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TALL XIX

Session 3 Austin – Leadership, Legislation, and Laws

January 20-26, 2025

Austin, Texas our state capital, home of the big “pink house.” Taller than any other state capital and facing to the South, unlike all other state capitals. A place where temperatures are generally warmer than the TX Panhandle and snow rarely touches the ground. Expect for Monday, January 20, when the entire town shut down due to 1” of snow and below freezing temps. Fortunately we had an inside connection with a cohort member who serves as chairman of the agriculture and livestock committee, officed inside one of the extensions of the capital. Our session began in agriculture, was packed full of political party legislator comments, and ended with more agriculture. An excellent agenda brought several viewpoints, concerns, advice and a new understanding of legislation. Follow along as I walk you through my experience-

Day 1- Our group met outside the Austin city limits at Pecan Grove Farms to begin the session with some key agriculture production in the region. We learned the complete process from root stock to grafting and harvest. This impressive orchard has been growing transplant container and/or bare root trees in a nursery, along with 250 acres of mature pecan trees with a harvest operation and processing facility for over 50 years. Due to disease weakness all pecan trees generally start with an Elliot seed stock then grafted to Pawnee or Western on top. This traditional breeding technique is to benefit from soil borne disease, pests and best production for the environment which they are grown. The pecan market is a unique business. Special guest Blair Krebs with the Texas Pecan Growers Assoc. gave us a presentation over dinner to discuss more of those details. To capitalize on the best payment a direct to retail market is the best bet, but not always the highest volume or opportunity to sell. Pecan trees require 250 chill hours below 46 degrees to reproduce and usually yield 50 -150 lbs. of nuts year over year. 1,000 lbs./ac is a good goal for production. An impressive tour, which I had little knowledge of, was a great start to our session in Austin.

Day 2- The next day snow began to fall in the city of Austin, and everything was shut down. The only people around the capital were a few state troopers and to our surprise a few Senators who did spare some time to say hello to our group. Briscoe Cain is a member of our cohort and also serves as a chairman in house of Representatives, District 128. He was our key to private entrances at the capital and influential on many of the successes of this session. The weather created some changes in our schedule, but we did fill the void with some great speakers. Steve Toth was one speaker who shared his viewpoints of the need for improved school systems. 70-80% of prisoners are illiterate, 75% are dyslexic. If we could improve quality of education at a younger age, maybe this would relate to more educated adults who can work and find great jobs instead of veering off in the wrong direction. Steve also talked about the lack of teachers, the quality of life and the pay for them. An area he is passionate about and intends to drive assistant in such.

Rep Alan Schoolcraft was another roaming the halls who managed to stop by for some great advice as well. Alan had similar ideas in improving schools, and water rights issues. School choice is his area and is pushing for this to be an open option for Texans. He compared other states like Florida and Arizona and how their open school system was a success.

The Honorable James Frank was a representative from Wichita Falls and he sits in as the Chair of Health committee. James introduced us to Senator Perrys huge water bill that will be a major topic moving forward. Mainly discussing infrastructure to move water to the state from outside of it. There is plenty of water in the state but not where it needs to be. How do we get that water to areas that need it most and what will be the costs that come with it? Cost of water will be an issue and agriculture may not be able to afford it. There are many more people in populated areas whose voice will be heard over our farmers. Secured people with dependable water will come first. However less than 0.5% of water is used for drinking. We are not running out of water, its just not in the right places. Desalination is a costly process and improvements are made every day. There is a ton of wastewater from drilling rigs, just not the right quality. James believes in an efficient industry through transparent pricing, competition, and customer care.

Robert Black also shared a few short comments to our group. He works in the office of the governor as his chief of staff and has served in Austin for 40 years. - Pour into those beneath you, they are the people who write our history and be a servant leader. He talked about team building and said when you're willing to do anything you'd ask your employees to do, you gain respect. Some short advice and more influence on the huge water focused session coming up.

We completed the day with a fantastic private tour of the capital.

Day 3- Most important and influential speaker yet, first topic of the morning. Dustin Burrows, speaker of the house shares 15 minutes with us before he leaves to go into session. Dustin is from Lubbock and gives us an intro of some of the main topics on his mind. 40-60% of water loss is from leaky pipes, new infrastructure is a must. Once again referencing Sen. Perrys water bill. He talked about the border and its national security issue. We could potentially be reimbursed from Washington from the states previous work at the border not that it is a federal issue. He mentioned a so called rainy day fund the state has and the surplus amount of funds that could be used for water supply in agriculture (funds generated from oil and gas industry.) Great to have a farm kid from our area that understands the real threat of water in agriculture. BTW this was the first time outside funds were raised for the speaker campaign race.

Cody Harris, TALL XV, and House of Representatives, district 8, gave us an intro on legislative process along with more talk on water, natural resources and moving forward. Cody said 3% of success as legislator is knowing how bills become laws and 97% is building and maintaining relationships. Founders made it difficult for laws to be made, so downside is, all laws have several opportunities to fail along the process. The 140 days of session meets every two years in Texas. The speaker meets with each member and assigns them to a committee with reps. There are 9, 27 member committees. The first 60 days no bill is voted on unless deemed emergent by the governor. Committee work begins immediately on budgets and is on the floor for vote in March and it must be passed as a balanced budget due to constitutional bylaws. Cody expanded on the \$2 billion spent on border security and the \$20 billion rainy day fund. No other state has anything like this. Cody was very knowledgeable and as a past TALL graduate did a great job informing us on the main topics and basic legislative review.

Representative Mary Gonzales, one of the few democrats and females in office was up next. She was from El Paso, one of the poorest geographies in the district. Mary comes from a County extension father who was raised on a pecan farm. Her roots run deep in agriculture. She has spent 13 years in congress. There are currently about 5,000 members and 200 are females. Mary informed us that this session was running behind due to too many negotiations around the house rules. Mary is working on plant disease uniform testing and pest prevention.

Senator Lois Kolkhorst gave us an intro of her early career and her 7 years spent in the senate. She talked about how TX legislators were only paid \$700/month and how this was introduced so those who served were mainly volunteers and did it to improve their state. Lois explained how Texas is the 8th largest economy in the world, even as an individual state. She told us about a bill informing that our world enemies are not able to own land in the state. She also discussed the issues with how one should be able to choose who makes repairs on our modern/expensive equipment. The digital lockdown controls who have access and who can control those actions. Public education is one of the biggest focus and biggest businesses in the state. A huge topic in this session. Lois encouraged local government involvement and explained in her view, that a county commissioner is an extension of the state. Lois left us with some advice- Competition makes us stronger. And when you're coasting, you're going downhill.

Later that day we moved from our meetings in the state capital to the Texas Association of Counties Building to catch the end of the Texas Ag Council meeting. We each gave our short introductions and heard a review from the previous cohorts trip to Poland. Some of these council members we saw later at the evening reception or throughout some other meetings on our trip. All influential members from each commodity group and specific agriculture boards/ organizations from around the state. They also sponsored our lunch with a brief time to visit.

That afternoon was a TALL alumni meeting back at the hotel meeting room. Eric Turpen, President, coordinated the meeting with a guest speaker Mr. Eric Opiela. Eric was a past cohort of TALL IX, a ranch and attorney. He gave a great presentation on the transition of Trump electoral votes and key swings from 2020 to 2024. Later in the evening was the TALL Alumni Reception. Over 300 people were in attendance at the Austin Country Club. Several awards were given from distinguished alumnus (Mark Miller- Texas Farm Credit) to lifetime achievement award (Roddy

Peoples- VSA Radio Network.) The Honorable K. Michael Conaway – Former US congressman and Chair of the House Ag Committee was the keynote address.

Thursday, day 4, we were back at the capitol committee board room to hear from Justin Rhodes, deputy director with the Texas Parks and Wildlife. His organization employees 3,100, 1,400 fulltime and 550 game wardens. Their main goal is to preserve our state for future generations. There are 88 state parks that generate \$63 mil in revenue. The most visited state park is Garner State park just outside of DFW. Followed by Ray Roberts Lake, Palo Duro Canyon and Enchanted Rock. PDC is one of the few parks that are self-funding and generate enough revenue for a profit. On the other side, Big Spring states park is the least visited. TXP&W is always looking to buy more land to make their parks bigger or even open new ones when the opportunity arises, especially in the populated triangle of Texas.

