The County Agent

A publication of the National Association of County Agricultural Agents

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President's Corner

Somewhere Between Take Off and Landing

2025-2026 NACAA President JJ Jones

As I began writing this article for the County Agent magazine, I found myself thinking about how quickly this year has passed. I started looking up quotes about the passage of time and came across one that felt particularly fitting, though it needed a slight modification. The quote reads, "The bad news is that time flies. The good news is you're the pilot." I would simply add, "Even though sometimes it feels like the accelerator is stuck to the floor." That is how this year has felt, or rather, that is how my entire time on the board has felt. It seems like just yesterday that I was campaigning for Vice President, and now I can already see the light at the end of the tunnel as my time on the board ends. I just hope that light is not a train.

I hope each of you is as eager as I am for the upcoming meeting in Denver. The Colorado agents have invested countless hours in planning, fundraising, adjusting, and refining every detail in an effort to make this one of the best meetings our association has ever hosted and I truly believe they have succeeded.

This year's meeting begins with an exceptional keynote presentation by Dr. Temple Grandin. Dr. Grandin is a renowned animal scientist, professor, and author whose work has transformed livestock handling practices worldwide. She is widely recognized for designing humane livestock systems and for her advocacy and writing on autism, drawing from her own experiences as a person on the autism spectrum. Her contributions have significantly improved animal welfare while helping producers and processors better understand animal behavior. Dr. Grandin's story is remarkable, and if you have never heard her speak, you are in for an extraordinary experience. If you have heard her before, you are likely like me, eager for the opportunity to hear her again.

One of the most impactful and anticipated components of the meeting is the opportunity for members to share and highlight the exceptional work they are doing to serve producers across their states. These presentations truly represent the heart of our association, showcasing the depth, diversity, and innovation of Extension programming. Regardless of your area of interest, there is always a wealth of knowledge to be gained across a broad range of subject matter, making each year's meeting both engaging and educational.

Equally valuable are the informal interactions that occur beyond the scheduled sessions. Conversations in hallways, shared meals, and spontaneous discussions develop into meaningful professional relationships. These relationships are lasting and help build a nationwide network of trusted colleagues. As a result, many of us leave the meeting with the confidence that we have a friend in nearly every state we can call upon.

Delivering our capstone presentation is Michele Payn. Michele is an internationally recognized agricultural communicator, speaker, and author who works to strengthen the connection between farmers and consumers. Through her writing and leadership development programs, she helps agricultural

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professionals effectively communicate the value of modern food and farming while building trust with the public.

To conclude our meeting, we will recognize the very best of our membership at the Distinguished Service and Hall of Fame Awards banquet. The Distinguished Service Award is one of our organization's highest honors, recognizing members who have demonstrated exceptional leadership, outstanding programming, and a sustained commitment to Extension education throughout their careers. The NACAA Hall of Fame Award represents the pinnacle of professional recognition within the association, honoring members whose lifetime contributions have made a lasting impact on agriculture, Extension, and the communities they served. Together, these awards celebrate excellence, dedication, and the enduring legacy of county agricultural agents who have advanced the mission of Cooperative Extension.

As we gather in Denver, I encourage each of you to take full advantage of every opportunity this meeting offers. Learn from one another, build new connections, and celebrate the outstanding work being done across our association. NACAA is special because of its people, and it is through your dedication, innovation, and willingness to share that we continue to grow and make a lasting impact. Thank you for the privilege of serving alongside you, and I look forward to seeing each of you as we come together once again to learn, connect, and celebrate the very best of Extension.

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NACAA Scholarship Experiences 2025-2026

Within this edition of The County Agent, are reprints of Educational Experience Reports which each previous award winner has submitted to the NACAA Scholarship Committee. These reports are from within the last 12 months and are quite impressive in regards to the educational value each individual/group experienced.

If you would like to make a donation to the NACAA Educational Foundation, you can do so via credit card on the NACAA website (www.nacaa.com - bottom left hand corner - Donate button), or you can send a check made payable to the NACAA Educational Foundation, and mail to NACAA, 6584 W. Duroc Road, Maroa, IL 61756.

Enjoy reading about the exciting opportunities many of our NACAA members had from receiving funding from the NACAA Educational Foundation.

Fences, Footprints, and Fresh Perspectives: Lessons from New Zealand and Australia

Group photo with Pete Morgan: Pete Morgan is a leader in the use of Collar technology and demonstrated the ease of moving cattle with a tap on his phone.

