



P.O. Box 27766
Raleigh, North Carolina 27611
919.782.1705

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the **LEADER**

88th ANNUAL **FARM BUREAU** *Convention* NORTH CAROLINA



convention were when my parents would leave the first weekend in December, and my brother and I would stay behind with our grandparents. I am always thankful this time of year for how I was raised on the farm by Christian parents. My mom has been and continues to be a constant source of support for me and my entire family . . . and she makes pretty good ice cream on the farm!

The other woman I want to thank is my wife, Tracey. This is not a role I could ever imagine doing alone. Tracey is always supportive and patient with me as I travel this state

and country. She is the epitome of a Proverbs 31 Woman and has been my constant companion now for 36 years.

As I think about the two most important farm women in my life, I realize that there are many women who are an integral part of their farm operation. Thank you to all of you for what you mean to me and to North Carolina Farm Bureau.

Thank you for this opportunity. I wish you and your families many blessings in the coming new year.

Each year, I'm charged with giving an annual report to the membership of all that we have accomplished in the past year. It started at the beginning of 2023 when North Carolina Farm Bureau was awarded the American Farm Bureau Pinnacle Award. This award is reserved for the six best Farm Bureaus in the country based on engagement and outreach, partnerships, advocacy, and leadership development. Winning the Pinnacle Award is a total team effort – volunteers, staff, the agency force – and I'm proud of all of you and I thank you for everything you do to make North Carolina Farm Bureau one of the best Farm Bureau organizations in the country.

For multiple years, North Carolina has led the country in membership growth. This year was no exception. We will report 637,187 member families at the American Farm Bureau Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah in January. Our membership growth is obviously affected by the success of our insurance agents, but I believe it is largely due to the total Farm Bureau mission. For 88 years we have served

as a voice and a guardian for agriculture and rural North Carolina. Our insurance company is a product of that mission. People see our Farm Bureau brand as trusted and reliable.

Our educational and leadership development programs continue to do what they were designed to do: educate the general public about agriculture while surfacing and growing the next generation of Farm Bureau leaders.

Our Young Farmers and Ranchers held three regional funshoots this year and hosted a successful statewide conference with over 400 attendees. I'm proud of their efforts with the Harvest for All project, helping our neighbors who are less fortunate have good food to eat.

We just graduated our ninth LEAD class. The LEAD team has made some great recommendations for how to take that program to the next level and I am really looking forward to seeing those changes implemented in our tenth class next year.



88th ANNUAL *Convention*

We will formally change the name of our Women’s Program to be the Farm Bureau Women’s Leadership Program. Such a simple change, but a very necessary one, to truly capture the role women play in agriculture and Farm Bureau. Our women can be found anywhere from the classroom to Congress advocating on behalf of farmers.

We continue to place an emphasis on farm, home, and auto safety. Our tractor and roadway safety campaigns continue to have great participation and visibility statewide. We have been involved in the discussions of how important mental health is on the farm. I’m very proud of counties that are hosting trainings on grain bin safety. Our local fire departments and first responders depend on us to help them in these lifesaving situations.

Our scholarship program continues to provide much needed financial assistance to students wanting to study agriculture at the collegiate level. Through the generous support of our counties and agency force, we continue to increase the amount we can give to our students to help offset their educational costs.

Next year we will celebrate 40 years of the Institute for Future Ag Leaders (IFAL) program at NC State. I have the opportunity to talk to many current and emerging ag leaders in North Carolina, and often they mention their time in IFAL either at NC State or NC A&T State Universities. We had a great IFAL class in 2023. They were all very engaged and we are looking forward to seeing where they go in the future.

Ag in the Classroom continues to be one of our most popular agricultural outreach programs. In 2023, we rebranded our book program to be called, “The Book Planter.” These ag accurate books are put into the little hands of our future ag leaders. We are finishing up our tenth year of the Going Local Grant Program, and it continues to be strong. We now have seven, soon to be eight, published “ag mags”. Our latest ag mag about careers has been very well received.

These are just a few highlights of our leadership and educational programs. I could talk for hours about the diverse activities and events we are seeing across the state as a result of these programs.

All of these programs do great work, but ultimately our mission is to serve as your voice in the legislative and public policy arena. When you see us fighting for our farmers in court, I hope you feel pride in being a part of Farm Bureau. When you see our public policy staff at regulatory hearings, you know that we are on the job. Our public policy, legislative and legal teams have stood tall and worked hard on behalf of all our farmers this year.

We have two staff members who are serving on American Farm Bureau working groups related to the important Farm Bill and farm labor discussions. As you know, there was recently a one-year extension on the Farm Bill. The hard work continues behind the scenes on both of these issues.