Railroad commissioner Mr. Jim Wright gave us updates on influential topics for this session as well. Surface water is only 19% of our water supply. The argument with who owns what and conflict between water districts continue. There are 235,000 wells and 85% of them are no producing. An interesting topic was mentioned about carbon credits being paid for plugging unused wells.

Si Cook with the Texas Farm Bureau gave us a whole new perspective of this “insurance Company” - Texas Farm Bureau. Si is a great advocate for ag with over 90 years of work in legislation. They have people to implement policy and be a voice for agriculture. They have 13 members/districts. Less than 2% of the state is in production ag, water is a huge factor but don't cut back on ag land. Also, private property taxes and rights should be maintained. Taxing ag land can be a huge burden on landowners.

Cory Pomeroy with Texas Oil and Gas was up next. Texas produces 45% of the crude oil in the US. Emissions have declined while US oil and gas production has doubled since 2007. To put that into perspective, the US has a 16% decrease in CO2 while China has had a 22% increase! Russia, 14% increase. Texas has a revenue of \$74 million from the oil and gas industry each day. Interesting enough Venezuela contains the most oil and gas but is only 24th in rank of production.

Another factor for his industry is finding alternative options for produced water. For every 1 gal of oil, 3 gal of water is produced.

Jessica Butler with the Texas Department of Transportation gave us a great overview from her perspective of the State. Texas has 29,000 more bridges than any other state. She presented topics around making public roads safe. There were 4,290 deaths last year on Texas roads, Impairment being the number one factor followed by speed and not wearing seatbelts. Thanks to our oil and gas industry to improving our roads and the flow of traffic without a big hit on taxpayers.

Later that after noon we presented our group assignments. Our groups presented facts on the oil and gas industry.

The evening was hosted by the Texas Poultry Federation and the Independent Cattle Raisers association at the state capital's Lieutenant Governors Reception Room. A beautiful section of the east wing of the capital building. The guest speaker was Michael Morrissey from the Lieutenant Governors office. Each gave a short update on their area of influence and a status of the department.

Day 5- Texas Department of Agriculture hosted us in their facility down the road from the capital. Sid Miller introduced himself and took time to shake all of our hands and sign individual printed photographs. He talked about the duties of his office- weights and measurements, pesticides, food and nutrition, organic programs, livestock exports, bios security, regulatory affairs, Go Texan marketing, and consumer and industry protection. To fully understand each area, several members of his program gave introductions in each area.

It was also a great opportunity to get to hear from Karl Rove Former Deputy Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor to President George W. Bush. A very spectacular man with years of hard stopping experiences. We were reluctant to hear of few his amazing stories. Karl's advice is to never stop learning, invite senators to meetings, and get involved politically. This was one of the best influential talks of the session.

Later than morning we checked out our hotel to head to Fredericksburg to meet with Don Weinheimer at the Arch Ray Resort. Don gave us an impressive economic update from the area

and backed it up with some substantial numbers he put together on real estate and tourism in area. He talked about the transition from where the town was and where it is today. Fredericksburg has 92% of their roads paved and is still the #1 producer of peaches in the state. Don's biggest challenges is providing emergency services and jail cells for the massive influx of tourist in the area. On average there are 29-30,000 visitors per week. The town's population is 27,000.

After lunch we moved over to Sonora to visit the historic Icehouse Museum. Some passionate local hosts showed us around the history of their town and the historic icehouse. They provided a dinner and introduced us to the keynote speaker, Bob Malone. Retired president from BP petroleum who later moved to Sonora to buy a ranch and retire. Bob is now the CEO and President of the Sonora bank and brings a wealth of knowledge to the industry and the small community of Sonora.

The next day we loaded a bus to the Texas AgriLife Research Station about 30 miles outside of Sonora. This is a 3,500-acre ranch specializing research in prescribe burning, rangeland vegetative monitoring, animal nutrition and physiology in grazing specific to that area. Dr. Doug Tolleson and his team gave us a great review of the station and their motives and goals at this facility. A guest speaker was Cory Wilson who talked about the infestation of coyotes in their area and the impact on goat and sheep production. He uses a thermal drone to scout wildlife and proved to be a massive value to rancher in the area for predator control. Cory had some excellent aerial footage from his drone he was able to share with us.

For lunch we were entertained at Rancho Bronco Vineyard with owner and entrepreneur David Wallace. David was a fast-talking guy with lots of info too share. He voiced his thoughts on energy, wind power, the oil industry, solar, hydrogen, water, and the wine industry. A man full of experience and very much willing to share. David's advice is to find a mentor, talk to experts, attend seminars, research online and incorporate the 10,000 hour rule- if you put this much time into it you're going to be good at it. His mentor- John Ravenburgh was also a guest speaker to talk about the wine influence in the area. John is president of the Texas Wine Growers Association.

He has a true passion for the wine industry from production to the final product. He gave a great overview presentation of the wine industry in Texas.

Later that evening we regrouped at the hotel and headed to the X-Bar ranch. A bed and breakfast villa in the country. Stan Meador is the owner and a past graduate of TALL VIII. Stan was a great host and introduced his guest speaker, General (retired) Ronnie D. Hawkins Jr., President, Angelo State University. Ronnie is one of the few presidents of a university without a PH degree. He talked about the university status and growth year over year. ASU is known for their Southwest pilot program. They have 28 planes with skywest. All made possible from their terrific alumni and fundraising. Their cyber security and A.I. programs are new and unique to the region. School districts are wide open for attack according to Mr. Hawkins. ASU brags about having the best PHD program West of i35. The overall gpa of their students is a 3.4. Angelo is an innovative university and currently enrolls 10,700 students with goals to reach 14,000 in 2045. The evening came to an end with a busted radiator hose on our bus. The session was over and we had no way to get home, at least for a little while.

7 days later we depart our ways back to our homes. Session 3 was full of legislative updates, mixed with key agronomic influences. Relationships and connections were established. There are many people to thank for making this trip worthwhile and many new thoughts to remember. The time spent away from my family was sacrificed but in a great exchange for experiences I do not think was possible without this program. I have learned more about the concerns our state carries and how our community/peers tackle the issues in front of us. Many people are fighting to make our country, and more importantly our state, a wonderful place to be. It is a process but will all work out in the end.

Thomas Hicklen #14
TALL Cohort XIX
Session 3 – Austin/Sonora
January 20-26, 2025

Austin

Monday, January 20, 2025

Session three started with Pecan Grove Farms and Nursery at Cedar Creek. Our host Travis Britt, TALL XVI alumni, Chief Horticulturalist and Nursery Manager and Blair Krebs, TALL XVII alumni, with Texas Pecan Growers Association and Pecan South Magazine, met us at a warm greenhouse. This greenhouse is one of four where they grow their root stock from the Elliot variety, to be later grafted with a stalk of Pawnee or Western varieties. They graft one hundred thousand trees a year to be grown for two years before being sold or planted. Their grafters are highly skilled workers that graft 150 to 200 trees per hour.

On average forty thousand are sold and the rest planted. Some are grown for a longer period to be sold as more mature trees around five to six feet tall. The nuts are harvested with a shaker, then they are windrowed in the middles to be vacuumed up to trailers. Their current production goal is five million pounds per year. Pecan Grove went from 400 acres to 4000 acres in 13 years trying to reach this goal.

Blair Krebs talked about the industry's history and current market. The pecan is the only major nut native to America. Native Americans harvested the pecan and taught the settlers how to harvest and prepare the nut. There are over one thousand pecan varieties, and most are named after Native American tribes.

The pecan market is a cash market with no standard grading system. Some oppose any system implementation because of the cost and possible regulation restrictions. The current top market price of \$2.50 per pound is rare, but \$1.60 to \$1.80 is more common. The breakeven cost is around \$2.00 a pound. More acres are being added every year, but it's not staying up with the loss of acres due to urban sprawl.

Tuesday, January 21, 2025

The day started with a good breakfast, icy streets and a cancelled schedule. The Capitol was officially closed, but The Honorable Representative Briscoe Cain opened the doors so we could have a tour. It was a little strange walking through the empty halls of the Texas capitol building waving at all the Texas Highway Patrol security. There are always sixty on duty in and around the Capitol. They were all friendly, helpful and intrigued by our loud presence. The tour was great, and the Capitol is beautiful.

