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Report to FACAA on the NACAA Ireland Agricultural and Cultural Tour

When one thinks of Ireland, they think of green and it's not just because of the country's symbolic green clover or popular St. Patrick's Day attire. Ireland's climate allows the production of some of the greenest grass in the world. Ireland's climate is influenced by the Atlantic Ocean. Being surrounded by the ocean currents allow the temperatures to be moderate, with milder than expected winters to be so northerly located. Abundant rainfall and cloud cover along with minimal tree cover contribute to Ireland's ability to grow exceptional green grass not only for their high-quality grass-fed livestock production but for some of the world's most prized golf courses.

During the Ireland Agricultural and Cultural Tour, I increased my knowledge of Ireland's unique landscape and climate and how it shapes the country's significant agricultural production, especially grass-fed livestock production. This information will strengthen my collaborative partnerships and programmatic focus in Brevard County. I work with other Brevard County agents to meet the broad educational needs of the ever-growing population that inhabits the Space Coast. My major programs are in integrated pest management, alternative crops and sustainable production systems.

Visiting a traditional sheep farm is something you might expect to do only in Ireland. Wool and lanolin derived from sheep has historically been a major commodity in the country, but due to urbanization, sheep farmers are fighting for the sustainability of their farms and looking for alternative ways to increase their revenue during urban sprawl and a tourism boom. This production situation is not much different than what we as agents are witnessing in Brevard County and across the entire state of Florida. I had the opportunity to increase my knowledge of traditional Irish sheep farm while analyzing the successes, challenges and adaptations from the changing population and landscape. The knowledge gained from this experience and interaction with Irish farmers will help me improve my programs with innovative ideas to bring to Brevard County producers. We have many livestock farms and other agricultural landowners who are trying to find alternative crops and production practices to be sustainable and conserve land in the quickly changing, urbanizing Brevard County. What are traditional Irish farmers doing to remain sustainable during times of intense urbanization? Alternative enterprises such as dairy sheep production!

I also had the opportunity to visit with Irish extension agents and other industry professionals at the Moorpark Agricultural and Grasslands Research Park.

Potato production in Ireland is historically significant and I learned about the evolution of potato farms since the times of the Irish potato famine. We have some acreage of potatoes in Brevard County and it was interesting to see an Irish potato farm and their innovative marketing and integrated pest management strategies that I may incorporate into my existing programs. We also visited a distillery where local grains are used to produce traditional Irish Whiskey. Locally sourced distilleries are booming in Florida along the East Coast and I increased my knowledge of the sourcing and sustainable production of this important product.

I had the opportunity to visit a water buffalo dairy farm, for which interest is growing with Florida farmers. I have had one farmer in Brevard County express interest in water buffalo cheese production as it is some of the best tasting worldwide, and I can attest to that! Delicious! I increased my knowledge of Irish dairy farm production and will deliver this information to the producers of Brevard County. Could Brevard County's vast animal production land host water buffalo for cheese production and enhance the sustainability and profitability? Perhaps!

Overall, the NACAA Ireland Ag and Cultural Tour was an excellent and one of a kind opportunity to network with fellow extension agents and specialists from across the country. This educational opportunity was a great way to discuss my programmatic successes and secure future collaboration with my peers nationwide and beyond. Thank you FACA for helping fund this awesome, unforgettable and truly rewarding educational opportunity!