In 2019, the Department of Environmental Quality renewed general permits for swine and dairy farms. DEQ enacted several requirements for these operations that would create additional burdens on our livestock producers. We challenged the conditions of the permits in court, and last month the court issued a unanimous decision in Farm Bureau’s favor. This is a great win for North Carolina’s farm families.

In a similar vein, several issues arose concerning permitting for our aquaculture farmers. DEQ renewed General Permits for our trout and hybrid striped bass growers in North Carolina that included expensive and burdensome water quality monitoring conditions. In this case, we did what we always do. We called on our partners at the Department of Ag, the NC Aquaculture Association, and others. Ultimately, we worked with the Legislature to pass a law requiring DEQ to fix the monitoring requirements.

Special thanks to Macon County Farm Bureau leader, Karl Gillispie, who worked with us as a member of the General Assembly.

Our oyster growers experienced a similar situation. The North Carolina Coastal Resources Commission regulates development in the coastal counties of the state. Though agriculture has a statutory exemption from regulation by the Commission, they took a position that oyster farming is not agriculture, and imposed expensive permits. It is troubling that a regulatory agency is trying to interpret the definition of agriculture. We have fought these unnecessary rules through the Rules Review Commission, and they agreed with us that the Coastal Resources Commission has no authority over oyster production.

We have talked about Waters of the United States, WOTUS, for several decades. You have answered the call by writing letters, making phone calls, and visiting Capitol Hill. This year, the United States Supreme Court ruled favorably to limit EPA’s overreach. It is great to see all of our hard work bear fruit, but even with this victory, there is still work to be done. On the federal level, we are already working on the latest version of the WOTUS rule written in response to the Supreme Court ruling. At the state level, the NC General Assembly included language in this year’s Farm Act to require the state definition of wetlands to conform with federal WOTUS definition. We continue to engage with state and federal regulators to ensure that our property rights are observed.

There are many other issues that we are working on and following. One thing is for certain: we will continue to pursue whatever legislative, regulatory, and legal action that is necessary to ensure ALL farmers have the opportunity to continue farming.

A common denominator in all these accomplishments is our Farm Bureau people.

You have a talented and professional staff that come to work every day. For them, this is more than a job. It’s a calling to do something that helps our farmers and our state’s most important industry. They are respected and trusted wherever they may be representing our Farm Bureau members. Our staff are key to building relationships and helping volunteers be the best advocates

they can be. I believe we have the best Farm Bureau staff in the country.

I’m also grateful for the leadership and vision of our Board of Directors. We sometimes joke with them about doubling their salaries. In all honesty, they make an investment of their time and knowledge that doesn’t have a price tag. The collective knowledge and commitment of our Board is one of the reasons our organization is so well respected to this day.

However, I think both our staff and the Board would agree that most importantly, it’s you, local county Farm Bureau leaders, and your efforts that are the most vital to the success of North Carolina Farm Bureau. We lean on you for direction on all of our advocacy efforts. We live by our grassroots policy development. Your communities look to you as the foremost authority on all things agriculture.

Seeing the activities of our county Farm Bureaus really makes me think about what it takes to be excellent. How did we get to the top?

As I mentioned before, our people are key. Thinking about the staff and all of our volunteer leaders, lots of words come to mind – dedication, hard work, creativity, willingness, pride – but all of that boils down to one word: HEART. We all believe in how important Farm Bureau is to our communities now and in the future. Our challenge is to recruit new leaders that have that same heart for people and agriculture and get them involved. Our state has changed dramatically in the past five years. Many of us have new neighbors. Our population is nearly 11 million. Many of our new neighbors have no idea what Farm Bureau is or what we do. I’m asking you to continue to be an ambassador for Farm Bureau as our circle continues to grow.

Another way we got to the top is by not resting on our past accomplishments. I heard a fitting quote the other day: “Your windshield is bigger than the rearview mirror for a reason. What’s in front of you is so much more important than what’s behind you.” To me, that signifies that our climb never ends.

Being at the very top can be a slippery slope. Some would say the next step is down, but I choose to look forward. There is a horizon ahead of us. Our organization may feel big, but we still have many opportunities to grow and improve. We have to be visionary, proactive, and creative so that what we are doing now sets us up to evolve with agriculture and society as a whole.

I’m going to be coming into your districts for eight farm shop meetings early in 2024. I’m excited to be visiting farms, but I’m even more excited about the conversations we will be having about the future of Farm Bureau. I really want to hear from you all.

As I close this message, I especially want to thank a couple of people. My mom has not been to a convention since 2019 when I was first elected. I invited her to come back this year. In fact, my earliest memories of Farm Bureau