State Representative Steve Toth volunteered to speak with us. He is from Spring and represents District 15 from part of Montgomery County. A preacher by trade, he was called to run to help education and small business. He wants to kill the bill that would require employees to provide usernames and passwords to social media apps to employers for security reasons. Seems crazy that this is even a bill.

He is against the Core Curriculum since it's hurting math and reading skills. He wants more focus on dyslexic and illiterate students. He believes there are three reasons for the teacher shortage in Texas,

violence in the classroom, teacher quality of life and teacher salary. These all need to be addressed to help education.

State Representative Alan Schoolcraft from McQueeney talked next. He represents District 44 from Gonzales and Guadalupe Counties. The congressman operates a 230-acre cattle ranch and owns a software development company. The prominent issues for Schoolcraft are water rights and education. He wants to pass the school choice bill.

State Representative James Frank is from Wichita Falls, of District 69 made up from Archer, Baylor, Clay, Cottle, Fisher, Foard, Hardeman, Haskell, King, Knox, Motley, Stonewall, Wichita, and Wilbarger Counties. He is Chairman of the Health Committee. The largest component of the budget is Medicare at 30%. He believes there needs to be a lot of health care and health insurance reform. The industry needs self-regulation verses government regulation. Pharmaceutical Benefits Managers are intertwined with insurance and government to allow kickbacks to the PBMs. The insurance industry needs to have transparent pricing, open competition and put the care of the customer first.

You can't have abundant energy without clean water. Frank supports a bill to bring in water from outside of the state, but there are a lot of missing details about where and who will supply the water. Desalination plants along the Texas coast are being considered, but they are expensive to build and maintain. The cost of water is already an issue but will only rise with population growth.

State Senator Drew Springer from Muenster representing District 30 came to talk with the cohort. He was a State Representative from 2013 to 2021 for District 68. He chose not to run for reelection to that seat due to him becoming manager of his father's financial services company. Property tax reform and relief have always been his focus. He voted for the reduction of property taxes before and believes more should be done.

The last assignment of the day was the presentation of our homework to the cohort. This was very interesting and, in some ways, entertaining. The topics of Oil & Gas, Agriculture, Real Estate, Banking & Finance and Tourism & Recreation and their impact on the Texas economy were presented with discussion following.

Wednesday, January 22, 2025

This morning started off with a surprise visit from the Speaker of the House Dustin Burrows from Lubbock, District 83. He represents Borden, Crosby, Dickens, Floyd, Garza, Kent, Lubbock, Lynn, Mitchill, Scurry, and Terry Counties. Water is his main issue in this congressional session. There is a 40% to 60% water loss due to leaky pipes and outdated water systems. He hopes to pass Senator Perry's bill to start upgrading these systems and start preparing to bring water from an out of state source, possibly Kansas. Also to build water desalination plants along the gulf coast. He wants more of the government surplus to go to property tax relief, and he is hoping the federal government will reimburse the State money spent for border security.

State Representative Cody Harris, District 8, represents Anderson, Cherokee, Henderson, and Navarro Counties. Harris said his TALL participation convinced him to run for office. According to him, being a good legislator is 3% knowing how a bill becomes law and 97% building and maintaining relationships. The

founders made it difficult for laws to be made on purpose. Never compromise your principles but help each other when you can.

State Representative Mary Gonzalez, District 75, represents El Paso County and is a TALL alumnus. She spoke with us about her history. She is the only Democrat in Congress with direct ties to agriculture. She and her father raise horses, hay and sorghum. Her father is a former Ag teacher. She was a professor at Southwest University. She has served in congress for 13 years and sits on the Natural Resources Committee and is Vice Chair of the Appropriations Committee.

State Senator Lois Kolkhorst from Brenham, District 18, was a state representative for 13 years before being elected for the state senate in 2014. She chairs the Health and Human Resources Committee and sits on several other committees. The senator believes in low taxes, low regulations, and a low service state. The state cannot meet the needs of everyone coming here. Education is her focus; it is the biggest business in the state.

She believes that no world enemies should own land in the state and is working to get a bill passed to make it a law. Local and county government involvement is encouraged. The county government is an extension of the state. Her motto is, "If you are coasting, you are going downhill."

Next it was off to the Texas Ag Council meeting to hear Jennifer Bremer and The Honorable Daniel Alders give a presentation of the Tall XVIII cohorts' international trip to Brussels and Poland. After lunch, it was time for the TALL Alumni meeting to hear from Eric Opiela, an attorney and a fifth generation Texas rancher. On election day he was in Milwaukee overseeing the recounting of 130,000 votes. During the 2024 election only six states switched to vote for President Trump, all swing states. He won by a smaller margin of votes than people realize, but a large majority of electoral votes.

In Texas, most voters live in 7 out of 254 counties. As people move to Texas, these 7 counties will continue to grow in population gaining more power at the polls. They are moving here for lower property taxes, better immigration control and border security and cheaper cost of living. This all contributes to concern for our water supply and our electric infrastructure. All these concerns are at the forefront of this session of the Texas legislature.

Later that night we attended the TALL Alumni Reception. This event honored Mr. Mark Miller, TALL VII, with the TALL Distinguished Alumnus Award and Mr. Roddy Peebles with the Texas Agricultural Lifetime Achievement Award. There were many sponsors recognized at the reception for their contributions to the TALL program.

Thursday, January 23, 2024

Justin Rhodes, the Deputy Director of Texas Parks and Wildlife, dropped by to tell us about the duties and responsibilities of the department. Justin is a 24-year veteran who started as a State Park Police Officer. The TP&W Department is run by a nine-person volunteer commission appointed by the Governor. State parks are the largest division with 3100 employees, 88 parks, 550 Game Wardens and a \$200 million dollar budget. With 9-10 million visitors a year, the parks require constant maintenance. Proposition 14 was passed to create a billion-dollar endowment of the Centennial Parks Conservation Fund to purchase future properties for parks and make updates to current park systems.

Commissioner Jim Wright of the Railroad Commission came to tell us about his position. The Commission accounts for 34% of State revenue - \$27.4 billion in 2024. Safety, environmental concerns, and economic vitality are the priorities of the Commissioner. The public sees the RRC as an oil regulatory agency, but it regulates more wastewater from the wells. Four barrels of water are produced for every barrel of crude oil. Some of the water is recycled in the fracking process, but there is no standard regulation on how to handle the rest. Orphaned wells have become a problem to plug due to the cost. There has been some federal funding but not enough. A change was made with regulations requiring each well to have a bond to pay for the plugging after it changes owners.

Si Cook, Executive Director and CEO of Texas Farm Bureau talked about the mission and purpose of the 91-year-old organization. Its mission is to be the voice of Texas agriculture. There are seventeen different divisions ranging from agriculture education and advocacy to health insurance. Insurance was added at a time when home insurance was not available to rural land and homeowners. They have an Ag Fund for political advocacy for use at the state and federal level. They run a program called Teach the Teacher to teach lessons about agriculture. They advocate for the Right to Farm changes to protect producers from encroaching cities. They also operate KTFB, a Texas Farm and Ranch radio station for 'All things Texas'.

The Vice President and General Counsel of the Texas Oil & Gas Association, Cory Pomeroy, talked with us about how they help the industry. Founded in 1919, the TXO&GA is a statewide trade association representing every facet of the oil and gas industry, legislation, regulation, judicial affairs and public/industry affairs. 90% of all production in Texas is done by its members. The oil and gas industry paid a record amount of \$27.3 billion in state and local taxes in 2024. The latest legislation is focused on orphan well regulation. The Railroad Commission is developing new rules dealing with well wastewater. The industry is trying to find more and better ways to recycle wastewater.

Jessie Monday, DVM, the State Epidemiologist for the Texas Animal Health Commission spoke to the cohort about TAHC and her position. The mission of the TAHC is to protect the health and marketability of all Texas livestock and poultry. She has the job of identifying and finding the cause and distribution of diseases to enable TAHC to develop strategies to prevent its spread. One of the hot topics is disease traceability, and with that RFID tags. These may become mandatory someday.

The Texas Department of Transportation Director of Engineering and Safety Operations, Jessica Butler, P.E., discussed with the cohort her job and the duties of TXDOT. She is responsible for the management and control of bridges, construction, maintenance, materials, tests and traffic safety divisions. TXDOT has a two-year budget of \$321.3 billion. It has a 10-year, \$104 billion plan for maintenance, bridges, mobility, bikeways, pedestrian walkways, and energy. TXDOT has 13,000 employees in 25 districts, 81,000 center lane miles, 56,000 bridges, owns and maintains Southwest Railroad, and it owns, operates ferries in Texas waterways.

