

If you glance through this issue of the Agricultural Review, you will see several stories on employees of the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services making a difference for agriculture. That makes this an issue I am particularly proud of.

Like many farmers and agribusiness owners, agriculture employees tend to just keep busy doing their jobs. Steady and dependable, showing up regardless of the circumstances or obstacles. Getting up early, working late, whatever it takes to get the job done – you know you can depend on them to see the task through.

It's one of the reasons I am so proud of the department and it's also a big, big part of what I attribute to my success as Agriculture Commissioner.

In the midst of figuring out operationally how we could do our work during the pandemic, we also tackled some massive projects with tight time limitations.

The story on page 1 about the IMPEC grants is a great example of that. While the federal government appropriated CARES Act funds to assist our agricultural community, we were limited in what it could be spent on and we had to have the money spent by the end of the year.

I was determined to use this funding to help our small meat processors increase their capacity so the farmers who use them could also benefit from this investment.

With more consumers interested in locally sourced proteins, many farms who are registered meat handlers quickly maxxed out their supply. As they looked to process more meat for customers, the availability of local processors dried up. Around April of 2020, we were already hearing that processing facilities were booked through early 2021.

The IMPEC grants will allow 57 meat and seafood businesses to increase capacity for the long term.

In addition to these grants, we also created programs and administered grants for dairies and for farmers markets and food hubs. For each one of these programs, staff with our Budget and Finance Division stepped up their efforts to ensure the paperwork was in order so these funds could be sent out as quickly and as efficiently as possible. We met the deadlines, we put the money delegated to the state to good use and we have increased our local processing capacity significantly.

For every employee story we highlight in this paper, both in this issue and throughout the year, there are many more that go untold. I wish we could tell them all, but I want them all to know I am grateful for their hard work and extra efforts.