventure, see you in the panhandle!

Thomas Hicklen (#14)
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Tuesday, July 23, 2024

The session started with a welcoming from Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz and Dr. Rick Avery, Director of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. The welcoming was more of a challenge for the cohort to gain as much as possible from the speakers, tours, and most importantly from each other. To also remember the real challenge comes after the program is completed. To use all the information, experiences, and connections made, and gained to be used to become better advocates for Texas agriculture.

The Land Grant Overview was given by Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz. This was very informative for me since I did not attend Texas A&M, and I'm not familiar with the structure and history of the Texas A&M system. I was aware of the Morrill Act of 1862 which granted land to be used or sold to start and fund a college to teach about agriculture. A&M was established in 1876 as a result of the Morrill Act. The Hatch Act of 1887 provided a way of funds to start agricultural experiment stations, and the Smith – Lever Act of 1914 started the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. The Texas A&M University System was formed in 1948, which incorporated the Extension Service. Today, it is called Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. This overview helped me better understand why the Extension, and the Experiment Stations are set up the way they are and how they function within the A&M University System.

Tammi Frederick, Vice President, Food Safety & Quality, H-E-B, delivered a talk on the history, the types of stores and services of H-E-B, H-E-B Quest Program, promoting GoTexas, and what keeps her up at night with food safety in the stores. The original store was opened in Kerrville, TX by Florence Butt. It was named C. C. Butt Grocery Store. Howard Edward Butt started running the store in 1919. It has expanded to one of the largest privately owned businesses in the United States. The stores are very good about promoting Texas made products through the use of the GoTexas label. Besides the H-E-B grocery stores, they have Central Market, H-E-B Plus, Mi Tienda, and Joe V's Smart Shop stores. These stores cater to different target customers based on the local needs and tastes.

The HEB Quest for the Texas Best program helps Texas small businesses and individuals get their products on the shelves of HEB stores. They can win money and have the use of the HEB labs and production facilities to get their products produced on a larger scale. An example of a success of the program was Slaton Bakery's cookies.

They are located close to Lubbock, and everyone in our area knew about the cookies, but through this program they were able to expand their production and increase sales.

Tammi also talked about her obsession with Food Safety. She is in charge of testing products, retail quality control, supply chain quality, federal and state safety regulations, and staying ahead of any product recalls. I learned from her that even large companies must stay ahead of the customer's local needs and must be willing to transform to meet those needs.

Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz presented a lecture and discussion on Ag Facts & Myths. Some of the facts discussed are the population concentration in the Texas Triangle. 70% of the Texas population resides in this area. This area also has some of the best soil for production agriculture which is quickly being lost due to urban expansion. 175 acres of farmland are lost in Texas every hour. This fact should scare everyone. Twenty of the largest cities are in Texas. Houston has the number one tonnage port in the USA. The scale of the Texas economy is comparable to most other countries' economies.

Truth in advertising was discussed. Gluten-Free, GMO-Free, and Hormone-Free foods can be very deceptive labeling. Products are marked Gluten Free that naturally contain no gluten but are done so to market towards a uniformed consumer. The same is done with the GMO-Free labels. The use of Hormone-Free labels on meat is a very deceptive use since there is only a minuscule amount of increase of estrogen in the meat. The use of the label of milk on items that should be labeled as juice, like almond milk. The use of the word meat to describe a processed product that imitates meat should be illegal. As agriculture professionals we need to educate the population on the benefits of our products and how mislabeling is used against the consumer and the producers.

Etiquette Training was directed by Susan Quiring, Ph.D. I was a little nervous about this session since I rarely attend any formal meals or ceremonies. The training was most enjoyable, and very informative. Small customs and formalities can help with relationships and certainly help in business dealings. The meal is often where a first opinion is formed in business relationships. Our table made a few mistakes at first, and Susan quickly corrected our mistakes then she answered all of our questions.