Lisa Carver, Deputy Comptroller with the Office of the State Comptroller, started her career as a tour guide in the Capitol building. She said, "The Comptroller is most important agency you've never heard of." The agency is the tax collector, bookkeeper, IT system for HR and payroll. It's in charge of creating the biannual budget estimate for the State. It manages the Rainy-Day Fund, and the College Savings Fund. The agency has its own police and investigation services. The Comptroller's office employs 3000 employees, half of which are in the tax collection service.

At the Lt. Governor's Reception Room, Robert Black, Chief of Staff for Gov. Abbott, spoke a little with the TALL cohort. He has been an Austin insider in and out of government for 30 years. He believes in servant leadership as told in the bible verse Mark 10:42-45. You must pour into those beneath you, these are the people that will write your history. The largest topic this session will be water, and how to improve our water supply for the long term.

Jennifer Jones, Chief Clerk of the General Land Office, talked with us about her position. She spent 30 years at the Texas Sunset Advisory Commission before being appointed to the Land Office. They manage all public land and leases. 13 million acres of mineral rights raised \$13.1 million in oil and gas royalties for public education. The agency protects all Texas beaches and coastal habitats from erosion. It manages the veteran land loans, cemeteries, and nursing homes. Jennifer believes in team building, "When you're willing to do anything you would ask your employees to do, you gain respect."

Martin Hubert, TALL alumnus and a lobbyist with Cornerstone, came to represent the Texas Poultry Federation at the reception. He is an Army Ranger veteran and practiced law in DC before moving to work at the state level. The Texas poultry industry contributes \$5.4 billion to the Texas economy with 40,500 employees with \$1.8 billion in wages. There are 23 million egg laying hens, and 16 million birds are processed in Texas every year.

Cooper Little, Executive Director of the Independent Cattlemen's Association of Texas, informed the group about his organization. ICA is a grassroots organization started in 1974 to be a legislative voice for ranchers and cow/calf producers. It has ten regional chapters.

Friday, January 24, 2020

The cohort visited the offices of the Texas Department of Agriculture for breakfast. We heard from Darren Turley, the Executive Director of Texas Association of Dairymen. He talked about the changes in the industry, the higher production of shelf stable products and greater varieties of cheese made in the USA. He informed us of the need to promote agriculture, and the misconceptions of the public.

Next the cohort heard from the Honorable Sid Miller, Texas Ag Commissioner. He told us of his role in finding a warehouse full of toilet paper during covid. Then he gave a quick introduction to Dan Hunter, Asst. Commissioner for Biodiversity, Government Relations, and Economic Development. Lena Wilson, Asst. Commissioner for Food and Nutrition, gave a quick presentation of her job duties. She was followed by the Director for Communications, Maddison Jaunreguito, who put on a very professional presentation on her responsibilities at TDA. Several other officers talked about their roles at TDA before it was time to take pictures with The Honorable Sid Miller.

We were very fortunate that Karl Rove, former Deputy Chief of Staff to President George W. Bush, had time to have a discussion with the cohort. He talked about his time in the White House and gave some great impressions of a couple of presidents. His calm bearing and willingness to answer all questions was uplifting.

Fredericksburg

Lunch at Arch Ray Resort was excellent. Trae Ottmers, TALL Alumnus, and Capital Farm Credit sponsored the meal. Ben Weinheimer, Gillespie County Commissioner, presented a history of the area. He also talked

about the transformation of the city into a destination community, and the stress this places on the city services. The rise in property values has made it hard on the service industries employees to find affordable housing, and the changing culture of the city. After lunch, we were given a tour of the distillery and the entertainment facilities.

Sonora

We were given a tour of the Sonora Icehouse Museum. It's filled with historic photos and artifacts from the area. Dinner was served at Sonora's Historic Train Depot. Bob Malone, President and CEO of Sonora Bank shared his insights about the area and how it is changing. With his experience in oil and gas energy he was able to supply insights into the wind and solar farm leasing industries, and how these were reshaping the landscape.

Saturday, January 25, 2025

A chuck wagon breakfast started the day at Sonora Agri-Life Research Station 14, after which Dr. Doug Tolleson shared with us the station's history from its establishment in 1916. Animal health, prescribed burn, forage nutrition and rangeland nutritional monitoring research are all done here. Live stream classes are taught from here using Starlink.

Meredith Allen, General Manager at Sutton Co. UWCD, talked with the cohort about water conservation in the State. There are 101 water conservation districts in Texas, but there are still some areas without water districts. Five-member boards are elected, and these develop rules for well spacing, production limits, and the number of permits per year. Each area has its own needs, uses, and different access problems.

Drone technology for predator control was covered by Ed Mayfield. He operates drones in coordination with a shooter on the ground, in a helicopter, or both. Livestock loss due to coyotes and pigs can be very costly to the owners. These predators have eliminated the local wildlife on some ranches. Drones' usage has become more common for control and management of predators.

Stan Cottle, Director of Preservation of Southwest Texas Wildlife, talked about the need to manage predators, but not eliminating all of them. Many of the public would like to limit, restrict, and regulate the snaring of mountain lions. If this happens, the same will happen with coyote control.

Diversity in agriculture was covered by Dr. Erika Campell, Owner of High Cross Vinyard. She started with two acres of grapes. Grass is planted between the vines, which are grazed by goats or sheep. The cuttings are fed to cattle, so nothing is wasted. The manure from the animals is used for fertilizer.

David Wallace, an oil and gas attorney and the owner of Rancho Bronco Vineyard, gave a presentation on oil and gas. Natural gas is the cleanest source of energy. Gas is produced from the oil pumping process, and so is water. Gas and oil are sometimes cost prohibitive due to the cost of production. The oil companies want to use brine water from fracking to make hydrogen to help the cost of overall production.

We were given a tour of the research station. Started at the goat pens and water tanks, then loaded on the bus to see the prescribed burn research plots. These are hand cleared and burned. Winter burns were used but they started studying summer burns and found they were highly effective with regrowth coming back thicker. 12-year, 8-year, 5-year and 2-year interval burns are studied. Indian grass, side oats gramma and

sprinkle top are used for the cover. Effects of the burns on nutritional values of the forage and comparing those with the needs of livestock and the needs of the local wildlife are being studied.

John Rivenburgh, President of Texas Wine Growers Association, spoke to the cohort about wine in Texas. He has been involved in the wine industry for 20 years. He founded the first Texas wine incubator; it's used to make small batches. There are more than 400 wineries and over 5000 vineyards in Texas. It's the fifth largest wine producing state and catching up to fourth place.

David Wallace gave the cohort a fast-paced presentation on his life theory, making the most out of your assets, and the seven habits of highly effective people. Next, David spoke of the QESSV Model: quality, efficiency, sustainability, scale, visibility. It is used to evaluate the viability of success of a vineyard.

We ended the session at X-Bar Ranch in Eldorado. Stan Meador, the owner and TALL VIII alumnus, has a beautiful ranch purchased by his family in 1903. It has spectacular views from the back porch overlooking the ravine. At dinner, we heard from retired Air Force General Ronnie D. Hawkins Jr., who is the current President of Angelo State University.

He graduated from Arizona State University where he ran track and participated in ROTC. He became the president of ACU in 2020 and started the commercial aviation program. Southwest Airlines has partnered in a mentoring program with the university and most of the students get hired by them after graduating. The university will start an Aircraft Control program next year and a drone program in 2027. The campus is now part of the Texas Tech University system. Their cyber security program is now NSA certified, and they built a new show barn for their Ag program.

This session was one of the most interesting so far. The cohort gained insight into our elected leadership needs to foster personal relationships to be able to form legislation. Seeing how politics comes into play at the committee level before any legislation can make it to the floor to become law was certainly eye opening.

David Derry (#10)
TALL XIX
Session 3 – Austin/Sonora
January 20 - 26

The sessions just keep getting better. Session three had a little bit of everything from production agriculture and rural life to politics and international affairs. Visiting with Karl Rove in person will be hard to top.

