

A look back on 2005 and ahead to 2006

Happy New Year! Hope your team won its bowl game. Did you get your hoppin' johns on New Years Day? Never can have too much good luck. If this is January, 2006, what happened to 2005? Well, what happened for the agriculture industry in South Carolina and the Department of Agriculture in 2005 is certainly worth recounting. But the start of each year is also the time for resolution and resolve to make it better than the year just completed. Like you personally, your family, or your farming operation, that's the case for the South Carolina Department of Agriculture.

Agriculture enjoyed a relatively good year for production. Traditional crops like corn and cotton had very good yields. A wet spring delayed harvesting of truck crops like watermelons, but extended the season a little. Peanut yields did not match those of 2004, but still provided some good profit opportunities.

Tobacco farmers benefited from the passage of federal legislation in 2004 to provide a buyout of tobacco quotas over the next ten years. The first installment was received in the fall of 2005. In addition, a favorable ruling on the last of the Phase II settlement payments ended that program on a good note for our farmers. Now tobacco prices will be determined completely by market forces. A year or two go a long way to know the future of tobacco production in South Carolina.

Dairy prices were better than average for most of the year. Legislation was passed in South Carolina in May of 2005 to help stabilize this industry. A tax credit can be earned by dairy farmers when prices are lower than a level determined by formula. The legislation addresses the fact that South Carolina farmers supply only about thirty percent of the milk bottled in our state.

Our timber farmers got some good news in 2005 also. A Canadian company, Grant Forest Products, announced their decision to locate two facilities in lower South Carolina in Allendale and Clarendon counties. They will produce manufactured products such as OSB lumber. A boost to pulpwood demand can help timber plantations manage costs to produce the quality saw timber.

We were blessed with significant accomplishments at the Department of Agriculture as well. In the spring our relocation proposal for the State Farmers Market was approved. We told you about the details of that in the most recent Commissioner's column.

In the summer, the 2nd Commissioner's School of Agriculture was held at Clemson. Department personnel and Clemson staff worked together to expose twenty-nine high school students

to various academic and career options in agriculture. Of particular note is that this excellent program is operated without using any tax dollars. Support from various farm organizations in South Carolina helps keep the tuition costs to students at a minimum.

We have known a while that South Carolina is home to great number of horses. The Department was the primary sponsor in 2005 of the first comprehensive equine survey done in our state in more than twenty years. In December, I met with retiring state statistician, Mr. Bob Graham. He introduced me to his replacement, and true to his charge as a keeper of the numbers, he would not give me a preliminary estimate. But we'll find out this month and make the results known to the public. I think we'll learn that our equine industry in South Carolina is quite significant.

Partnerships were big for the Department of Agriculture in 2005. It has been a priority of mine as Commissioner that we look for ways to work with other farm groups to produce better than we can by working alone. We coordinated with the Peach Council to have July designated as peach month. In addition we worked with them to have Governor Sanford contact grocery chains to emphasize the quality of our tree-ripened peaches. The Department worked to help establish two new organizations that will work to advance agriculture in South Carolina. The new Food Policy Council will bring together organizations to share ideas about our food systems and the sustainability of agriculture in South Carolina. The Advocates for Agriculture is a non-profit foundation designed to improve marketing and promotion of South Carolina agricultural products and the industry.

We took some steps in 2005 to improve the operation of the Department of Agriculture. Classes to improve supervisory skills were attended by many of our personnel. With the significant impact of retirements looming, we initiated an outside look at the agency by the State Office of Human Resources. The purpose is to better organize the Department to meet its mission going forward. Training in technology will help our consumer services inspectors do their jobs more efficiently. We'll report more on these initiatives later in the year.

On a sad note we lost a real statesman on 2005 with the passing of Governor Carroll Campbell. I attended the funeral services and was moved by the eulogy offered by Mr. Bob McAlister, a long-time staff member for the Governor. Recently, I told Mr. McAlister that his words had caused me to come away with a stronger resolve as Commissioner of Agriculture to work for the agriculture industry in South Carolina. It will be a priority of mine to motivate the staff of the Department in 2006 to have that same stronger commitment. Based on what I have seen in sixteen months as Commissioner, I am confident this will happen.

So we look back at 2005 and ahead to 2006. It will be a busy year for the South Carolina Department of Agriculture and for me as Commissioner. But that's the way we like it. Let's hope it'll be a good year for agriculture in South Carolina.