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Amy K. Swinford, DVM, MS, DACVM, Director and Veterinary Microbiologist at Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory gave a very informative and interesting lecture on the responsibilities of the TVMDL. All veterinary clinics in Texas, State agencies, some Federal agencies, Zoo's and individuals use the services of testing of the

TVMDL. There is four locations, College Station, Canyon, Gonzales, and Center. It is a member of the National Animal Health Laboratory Network.

She explained the current crisis of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. March 23, 2022, the largest outbreak in history was discovered in west Texas at a chicken farm. It made the jump to humans at a west Texas dairy. They were instrumental in finding and tracing how that was accomplished. This has the possibility of a large impact on the market with pandemic impact. There is a current fear that African Swine Fever will travel to the United States. When that happens there will be panic in the pork markets and devastating effects to the wild swine population in Texas.

Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Issues Facing Agriculture was discussed by Mr. Stephen Cisneros, Associate Director of Texas A&M AgriLife Research. He briefly discussed how the Research system was formed through Smith-Lever Act of 1914, its current locations, and why the locations were chosen. The strategic priorities of AgriLife Research are leading edge research and innovation, sustainable production systems, economic strength, and healthy living. There is research for producing better food for health, livestock disease and health, soil and plant health, turf grass varieties, bio energy, food supply chain safety, water reclaiming, and bio security of our food systems. Mr. Stephen challenged the cohort to participate in our trade and government boards to get more funding to upgrade the equipment needed to improve research. He asked us to find ways to promote agriculture and engage with the public to support agriculture in Texas.

USMCA, Tariffs and National Policy was discussed by Dr. Joe Outlaw, Co-Director of the Agriculture Food Policy Center. Dr. Bart Fischer is the other Co-Director. The AFPO was created in 1983 to provide an unbiased analysis and the economic impact of changes in policy on stakeholders. Joe is always on call to discuss the impact of changes in policy with congressional members, but it is usually their aides and assistants. The aides are the people behind the leaders that are trying to implement policy changes. He is intimately involved with the formation of new or upgraded policy that will be in the Farm Bill. His opinion on the new Farm Bill coming anytime soon is there will be no new Farm Bill till after January, and probably not till September of 2025. Dr. Outlaw is an interesting speaker with deep knowledge about the political connections of commodities and what any changes to commodity policy can have on world markets. He was very good about answering questions, but I really enjoyed his Texan tell it how it is attitude.

We traveled to John R. Giesenschlag Farms. The lunch was served in the shop area, and the food was very good. We heard from James Giesenschlag about his TALL experiences. What he learned from his cohort convinced him to get more evolved in agricultural organizations in his area. Dennis Olam spoke on his family's ties to the land

being a multigenerational farmer. He talked about how he was trying to keep his family evolved in the future, and the sustainability of the farm in the future.

John talked about his family's past and his worries of encroachment effecting his right to farm, water rights, and the loss of agricultural land. His emotional ties showed through his speech. He believes we must all speak out to educate about the need to save the land for agricultural use.

We next toured the Wiggins LLP-Watermelon Warehouse, Incorporated. Jody Wiggins gave us a wonderful tour and answered a lot of questions. He spoke about the changes in packaging requirements over the years, the variety changes, and the enormous labor requirements of his crews. The watermelons can be tracked back to the field through labeling. The next phase may have each watermelon with a traceability tag. He owns some fields, but the majority of the watermelons come from contract farms. He was very kind to answer questions right up till we were herded toward the bus.

The next stop was the chicken processing plant of Wayne Sanderson Farms. Allen Laughlin the Complex Manager gave us an overview and then a tour. This tour was very interesting. Because of the noise levels, we were broken down to small groups which allowed us more opportunity to ask questions. We were able to tour the entire plant from unloading to boxing of the packaged product. A lot of the automation was added because of the restrictions of Covid, but there is still a need for a large amount of labor for now. They are a major supplier for Wal-Mart, Sam's, and Chick-fil-A.