Monday – 1/20

As is typical for Hill Country weather, we arrived in Austin with a cold front bearing down on us and the threat of icy weather. After gathering in Austin we headed east of town a short distance to Pecan Grove Farms. I was aware of the Berdoll family and pecans in the area due to the storefront on Highway 71 that I have passed over the years, but mainly associated pecan production with the area around San Saba and farther west. I did not realize the extent of the orchards there in Bastrop or the existence of the nursery. I was unaware of the complexities of managing the pecan groves due to varietal differences, seasonality, and weather. I generally thought most of the issues were related to pests, disease and the lack of irrigation water. The nursery operation was of particular interest related to the differences between eastern operations and those in Texas and to the west, and how that impacted decisions. I hadn't put much thought toward the marketing aspects of pecans, but Mrs. Krebs did a great job of explaining the pecan market.

Tuesday – 1/21

Tuesday was laid out to be a jam-packed day at the busy Texas Capitol, but instead late Monday we found out that the Capitol would be closed to visitors and most would be home due to weather. As we have come to learn this did not deter Dr. Jim and we ended up with a great impromptu agenda. We started off the day crossing a roped off sidewalk with a sign stating "CAPITOL CLOSED VIOLATORS WILL BE SUBJECT TO ARREST" on our way to a private tour of the Capitol building led by Briscoe Cain after he found a door that was open. Needless to say this was

a little different than any other tour of the Capitol that I have been on. It was just us the DPS troopers (who were surely wondering what this group was doing there) and a few legislators and staffers who made the trek into work. Briscoe entertained us in his office and described his reasoning behind the choice of office and decorating and furnishing his office the way he did. We then commandeered a hearing room where Texas Representatives Steve Toth, Alan Schoolcraft and James Frank visited with us along with former Texas Senator Drew Springer. I appreciated their candor and really appreciated the discussion on school vouchers, educational savings accounts and public education. I'm very passionate about the issue and the impact that it will have on rural communities. Public schools have a profound impact on rural Texas communities that goes unconsidered by many urban representatives in discussions at the Capitol. Rep. Frank discussed healthcare in general and how it impacted rural Texas. Since everything was closed at the Capitol we headed to the Texas Chili Parlor for lunch.

That afternoon we met and our teams each presented their homework reports. Each of the groups did a great job, and I learned something from each of them. The reports spurred good discussion ranging from ag banking to promoting agriculture to future generations.

Wednesday – 1/22

Cohort XIX became masters of gaining entry to the Capitol without going through security and Wednesday found us back at a much busier Capitol. Newly elected TX House Speaker Dustin Burrows was our first speaker of the morning. He discussed his priorities for the Texas House session, which included water. A recurring theme among all we talk with is the importance of water to the state and particularly to agriculture in the state. He also discussed the workings of the Texas House as opposed to how things work in D.C. and the importance of maintaining that culture of cooperation. Texas State Representative Cody Harris, a TALL alumnus, was next to address the group. His story of what led him to get involved in politics and the role TALL played in that was interesting. After Cody finished Texas State Rep. Mary Gonzales addressed us. Her perspective was very interesting as Mary is considered to be one of the most politically liberal members of the TX House, but shares a common appreciation of agriculture with her more conservative colleagues. She stressed the importance agriculture played in her life with a father

who was an agricultural extension agent in far west Texas. Even though representatives may have a large ideological divide they can find areas upon which they agree and can work together. This is refreshing to hear because it seems that more and more our politics are become more divided. If we can't work together with people we have differences with then there is no way we can continue to govern ourselves effectively. TX State Sen. Lois Kolkhorst was next to address us. She discussed the differences between the workings of the house and senate, and why those differences have naturally developed due to structure. Sen. Kolkhorst is very respected in agricultural circles and is frequently mentioned as an ally when discussing agricultural issues with groups such as TSCRA. As a side note her aide, Ryan, is married to a young lady who grew up in Medina and his in-laws are very good friends of ours.

For lunch we walked over to the Texas Ag Council meeting where Jennifer Bremer and Daniel Alders presented their report on TALL XVIII's international trip to Brussels and Poland. After lunch we attended the TALL Alumni meeting where Mr. Opiela gave a very interesting report on demographics and election data from the last two elections. After lunch Briscoe arranged a Capital Dome tour for anyone who wanted to go so a group of us headed back to the Capitol. Unfortunately, our skills failed us and we had to pass through the main doors and security this time, but the DPS officers were friendly and not too suspicious of our group. This quite possibly could have been the highlight of the trip as we were led on a private tour all the way to the top of the Capital dome just below the lady liberty statue.

That evening we attended the "A Tribute to Texas Leadership" reception where former US Congressman and Chair of the House Agriculture Committee, Michael Conaway, spoke. He described the role that faith played in life and political career and charged us all to go forward relying on faith. During the reception our CEO of Texas Farm Credit, Mark Miller, was presented the Distinguished Alumni Award. It has been a privilege to work for and with Mark and he is certainly deserving of the honor. After the reception a group of us ended up at Home Slice Pizza for dinner and camaraderie.

Thursday – 1/23

Thursday we were back at the Capitol for conversations with individuals from several different state agencies. Justin Rhodes, Deputy Director of Texas Parks & Wildlife, gave an update

on what is happening with TPWD. The expansion of parks is something that they are actively engaged in as popularity of parks continues to grow. Also, we had a good discussion about CWD, its impacts on the deer industry and balancing the priorities and concerns of all parties involved. Commissioner Jim Wright updated us on the Texas Railroad Commission. I often forget that there are three statewide elected commissioners. We had a good discussion regarding orphan wells and the lack of oversight on solar and wind farms as opposed to other energy sources. Si Cook, Executive Director and CEO of Texas Farm Bureau, spoke on the importance of TFB and what their role is in advocating for agriculture. He also pointed out the difficulty that exists representing such a diverse group that can only adopt official positions once a year at the membership meeting. Corey Pomery, Deputy Director and General Counsel of Texas Oil & Gas Association spoke on the importance of the oil and gas industry, its role in the global economy and current issues facing the industry. After lunch Jesse Monday, DVM the state epidemiologist for the Texas Animal Health Commission provided us an overview of the TAHC, her view of CWD and other animal diseases. Jessica Bulter, Director of Engineering and safety Operations with TXDOT updated us on the current issues facing the department. Safety is a major issue as the number of deaths on Texas highways has continued to climb. Lisa Carver, Deputy Comptroller, rounded out our speakers for the afternoon. She provided an overview of what the Comptroller's office does and as a surprise to some in the cohort explained escheated properties and how to claim them utilizing the website.

Afterwards we had a short break allowing a few of us to check out The Cloak Room and make a visit to the Texas Chili Parlor again. The X feed of The Cloak Room is a good follow by the way. Following our break we had an evening reception in the Lt. Governor's Reception Room. Robert Black, Chief of Staff for Governor Greg Abbott was gracious enough to be our host. Mr. Black is no stranger to Texas government and has been the Governor's Chief of Staff since July 2024. Jennifer Jones, Deputy Commissioner for the GLO spoke with us about the role of the GLO and her career in government. The reception was sponsored by the Independent Cattleman's Association represented by Cooper Little, Executive Director. Mr. Little addressed ICBA's structure, what sets them apart from other associations, and their priorities in representing cattle producers. Martin Hubert with Cornerstone Government Affairs represented his client the Texas

Poultry Federation. Martin explained the role of the federation and current issues in the poultry industry. In visiting with Martin I learned that his brother-in-law works for Texas Farm Credit and is a good friend of mine. That evening we concluded our meetings at the Capital and bid the building adieu.

Friday – 1/24

We began Friday in Austin and by the end of the day had traveled to the western edge of the Edwards Plateau Region ending up in Sonora. The morning began at the Texas Department of Agriculture with a presentation from Darren Turley, Executive Director of the Texas Association of Dairymen. Darren related his journey in agriculture and what led him to his current position. He was able to share a lot of information in the short time we had with him. Especially interesting was his discussion of robotic milking stalls and the ability for dairy cows to “milk themselves”. This allows for better milk production and better cow health as the cows are not on a set schedule. It also allows for better work-life balance for dairymen. Issues facing dairies are high feed costs, drought and labor shortages. Darren was followed by various leaders within TDA giving us an overview of what the agency does. Commissioner Sid Miller gave us a high level overview of agency in general. Dan Hunter, Lena Wilson, Maddison Jaureguito, Philip Wright, Karen Reichel, Richard De Los Santos and Mindy Fryer all explained their individual department roles in the agency and how they benefit agriculture and rural communities. This ranges from promotion of agricultural goods to education to the community block grant program.

