

I don't know about you, but I may not have ever been happier to see the end of a year come. I am not one to wish time away – it's too finite to waste and I have a pretty big to-do list of things I want to get done and accomplished.

I also realize when we start 2021, we will still be grappling with some of the same COVID-19-related issues we are when 2020 wraps up. But after nine months of dealing with the pandemic, we know more about this virus than when it started and we are closer to a vaccine being available, which will hopefully allow us to refocus our energies and efforts in different and more productive ways. I am encouraged by the news of a vaccine, but in the meantime, I cannot stress enough that we need to remain vigilant in protecting ourselves and others.

2020 has challenged us in ways that we would have never thought possible, but we are still standing and that is a good thing. I have had several years on my farm where ending the year still standing was an accomplishment and I think that is true for 2020.

I can tell you that I have never lost confidence in our agricultural and food manufacturing community's commitment to continue to provide food, fiber and fuel. If anything, I am even more impressed by an industry that has weathered many, many hardships along the way, but still stays focused on doing its job every day.

As a farmer, I recognize the drive and passion our farm community has. I know you love what you do and understand the responsibility that accompanies producing essential products – and it really doesn't get more essential than agriculture or food.

From the start of the pandemic, my phone has stayed busy with farmers and agribusiness owners wanting to be sure they could continue working. We have worked hard all year long to ensure farmers markets, pick-your-own operations and agritourism sites remained open and safe, that agricultural workers were recognized as essential, that there were relief and assistance programs for farmers and their workers, and that farms and agribusinesses had access to PPE and resources they needed to operate.

With every call, we went to work to ensure the concerns and needs of agriculture and food production were not overlooked. Some things may not have moved as quickly as I would have wanted, particularly with shortages of supplies in the beginning, but we kept working throughout to keep agriculture and agribusiness at the table.

I applaud and thank each and every one of you who have continued to work to ensure we are fed. Even in the face of great adversity, you have persevered.

As we begin to look toward 2021, I believe we will emerge stronger for the challenge.

We still have much to be grateful for in 2020 – yes, even in light of the pandemic.

For example, many people sought out local foods during this pandemic, which I hope will translate into more opportunities for farmers long-term. I have heard from some farmers with pick-your-own operations or on-farm markets that ended up having a pretty good year or one of

their best. It seems people wanted to know who was growing their food and wanted to support local growers.

The pandemic also offered us more opportunities to explain the way food products get to the grocery store shelves, or school cafeterias and restaurants. I believe the public has a better idea of the supply chain. In the end, I hope more people have a greater understanding about where their food comes from and the connection we all have to the farm.

Agriculture has been able to help provide for those experiencing food insecurity. We have seen record numbers of federal food assistance distributed in North Carolina through our Food Distribution Division and the federal Farms to Families program.

More attention and funding have been directed at broadband Internet, particularly in our rural communities. This will provide long-term benefits to these communities.

I am grateful for these things, plus many more. As we come to the end of 2020, I can say I am extremely proud of the response I have seen from agriculture this year.

It reminds me that together, we are going to continue to move this industry forward. Together, we will look to expand new opportunities for farmers and agribusiness. And together, I believe we see agriculture emerge as a \$100 billion industry in this state.

Thank you for everything you do to make agriculture and agribusiness our No. 1 industry. Keep the faith as we look to 2021 to be a better year for us all.