We were off to STgenetics next. We were able to see the feed gates and were told how each animal is monitored. The tracking device, Farmfit, is like a Fitbit for cattle that stays in the first stomach which monitors all movements, and temperatures. They do generic testing, and the sexting of semen. The fluid that keeps the semen viable was developed by STgenetics. The sexting and generic testing are done for all cattle, but the main customers are dairies.

The generic testing named Vision+, can help a producer tailor their cattle to the desired traits most wanted. They have an extensive catalog of semen for sale of all kinds of cattle and not just dairy. Jim Haney, Co-Owner, was very enthusiastic and passionate in sharing his experience of the development of all of their services. I believe he would have answered questions all evening.

Thursday, July 25, 2024

A day of fun at TAMU Challenge Works was next. Well, a half day anyway because of rain we couldn't do the ropes course. We played games that required us to get to know each other, and each other's names. One of the main objectives was forming us into a working team. Some of the games seemed a little silly for adults, but they certainly were helpful in bonding the cohort together.

We travelled to the Brazos County Expo Center to tour and learn about the facilities. Jacqueline Foster, General Manager, and Elizabeth Hailey, Sales and Marketing Manager gave us a great tour. There are two arenas, the biggest is able to seat 3,000 people, the smaller 720, both are covered. The Expo has two pavilions, an exhibit hall, and a large ballroom that can be separated into smaller rooms. This has had a large impact on the community with events like rodeos, stock shows, awards banquets, association meeting, indoor competitions, and rental facilities available for private events. The planning and building of the Expo took many years and was only completed by the dedication from a cross section of the community.

At Producers Cooperative in Bryan, Texas, we were given an overview on the history and of the operations of the cooperative by Hope Moriarty, Supply Division Manager. The coop was started in 1943, it has an outlet in Heidenheimer, Hillsboro, as well as the main location in Bryan. The tour of the feed plant was given by Everett Lowe, Feed Division Manager.

They sell all brands of feed, but they specialize in custom made feed, like pellets, creep feed, bulk or bagged feed. The coop sales and delivers petroleum as well. Street diesel, farm diesel, gas, bulk motor oil, and grease are all delivered to customers. The Petroleum Division is headed by Billy Padgett.

The store tour was given by Hope Moriarty. The store sells to members and to public. Members do not get a discount, but they do get patronage based on the volume purchased. The store sells animal health supplies, feed, show supplies, yard and garden supplies, tools, pesticides, herbicides, and work wear.

The TALL XIX Welcome Reception was held at the Texas A&M AgriLife Center. Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz made opening remarks explaining the purpose of the program and the many hands needed to keep the program running. Dr. Rick Avery gave the welcoming to the TALL XIX. He congratulated and thanked the cohort for accepting the challenge to attend the TALL program. The cohort introduced themselves and then we were paired with our dinner host.

My host was John Giesenschlag. When entering his vehicle, he immediately said, "you can take off that jacket and tie, nobody needs that tonight." I knew then we would get along well. John is a long-time friend of my in-laws, Dan and Linda Taylor. John offered a lot of personal advice, farmer to farmer, and it will never be forgotten. I will always be grateful for his words. We had a wonderful dinner at Gate 12 at the airport.

Friday, July 26, 2024

After breakfast, we headed to the George Bush School of Government to listen to Al Davis, Agency Director Texas A&M Forest Service, and retired Marine Colonel. He talked about the many responsibilities of the Forest Service. Firefighting is the one that gets all the attention, but there is fire prevention, disaster relief, training of firefighters, landowner assistance programs, and forest restoration. All Texas volunteer fire departments perform their training at their facilities. There are 58 office locations with 540 full time employees. There is a great need of more funding for equipment and for employee retention.