After moving downstairs we were fortunate to be able to visit with political strategist, Karl Rove. Mr. Rove was instrumental in the red wave that overtook Texas in the late 80’s and early 90’s and it was a treat to get his views on the current political climate. He related a brief overview of his career in politics including him being the person that told Pres. George W. Bush that a plane had collided with the World Trade Center on 9/11/01. Mr. Rove is a critic of Pres. Trump, but that does not stop him from acknowledging his strengths. After a short question and answer opportunity Mr. Rove had to leave to tape his segment for Fox News.

Once we departed the TDA building we headed toward Sonora, stopping just outside of Fredericksburg at Arch Ray Resort. Here we were hosted by my friend Trae Ottmers with Capital Farm Credit. Trae gave us a brief economic update for the Gillespie County area including the

explosive growth they have seen resulting in ever increasing housing and land prices. This is putting a strain on both affordable housing and agriculture. Don Weinheimer, Gillespie County Commissioner, expanded on those issues and discussed how Gillespie County is dealing with the growth and planning for the future. Again, we heard the recurring theme of water availability being a concern.

After enjoying a nice lunch and tour of the Arch Ray facilities we headed for Sonora. Once we arrived in Sonora we headed for the Old Sonora Ice House Ranch Museum where we were greeted by Curry and Bonnie Lou Campbell. Curry and Bonnie Lou are ranchers in Sutton County with deep family roots. We were given an overview of the history of the area including ties to the Wild Bunch Gang of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, then allowed to peruse the museum examining artifacts from the glory days of sheep and goat production on the Edwards Plateau. It brought back a lot of memories as we raised finewool sheep until 1995. We dispersed our herd in 1995 due to low wool prices and predation that we could no longer control. Unfortunately during this time I received a call that I had a few head of cows out on the highway back home so I spent some valuable time on the phone explaining to my neighbor how to get them back in. Once the cows were back where they went I picked up my tour of the museum. From the museum we moved to the old depot where we were treated to dinner and a discussion with Bob Malone, Chairman of Sonora Bank. I have heard Bob speak multiple times and always learn something new each time. He discussed his career, first in mining then in oil and gas and finally in banking with a side of ranching to go along with it all. Bob also gave his take on the energy industry and world politics. We concluded our evening back at the motel where a few of us discussed the day and Texas politics with Dr. Jim.

Saturday 1/25

We began our day on Saturday with a chuckwagon dinner at the experiment station between Sonora and Rocksprings. Dr. Doug Tollerson gave us a history of the Experiment Station along with an update about current studies they are working on. Meredith Allen with the Sutton County UWCD gave an excellent presentation on the groundwater situation in Sutton County. It is fascinating how different areas of the state have vastly different groundwater profiles. In Sutton County, they experience relatively quick recharge similar to our recharge in the Hill Country, but

they do not have the creeks and rivers that we are blessed with. She explained monitoring that they are currently doing that provides a better understanding of how groundwater behaves in the area. Next Ed Mayfield presented his work with drone use in predator control. Over the last several years predation has become a greater threat to livestock and wildlife in the Edwards Plateau region. Mr. Mayfield has employed the use of drones to locate and track predator movements on properties. He then works in conjunction with trappers to eliminate predators. This tool has been extremely successful and helps the trappers better use their time and resources to combat the issue. Dr. Erika Campbell updated the group on the expansion of vineyards into Sutton County and an emerging wine industry in the area. Next David Wallace updated us on the state of the energy industry both as it relates to oil and gas and renewable sources such as wind and solar in Sutton County. He explained why once profitable gas production is no longer profitable and why the area has high concentrations of natural gas. After lunch we toured the experiment station discussing prescribed burning and grazing management techniques. They have been able to study various brush management techniques at the experiment station along with prescribed burning intervals. This has allowed them to study how to return the range to something similar to its natural state before the effects of overgrazing and prevention of wildfire. Fire is essential to the maintenance of the natural habitat and prescribed burning is an effective way to introduce fire back into the ecosystem. There at the experiment station they have been studying how different fire intervals effect the native range. After visiting these areas of the experiment station we left out of the north end and headed toward Rancho Bronco Winery. Once at Rancho Bronco Winery we were treated to a wine tasting and discussion from John Rivenburgh wit the Texas Wine Growers Association. John gave us an overview of the Texas wine industry and why Sutton county holds promise as a newer grape growing region in the state. Once again David Wallace spoke to us about his venture into grapes in this region.

That evening we headed out to the X Bar Ranch for a relaxing evening enjoying the countryside just south of Eldorado. Stan Meador explained to us how they were able to reinvigorate the family ranch. His brother leases the family ranch for traditional agriculture utilizing it for grazing, while Stan leases the recreational rights to the ranch. Recreational aspects include hunting and other ecotourism ventures such as star gazing under the dark skies of the

region. Stan related the path they took to get to where they currently are starting with an hunters camp and developing that into a quaint rustic get-away for a variety of clients. After a dinner provided by the Sutton County Steakhouse Gen (ret) Ronnie D. Hawkins, Jr., President of Angelo State University addressed the group. He related developments at ASU and how they were expanding offerings at the university. ASU is a frequent destination of graduates from Medina High School so it was nice to hear how ASU is positioning itself for the future. After we arrived at the ranch it was discovered that our bus had busted a radiator hose so after much discussion it was determined that the bus would not be able to make it back into town. After dinner the Campbell's couriered a few of our group back to the motel to gather some vehicles to retrieve the rest of us. While they were away we visited around the campfire and enjoyed a nice cool night.

Sunday 1/26

Sunday morning concluded our trip and after sleeping in a bit I turned my truck toward the southeast and started the drive home through the back roads from Sonora to Rocksprings and finally back home again. The session was one to be remembered from the bustling city of Austin to the laid-back atmosphere of Sonora, TX. It was a good reminder of the diversity of agriculture in Texas and how agriculture encompasses much more than first meets the eye.

TALL Cohort XIX Session Three Narrative
Liz Cowan Phillips, 19
January 20 - 26, 2025

State Government: Issues and Policies “Leadership, Legislation, Laws”

Timed to coincide with the 89th Session of the Texas Legislature, Session Three of the Governor Dolph Briscoe Jr., Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership (TALL) Cohort took place in Austin and Sonora from January 20th to 26th, 2025. Our cohort was excited to assemble once again, building stronger relationships and making new memories, such as climbing to the top of the Capital Dome and being left high and dry 20 miles outside of Sonora, TX to name a few.

Monday, January 20th

Pecan Grove Farms and Nursery, Travis Britt & Blair Krebs

The “Valley Kids” as we’ve named ourselves, Mike Atkinson, David Cortez, and myself, drove up from the Rio Grande Valley together on a cold and winter-weathery Monday to meet our cohort at [Pecan Grove Farms and Nursery](#) in Cedar Creek, TX. We quickly sought shelter from the cold in the pecan tree greenhouses with Travis Britt (TALL XVI), his staff, and Blair Krebs (TALL XVII) from the Texas Pecan Growers Association. Travis and his team grow 100,000 Western and Wichita pecan trees a year, selling 35,000 to 40,000 annually. They start their trees from Elliot variety root stock and later graft Western, Pawnee, or Wichita branches. Eager to get into the warmth, we enjoyed local BBQ while learning all about the history and culture of Texas Pecans from Blair Krebs before cutting the evening short so we could all get back to our respective homes for the night before predicted snowfall.

Thanks to the generous (and Honorable) Briscoe Cain, our cohort was able to gather in the Penthouse Suite at the Doubletree in Austin to catch up over polish soda waters while watching it snow.

Tuesday, January 21st

Capital Closed, but Not to TALL, The Honorable Briscoe Cain, Texas House of Representatives District 128, TALL XIX

Waking up to a dusting of snow was a treat for this South Texas girl, but the real treat was having the entire Texas State Capital to ourselves due to a weather closure. We entered through the “pillbox” with Representative Briscoe Caine (our friend and cohort member) and were taken on a personal tour of a very quiet Capital Complex, starting in Briscoe’s office and ending in an auditorium filled with representatives and a state senator. We had the honor to talk to State Representative Briscoe Cain, State Representative Alan Schoolcraft, State Representative Steve

Toth, State Representative James Frank, and State Senator Hugh Springer on topics including school choice, student illiteracy, water, rural Texas, teacher retention, rural hospitals and healthcare costs and insurance.

