



November 14, 2019

To: Bridget Stice, FACAA Education Foundation Chair

From: Christine Kelly-Begazo, FACAA Educational Foundation Scholarship Recipient

RE: Report to FACAA on the NACAA Ireland Agricultural and Cultural Tour

I was awarded funding from the FACAA Educational Foundation for the NACAA Ireland Ag and Cultural Tour from 10/13-20/19. This was probably one of the most educational agricultural tours that I have been on. Each day was filled with visits to farms that I normally would not have access to that taught me many things that I will be able to incorporate into my own programming in Indian River county as well as information that I will be able to share with my colleagues. I have already prepared a presentation entitled "Agritourism in Ireland" and presented it to our local Master Gardeners. Each day there was something new and interesting that made me think about how we farm in Florida and even in the U.S. Without the opportunity to go on this trip, I would never have been able to compare and contrast our different farming systems and how they support our food supply. Each agricultural site was selected to enhance our learning with the farmers telling their side of the story; how they are adapting to climate change, fluctuating market structures and influences, Brexit and generational farming. Some of the challenges that these farmers brought up during their discussion were things that I had never considered before and I think that it will help me understand some of the decision-making process that our own farmers/producers go through. This tour also gave me a one-of-a-kind opportunity to network with fellow extension agents and specialists from across the country and create partnerships that I hopefully will be able to utilize in the future.

One very important thing that I learned was the importance and value of paying the farmer for his time for the visit. Agents rely on producers to assist them with farm tours, but I don't know if we ever take into consideration that they are losing valuable work hours by hosting a tour on their farm. Each one of the farms we visited was give monetary compensation for their time and those funds were wrapped into the overall registration fee. I think that this not only helped the farmer (the minimum they were recompensed was \$100) but also encouraged them to view the tour in a more positive light and they were all generous and welcoming. This will definitely be something that I will consider when planning a farm tour.

No matter what livestock farm we visited, their main production system was focused on pasture-raised, almost year-round. Perennial ryegrass was the major grass grown throughout the southern and central region of Ireland. Visiting the Moorepark Animal & Grassland Research Center gave us insight to this pastured-based system and taught us that dairy production could be successful with limited concentrated feeds. Most of the farms were small (<100 acres), multi-generational family farms. Some of the farmers spoke of having to give up some of the farm responsibilities and letting the

next generation bring in new technology. It was interesting to see a computer-based milking stations contained in a 200+ year old building!

The first farm we visited was a sheep dairy, something that I had never seen nor even considered. They were innovatively breaking into a new market as the sheep meat market was depressed. They had done some market research and switched over to the dairy and was making a variety of cheeses that were distributed not only in Ireland but also in the European Union. They offered samples and I was impressed with their take on blue cheese which was much milder than what I was normally used to, and they said that it had to do with the difference between sheep and cow milk that made it milder. I don't think that I have ever heard of sheep dairy farming in my area and that might be a niche that a new farmer might want to consider. I am often asked for new and innovate ideas for new farmers and this will now be on my list of things for them to investigate.

In Cork County, we visited a potato farm and its packing house as well as a beef and grain farm. The potato farm was interesting as I had never seen potatoes grown on that scale. The packing house was a large as some of the citrus packing houses in my county, but cooler! This was one of the bigger farms that we visited and an anomaly in Irish agriculture. This family had over 400 acres in production as well as other leased lands and had various other producers in their co-op. One take away from this visit was that I learned that throughout Ireland they have monthly producer meetings where faculty from the research centers go to hear what issues the farmers are facing. I am not sure if that frequency would work in my area as we don't have farmer co-ops but maybe in an area (such as the Panhandle) where you have small farmers that are used to working together. This gave me something to think about and I might be able to incorporate in multiple farmers in my area decided to plant industrial hemp when it is legal to.

The grain situation in Ireland is more interesting that in other areas because a lot of their grain is grown for local utilization in Jameson whiskey and Guinness beer and not in livestock feed. In fact, once realizing that those two companies were tour stops, one producer asked us to ask them why they don't give them a higher price for their grain. I did just that when we were at Jameson's and the guide laughed and said that it was a 150-year old disagreement. Needless to say, relationships in that country go way back.

I was also very impressed with a water buffalo dairy farm that had been so successful with their agritourism plan that they had to hire another staff member just to oversee that component of they farm. They had a room where a movie about the farm was shown and where we were able to sample the various cheeses, including mozzarella, in a certified kitchen. Another marketing tool that they were using was a small gift shop where one could buy logoed items such as caps, shirts, pens and even stuff water buffalo. This farm was a great example of how they were able to expand into the realm of agritourism without disrupting the flow of the dairy itself.

All in all, this trip was extremely informative and very interesting. Most of the farmers were extremely worried about the impact of Brexit and what that would mean to them and how it would affect the success that they were currently experiencing. This was a problem that we (the tour participants) could not even begin to understand but it was evident that it was a worry for all of them. And it really brought home the concept of a global economy and how it could affect a small local Irish farmer. The knowledge that I gained from this experience, and personal interactions with Irish farmers, will help me improve my programs with innovative ideas and solutions for my own local farmers in Indian River county. I would highly recommend that every agent take the opportunity to go on a similar tour to broaden their horizons and see agriculture in a different light.