Professor Andrew S. Natsios from the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs was very kind to talk with us while on vacation. He spoke about the current affairs of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its repercussions on the global political landscape. He explained Putin's position and why he must try to expand the Russian territories. I was surprised at the Muslim growth in Russia is part of the expansion needs for more Slavic populations. The European Union response has been slow, and now has decided on military buildup. His prediction that the third world war is already underway is frightening. His session was very enlightening.

Dr. Gerald Parker, Associate Dean Global One Health gave a talk on National Health Security and Biodefense. He talked about preparedness for a health emergency, how to strengthen restrictions on risky research, and needing an independent oversight commission for gain of function research. The political pressure from the White House is sometimes the only thing that can push regulation changes for oversight. He has testified in four committee hearings before Congress and the Senate to advocate for changes in the restrictions of risky research.

The official cohort picture was next and the end of the TALL Session 1 - College Station. It was very enjoyable and educational. I have made some new friends and I'm looking forward to learning more about agriculture with my TALL Cohort XIX.



Our initial session was a whirlwind of activity, filled with learning and new experiences. We began with a warm welcome from Dr. Mazurkiewicz and Dr. Avery, who provided an overview of the [TALL program](#) and what we can expect over the next two years. We then introduced ourselves to our diverse cohort, a remarkable group of individuals who bring a wide range of perspectives and experiences in agriculture. I'm thrilled to be part of such a dynamic and passionate group, and I look forward to the journey ahead with them.

Dr. Mazurkiewicz's presentation on the history of Land Grants, [Texas A&M](#), and the state agencies under the TAMU umbrella offered valuable context. Growing up in Stephenville and being involved in Erath County 4-H, I had some familiarity with the extension and research agencies. My sister and I even used the local Texas A&M AgriLife Center for an ag science project that won at the National FFA Convention. However, learning about the history of Land Grants and the first experiment stations gave me a deeper appreciation for the foundational role these institutions play in Texas agriculture. It was a reminder of how far-reaching and impactful agricultural research and education can be.

Tammy Frederick, Vice President of Food Safety & Quality at [HEB](#), offered a fascinating glimpse into the workings of a major retailer. Her discussion about HEB's ISO-accredited facility was particularly thought provoking. It's impressive how they can independently conduct nutritional panels and shelf-life testing, not just for their own products but also for the small businesses they bring in as vendors via HEB Quest for Best. This capability supports local entrepreneurs and aligns with HEB's commitment to quality and community.

The day concluded with an engaging etiquette training session by [Dr. Susan Quiring](#). Her guidance on proper etiquette, both in the U.S. and internationally, was invaluable. As we represent TALL and our respective businesses, these skills will be crucial, especially during formal events and our international trip to Spain. It's exciting to think about how these lessons will help us navigate different cultural settings and professional environments.

Wednesday was very insightful with multiple speakers and visits. Dr. Amy Swinford, Director of [Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory](#), explained the integral role they play in identifying livestock diseases. Her insights into diagnosing dairy cattle with Avian flu and assisting healthcare workers with COVID-19 testing were eye-opening. She also discussed the potential threat of African Swine flu to the livestock trade in Texas. Her stories about real-world applications of diagnostic work highlighted the critical importance of vigilance in disease management.

Next, Stephen Cisneros, Associate Director of [Texas A&M AgriLife Research](#), provided an overview of their current projects. The research into utilizing AI to determine row crop yields prior



to harvest was particularly interesting, as it will allow farmers to make informed decisions. The potential of AI to revolutionize yield predictions is something I hadn't considered before, and it sparked ideas about how technology can be leveraged in smaller-scale farming operations.

Joe Outlaw, Co-Director of the [Agriculture Food Policy Center](#), offered honest observations into the political process. He explained how their center uses data from farmers and ranchers to discuss the impacts of policy on the agriculture industry with politicians. He also emphasized the importance of keeping the farm bill attached to SNAP to ensure sufficient support from Congress. His candid explanation of the political landscape and its impact on agricultural policy was both sobering and motivating, emphasizing the need for informed advocacy.