We ate lunch at the infamous Texas Chili Parlor and wrapped up the day with our group homework presentation in the Penthouse Suite of the hotel where each group taught us about various sectors of the Texas economy. Later that night the cohort ladies enjoyed a delicious Italian dinner at Red Ash.

Wednesday, January 22nd

Speaker of the House, Justin Burrows

Much to our delight and surprise, our cohort was greeted bright and early by Justin Burrows, the newly elected Texas House Speaker for the 89th legislative session. Justin is from Lubbock, TX which is where much of my family lives. One of the biggest things I took away from our time with Justin was that “farming is a national security issue.”

The Responsibilities of the Natural Resources Committee and the Importance of Water to Texas Moving Forward, The Honorable Cody Harris, Texas House of Representatives District 8, TALL XV

Cody Harris initially ran for office because he felt the needs of his rural friends and neighbors wouldn't be met by his opponent. Now on his 4th term in the Texas House of Representatives, Cody serves on the Natural Resources Committee. He explained to us that if nothing else, the House is required to pass a balanced budget each session and the rest of the bills that are passed are a matter of moving forward and working together. Cody said that how a bill becomes a law is only 3% of the work. 97% of the work is relationship building and telling the truth. Looking to the future, Cody is a huge fan of desalination plants and nuclear power with nuclear power providing the energy needed to run a desalination plant.

The Challenges and Opportunities facing Texas Agriculture, The Honorable Mary Gonzalez, Ph.D, Texas House of Representatives District 75, & TALL XVII

[Representative Mary Gonzales](#) hails from San Elizario, TX near El Paso and is as passionate about agriculture as they come. She spoke about how she is one of the few Democrats chairing a committee but that the new 89th Session House rules are looking like that honor will be stripped away. Mary and her father are on very different spectrums of the political scale but can come together over what is best for agriculture in Texas as dairy goat and cattle raisers. Mary was a breath of fresh air during our line up of speakers and brought laughter and smiles to the room.

Committee Memberships and Responsibilities, The Honorable Lois Kolkhorst Texas State Senator, District 18

With over 7 terms in the Texas House, now Senator Lois W. Kolkhorst shared her experiences in politics and her fight to protect Texas. As a Republican with Libertarian leanings, Senator Kolkhorst

favors less laws and less restrictions. She cites public education as “Forture 1” for the state of Texas and our first priority. She also believes in protecting Texas’s economy, the 8th largest in the world and filed a bill to stop other countries from buying land in Texas. There are 150 members of the house and 31 senators who work 140 days every other year for \$600 a month.

Texas Ag Council Meeting

After a long morning in the Capital, the cohort walked a few blocks to the Texas Association of Counties building to attend the Texas Ag Council Meeting where we introduced ourselves in TALL fashion and heard from Jennifer Bremer and Daniel Alders on their international trip to Brussels and Poland.

“A Tribute to Texas Leadership” - TALL Alumni Reception

Wednesday night we were invited to join TALL Alumni for a lovely reception at the Austin Club where two prestigious awards were given, the TALL Distinguished Alumnus Award to Mr. Mark Miller, CEO of Texas Farm Credit, TALL VII and the Texas Agricultural Lifetime Achievement Award posthumously given to Mr. Roddy Peeples, the former owner of the Voice of Southwest Agriculture. I was able to make new friends and connect with an old 4-H friend Sarah Novak Franklin, TALL XVI, whom I hadn’t seen since high school. We ended the night at Homeslice Pizza with most of our cohort and a few friends from other cohorts.

Thursday, January 23rd

Texas Parks & Wildlife Department Duties & Responsibilities, Justin Rhodes, Deputy Director, Texas Parks & Wildlife

Texas Parks & Wildlife is run by a 9 person commission, has 3100 employees that operate in 7 divisions: State Parks, Game Wardens (550), Inland Fisheries, Coastal Fisheries, Construction and Infrastructure, HR, and Legal. Their mission is to preserve and steward natural resources and provide recreational opportunities for Texans. There are 88 state parks across the system and they generate over \$63 Million in annual revenue. Proposition 14 was recently passed to create a \$1 billion endowment to purchase new parks in the state of Texas.

The Responsibilities and Duties of the Railroad Commission of Texas, Jim Wright, Commissioner, Texas Railroad Commission

The Texas Railroad Commission is in the water business. Really, they are in the natural resources business and support the development and economic vitality for the benefit Texans. They are the oldest agency in the state of Texas and are focused on safety, the environment, and the economy with a huge portion of their time dedicated to oil and gas as the foundation of Texas taxes as that is what sets us apart from other nations and states. Jim Wright, Commissioner with the Texas Railroad Commission talked a lot about how nuclear power is on the horizon for Texas as well as

the over 8000 orphan wells that Texas inherits after oil companies pass them around without capping.

Farm Bureau 101, Si Cook, Executive Director and CEO of Texas Farm Bureau

The American Farm Bureau Association is a 91 year old agricultural organization founded in 1934 to be an advocate for agriculture and rural communities. According to the National Farm Bureau website, “Farm Bureau brings members together at the county, state, and national levels to speak with a united voice, support one another, and give back to our communities.” As Si put it, Farm Bureau is the “Voice of Agriculture in Texas.” Political action is a huge part of what Texas Farm Bureau focuses on on behalf of its 500,000 member-families. Si reminded us that it is critical to get agriculture in the hands of ALL people, not just those directly involved in production, which is why they focus heavily on education in the classroom and presence at agricultural fairs and events.

Cory Pomery, Deputy Director and General Counsel of the Texas Oil & Gas Association

Texas is the 3rd largest producer of natural gas and crude oil. From 2022 to 2023, Texas saw a 21% increase in production due to increased technology. Cory and his team are currently working with Texas ag commodity leaders to find a way to balance private negotiations with state needs. Electricity was a prominent issue last session due to the power issues of the 2021 freeze. We should be looking at opportunities for energy addition not energy transition and thermal energy is a reliable source. We talked a lot this session about orphan wells and reducing the number of them by providing an incentive for owners to keep them maintained.

Jessica Butler P.E., Director of Engineering and Safety Operations, Texas Department of Transportation

Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT), has over 13,000 employees with 25 districts across the state. They oversee the safety of 56,000 bridges which is 29,000 more than any other state. TXDOT plays a role in airports, owns and maintains the Southwest Railroad, and oversees the state’s ferry system. In the future, the department is looking to increasing mobility, connectivity, bike/pedestrian paths, and energy.

Lisa Carver, Deputy Comptroller/Chief Clerk & Chief of Staff, Office of the State Comptroller

The Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts is the most important agency you’ve never heard of, they serve as the state’s tax collector and bookkeeper and keep all other agencies running. The

Comptrollers office creates biannual budget revenue estimates and ensures investments such as rainy day funds and swift funds are set up and functioning appropriately. Texas is the only state with it's own gold depository which holds approximately \$200 Million.

Friday, January 24th

Darren Turley, Executive Director of the Texas Association of Dairymen

Darren and the Texas Association of Dairymen supplied a great spread of breakfast sandwiches bright and early at the Texas Department of Agriculture. There are 290 dairies in Texas, making Texas the 3rd largest dairy producing state with over 9,000 head of cows being milked 3 times a day. It was interesting to learn about a new clear liquid milk protein product that has been developed to be colorless and tasteless. It's important to note that almost 100% of dairies are family owned and multi-generational.

Texas Department of Agriculture, Commissioner Sid Miller

Texas leads the United States in agricultural exports and has the largest port in the United states for trade in Laredo, TX. The Texas Department of Agriculture protects the consumer in a variety of ways not limited to weights & measures, pesticide management, rural healthcare, COVID, Go Texas. Sid told a COVID story about how he and the department released thousands of rolls of toilet paper from bureaucratic red tape during the pandemic by simply applying common sense to a rule that prohibited distribution due to Spanish instructions. A critical part of the agencies current work is biosecurity for the border due to threats of invasive species.

