

Happy New Year!

I intend to start 2021 with the same optimism I bring to the start of every growing season. It has served me well in my farming career, and, I believe there are good reasons to be optimistic for 2021.

I am encouraged by the approval of two vaccines against COVID-19, which I plan to take as soon as I can. I have also witnessed the incredible fortitude of the agricultural and food industries in ensuring no shortages of food during the pandemic.

While we saw things in short supply for a time, we did not actually experience a food shortage – a testament to farmers and the industry.

We also saw an increased volume of food going out to help those in need, whether through the network of food banks in our state, through the federal Coronavirus Food Assistance Program or through our own Food Distribution Division.

For example, the Baptists on Mission recently shared that they helped distribute over 632,000 boxes of CFAP food to those in need in the past seven and a half months. In addition, our Food Distribution Division has tripled its movement of USDA commodities through the Emergency Food Assistance Program to food banks and other feeding sites for those in need.

The bottom line is agriculture rose to the occasion and met the needs and I know that will continue to happen.

As we start 2021, I want to share some of my priorities for the New Year and for my fifth term. I hope I can count on your help with these, too. Here we go:

- Educating the non-farming public on where their food comes from, how it is produced and how agriculture contributes positively to our environment. As I saw in the election, too many people are not aware of the positive benefits of agriculture and forestry to the environment. As farmers, we don't talk about carbon sequestration, nutrient uptake of plants and the benefits of open, planted land compared to impervious surfaces. But we understand the benefits. Ag education is not a new subject matter, but it has become even more critical that people understand what agriculture is and what it isn't. Too many non-farming people have been trying to explain their version of agriculture for too long. Our department, along with other ag organizations have been taking to social media and other outlets to introduce people to farmers. In March, we will wrap up a year-long effort introducing a farmer a week. We plan to continue this, by introducing people each week to young people in agriculture. I am excited to read about these next generation farmers. Follow us on Facebook to read these weekly stories, and more importantly, share these stories with your friends.
- Farmland preservation will continue to be a priority for as long as I am Commissioner because it is needed to ensure viable farm and forestland for the next generation. As our state's population continues to grow, more and more land will be developed. Conservation easements provide options for farmers and property owners, while

ensuring the land remains open or in agricultural production. If you are interested in a conservation easement or want to know more about how they work, you can contact our Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation office at 919-707-3071.

- Food safety also remains a top priority as it impacts us all. This year we will bring the Agricultural Sciences Center online, which will add a tremendous new tool in our food safety efforts. This state-of-the-art lab will house four divisions, several whose work is critical to food safety – Food and Drug Protection, Veterinary, Structural Pest Control and Pesticides, and Standards. I am eager for the department to begin using this building, which replaces labs that average 40 years of age or older.
- New market development for agricultural products. International trade will remain important going forward, but we will also continue to look at developing new value-added opportunities for farmers and attract more food manufacturing to the state. Success in all of these areas will help agriculture and agribusiness reach \$100 billion in economic impact.

As you can see, I am looking forward to 2021 and the work we have ahead of us. Again, Happy New Year!