At [John R. Giesenschlag Farms](#) in Burleson, we heard from several local farmers and ranchers. Common challenges included water scarcity and generational transition of farms. The startup costs for new farmers were also a significant concern, hindering new farmers from replacing retiring ones. The passion for agriculture among these farmers and ranchers was truly inspiring. Hearing their personal stories and struggles brought home the reality of the challenges facing our industry and the importance of supporting the next generation of farmers.

[Wiggins Watermelons](#) in Burleson County was our next stop. It was surprising to learn that they sell seven million watermelons in a five-month period. The labor-intensive nature of growing watermelons, including the need for hand harvesting due to the delicacy of the fruit, was fascinating. Additionally, the role of bees in pollinating watermelon plants was intriguing. Seeing the entire process from planting to harvest and learning about the logistics involved was illuminating.

We also visited [Wayne Sanderson Farms](#) poultry plant in Bryan. With my background in red meat, the differences in the poultry industry were striking. Wayne Sanderson Farms has four plants in Texas, producing case-ready products for retail and bulk products for foodservice. A significant challenge for their operation, like the farmers and ranchers at Giesenschlag Farms, was water usage. Their plant uses 1.5 million gallons of water per day, and they have an onsite wastewater treatment facility to reuse as much water as possible. Learning about their sustainability efforts and challenges gave me a new perspective on resource management in agriculture.

Our final stop on Wednesday was [STgenetics](#) in Navasota, a multifaceted business that began by sexing semen for the dairy industry. Their services now include sexing semen for sheep, goats, horses, and deer, and selecting the best sires based on genetics. They are also rolling out new technology to monitor real-time vitals for cattle using a bolus. The advancements at STgenetics were impressive, and Juan Moreno's passion for the industry was evident. Their



innovative approaches to genetic management and animal health monitoring were particularly inspiring, offering new possibilities for improving livestock production.

Thursday's plans were shifted due to the heavy rain. As members of the agricultural community, we were all thankful for the rain and happy to adjust to the new schedule! We spent the morning at the TAMU recreation center, participating in teamwork games to get to know each other better. The team-building activities were not only fun but also helped build a sense of camaraderie among us. Dr. Mazurkiewicz then gave us a history of the [Brazos County Expo Complex](#), and our tour was led by Jaqueline Foster, the general manager. Learning about the work that went into establishing the complex spoke volumes to the commitment needed from community leaders to accomplish large projects.

Our next stop was [Producers Cooperative](#) in Bryan with Everett Lowe & Mark McMath, where we learned about their community-driven approach and dedication to agricultural education. The visit highlighted the importance of cooperatives in supporting local agriculture. Seeing their operations firsthand and understanding their impact on the community underscored the value of cooperative models in agriculture.

The day concluded with the TALL XIX Welcome Reception at the Texas A&M AgriLife Center and dinner with industry leaders. I had a wonderful time at dinner with Phil Peabody and his team at [Capital Farm Credit](#), networking and learning about the industry from corporate leaders. It was fascinating to hear their perspectives on agricultural finance and how they support farmers and ranchers.

Our final day was spent at the George Bush School of Government. Al Davis, Agency Director of [Texas A&M Forest Service](#), shared his management style, emphasizing clear communication and core values. His approach to leadership, especially his emphasis on ensuring everyone understands the core values of the agency, was inspiring and something I plan to incorporate into my own leadership style. Professor Andrew Natsios provided eye-opening perceptions into the Russian-Ukrainian war and international affairs. Dr. Gerald Parker spoke about biosecurity and biodefense, enlightening us on the triggers for shutting down livestock trade due to illness.

Looking ahead, I'm eager to delve deeper into the various aspects of agriculture and leadership that the TALL program will explore. The knowledge and experiences we gain will undoubtedly shape our careers and contributions to the agricultural community. The initial session has set a high bar, and I can't wait to see what's next.