Dan Hunter, Assistant Commissioner for Biosecurity, Government Relations, and Economic Development

Dan spends much of his time at the Capital this time of year advocating for Texas Agriculture, water rights, and the lives and livelihoods of Texas. The produce safety program is run by Dan's office and is FDA funded. Dan reminded us that personal interaction is critical to making deals and building relationships. He told us a story about how he was able to close a huge deal in Spain because he was one of the first in-person visitors after COVID when officials hadn't seen another person in their physical offices in three years.

Maddison Jaureguito, Director for Communications

Maddison leads an 8 person team that works with all of TDA's divisions they have 4.5 million social media impressions this year and have doubled that of last. Maddison's team has worked to get Sid listed in the Top 5 political leaders, increased news interactions 11%, and are beating the GLO in social media mentions.

Lena Wilson, Assistant Commissioner for Food and Nutrition

Lena and her team lead all nutrition programs in the state except for SNAP and WIC. I personally enjoyed hearing from Lena as I worked the first 9 years of my career in the Child Nutrition Program which is one of the many her department oversees. Lena's department has over 220 employees.

Phillip Wright, Administrator for Agriculture and Consumer Protection

Phillip leads regulatory affairs for TDA and is focused on industry, consumer protection and equity in the marketplace. He and his team must regulate to the lowest common denominator across 14 programs and 4 teams to protect consumers on matters of biosecurity, weights and measures, licenses, etc. There was legislation filed last session that proposed farmers be allowed to sell eggs directly to restaurants that haven't been graded or inspected. This is an area that needs more education to be safe as ungraded, uninspected eggs could be dirty or need to be stored and used differently than commercially purchased eggs.

Karen Reichel, Administrator for Trade & Business Development

Karen and her department oversee over \$70 million of federal funds for community development block grants that are used for projects such as road improvement, downtown revitalization, and water to municipalities. They also oversee a colonia fund that impacts areas near my hometown by providing running water and septic.

Richard De Los Santos, Director for Livestock Export Facilities and Produce Safety

Richard and his team are critical in ensuring export pens stay regardless of disasters and disease such as COVID and the freeze of 2021. Food safety modernization has improved the prevention of food borne outbreaks.

Traé Ottmers with Capital Farm Credit-Hill Country and Don Weinheimer, Gillespie County Commissioner Precinct 4

Trae and Don hosted us for lunch at the Arch Ray Resort where we were treated to a delicious meal and tour of the facilities. Over lunch, we heard from Don Wienheimer who is a 5th generation Gillespie County resident and current county county commissioner. Don shared his experiences with agriculture in the county as well as some history facts about Fredricksburg. It was interesting to learn that all county roads in Gillespie County are paved.

Old Sonora Ice House Ranch Museum

After traveling from Fredricksburg to Sonora, we were treated to a private tour of the Old Sonora Ice House Ranch Museum for historical overview of Sonora and a step back in time. The ice house originally made 300 lbs of ice and was built in 1927. In 2008 the building was transformed into the museum it is now and houses a variety of historical artifacts from the surrounding areas. One of the notable stories is that of Will Carver who ran with Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and came to Sonora to rob the local bank.

Bob Malone,

Saturday, January 25th

Sonora Experiment Station

Boarding the bus at 6:59 was a challenge but we were rewarded by a gorgeous West Texas sunrise on the bus as we made our way to the Sonora Experiment Station for a chuck wagon breakfast and day of learning. Doug Tolleson runs the experiment station which was started in 1916 to represent West Texas and the growing number of sheep and goat raisers in the area.

Water conservation Hill Country / Edwards Plateau Region, Meredith Allen, General Manager at Sutton Co. UWCD

Meredith is a young woman who is passionate about water. You can tell from the moment she started speaking to the group. She taught us so much about groundwater in Texas and how she is working to manage the available water in the Edwards Plateau. There are 100 groundwater districts created by the Texas Legislature and each must treat groundwater users the same but manage their different needs and access. There are 9 major aquifers in Texas and they aren't uniform. We also learned that vanity ponds are a hot topic currently at issue with the Texas Supreme Court.

Predation in Edwards Plateau and Hill Country, Ed Mayfield

Ed taught us that one of the biggest challenges ranchers around Sonora are facing are predators, specifically coyotes that are killing sheep and goat kids at an alarming rate. Ed and a team of trappers are working to correct this problem by searching for predators by drone, dropping GPS pins, and then following up with an aerial kill from helicopters. This tactic has been very successful for ranchers at it can help maximize the hefty helicopter fees of approximately \$450 an hour.

Preservation of Southwest Texas Wildlife, Stan Cottle, Director Preservation of Southwest Texas Wildlife

The Preservation of Southwest Texas Wildlife was formed due to a massive overrun by predators making it difficult for sheep and goat raisers to make a living raising livestock. In some areas, coyotes and pigs have completely eliminated native or exotic species, decimating the hunting industry of the area. The group is trying to reduce the number of predators to help wildlife and sheep and goat herds reach appropriate numbers. They work hand in hand with trappers such as Ed to support local wildlife and reduce predator populations.

Diversity in Agriculture, Dr. Erika Campbell, Owner- High Cross Vineyard

Passionate about West Texas wine and the story it tells, Dr. Erika Campel was a breath of fresh air from the heavy topic of mass killings of sheep and goats. She told us the story of her wine and the goats and sheep that graze the grasses under her vines and live in harmony to produce happy grapes and delicious wines. She and her husband run a 10 acre vineyard and rotate sheep and cattle on their vineyard to increase the biodiversity and health of the soil.

Oil & Gas, David Wallace, Owner, Rancho Bronco Vineyard

David Wallace is from a family of ranchers who have been in the Sonora for over 120 years. He is a board certified attorney specializing in oil and gas. David started off his talk highlighting the importance of the energy needed to run AI. He then went on to speak about a variety of energy sources and the various needs for each. The biggest take away from his time with us is that the current cost to drill and speed at which we can extract oil in the region is significantly impacting the profitability of oil and gas production in Texas.

Tour facilities: Information on Breeds of Sheep & Goats Discussion & Tour of Prescribed Burn sites, Grazing Management research project Dr. Tolleson

After a morning in the classroom, we ventured out to the pens where we were introduced to the station's goat herd and learned about the shade ball water conservation project that is currently being researched. Hexagonal balls made in my hometown of Harlingen, TX are placed in stock tanks at 80% to reduce evaporation while still allowing the animals access to drink. We then moved onto the bus for a field tour of the prescribed burning grounds which I found very interesting. You could see visible differences in the pastureland based on the frequency of mosaic prescribed burns.

Tour Rancho Bronco Winery, Vines and Wines in the Edwards Plateau, John Rivenburgh, President Texas Wine Growers Association, David Wallace, Rancho Bronco Vineyard/Winery, Owner

Back in Sonora, we visited the Rancho Bronco Winery where we met John Rivenburgh with Texas Wine Growers Association who has done fascinating work to make Texas wine better each and every day. He has been involved with the opening of 20 wineries and founded Texas's first wine incubator. John taught us a lot about the fast growing Texas wine industry that consists of 400+ wineries and 5000 vineyards. Texas is the 5th largest wine producing state and is moving to 4th quickly. We heard again from David Wallace about making the most of your assets and his QESSV model for evaluating business deals.

Tour X Bar Ranch Facilities, Stan Meador, Founder/Owner & TALL VIII

Pulling into X Bar Ranch we knew something was gravely wrong with our tour bus, but the polish soda waters that awaited us drowned any sorrows. X Bar Ranch is owned by the Meador family (Stan Meador is TALL VIII) and offers a home away from home for visitors from all over the world. There are 9 cabins available for rent and the facility has been used for corporate hunts, mountain bike races, horse trail rides, and most popularly, an annual "star party" for hobbyists and enthusiasts alike.

Gen. (Ret) Ronnie D. Hawkins Jr., President, Angelo State University

Rounding out a perfect TALL XIX trip was [Retired General Ronnie D. Hawkins Jr.](#) Ronnie is the current president of Angelo State University and really amazing guy who brings such a presence to the room. Ronnie ran track at ASU and after a career in the military returned with his family to become president of the university in 2020. There are great things happening at ASU and i was most impressed by the commercial aviation program and all the opportunities in aviation available at ASU.

TALL XIX Austin/Sonora was a trip full of so many memories, from breaking into the Capital (kinda), sailing a cactus paddle down 9 stories to the roof of box truck, many polish soda waters, to hitching rides back from a remote ranch after a bus break down, our cohort had a blast. We learned a lot about leadership, a little about legislation, and we only broke a few laws.