The Alabama Extension Animal Science & Forages team traveled thousands of miles away to see firsthand how two of the world's leaders in forage-based livestock production manage their land, animals, and businesses. This group of producers and educators embarked on a study tour of New Zealand and Australia. They visited innovative dairy, beef, sheep, deer, and goat farms; spoke with precision agriculture contractors; and met with leading agribusinesses and producer organizations.

Deer Farm: Antlers from a deceased top sire of breeding stags sold across New Zealand.

Stokman (yes that is the correct spelling) Angus: Evaluating yearling Angus bulls at Stokman, where Collar technology is used extensively.

It was more than just a trip—it was a masterclass in sustainable farming.

The central theme was something Alabama producers can relate to: sustainable intensification. In simpler terms, it's the art of raising more livestock efficiently, protecting natural resources and ensuring long-term profitability. They explored advancements in rotational grazing, precision pasture management, and ag-tech applications that make the most of every acre. From on-farm discussions to research briefings, the take-home message was the same: technology is powerful, but it's how you use it—and how well it fits your land—that matters most.

Technology Used

- Virtual Fencing:
  - Cattle are trained to a fitted collar to respond to beep signals to stay within the mapped boundary by the farmer. The boundaries can be made by assessing how much grass is available in the field and mapped out on their phone. The benefits of this technology include:
    - Decreased animal stress
    - Reduced labor requirements
    - Greater safety for producer and livestock
    - Allows grid sampling maps to be included in grazing plans to use livestock to move nutrients throughout the pasture
- Optiweigh System:
  - This mobile scale can be transported between pastures. Livestock are attracted to mineral salt or protein lick in the scale. When the animal enters the scale, their EID tag is scanned and a weight is recorded.The scale weighs the front half of the animal. This weight is within 3-5% of the weight on a normal scale. The software keeps up with daily weights and a rolling herd average. This information was used to help farmers make decisions on pasture moves or animal health treatments. As animals reached target sale weights, marketing decisions could be made earlier and with more certainty.
- Mobile software and data collection:
  - Farmers were using technology on their phones to keep up with daily tasks such as water levels in tanks and power on electric fences. Weather stations placed in various parts of the farm would gather weather data related to air and soil temperature, precipitation and soil moisture.

Implemented Strategies

- K-Line irrigation:
  - Some farms used irrigation lines that can be moved with ATV that has a thick pod around the sprinkler head. These can be used when livestock are present.
- Herd Barns:
  - In some areas of NZ, they were using herd barns

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Heifer with Collar technology: Yearling heifers are typically trained to the Collar in 10 days.

to feed silage under a roof with wood chip bedding to help catch nutrients. The resultant compost would be used on fields to reduce fertilizer use.

- Diverse Pastures:
  - The use of diverse pastures was a repeated theme in both research and farmer discussions. In NZ, plantain and chicory were included in pasture mixes because of improved animal performance and reduced environmental impacts such as less nitrogen leaching and methane emissions. In AUS, one farm we visited was using a browsing shrub called leucaena. Luecaena provides a higher protein forage for cattle during the summer when pastures lose quality.

Lessons That Stuck

One recurring point was simple yet profound: **focus on profit, not just yield**. It's tempting to chase high production numbers for bragging rights at the coffee shop, but as we saw, profitability often comes from matching livestock to the environment.

Another takeaway was summed up in a phrase: **fences grow grass.** It's not the first thing you consider listing what's needed for good forage—soil health, moisture, fertility—but well-placed fences make rotational grazing possible, and that makes all the difference. In New Zealand, we saw a side-by-side comparison where intensive grazing management resulted in noticeably healthier, thicker grass. Whether it was a high-tech dairy moving cattle every few hours or a seasonal beef operation guided by the calendar, the principle was the same: controlled grazing builds better pastures.

And then there was a reminder as old as farming itself: **the best fertilizer is footprints in the field.** Even with cutting-edge technology, nothing replaces boots on the ground. Walking the pasture, checking fences, observing cattle behavior, and inspecting equipment all provide insights you just can't get from the seat of a tractor or side-by-side.

Commercial Ewe Flock: Hilly terrain is intensively managed and utilized in the grazing rotation.

Hillside Grazing: Both dairy cows and Beef bulls (finished on grass) are grazed on steep hillsides and rotated daily.

All Weather Runway: New Zealand producers are very focused on timely fertilizer applications on perennial ryegrass. This runway allows access for planes to load fertilizer and make aerial applications on the steep terrain, regardless of wet conditions.

Dalby Sale Yards, Australia: Buyers, Sellers and Commission Agents at the sale with 4,500 animals average per week. There is no sale ring and animals are weighed AFTER the price is determined. All animals have Electronic Identification for traceability.

Bringing It Home

The group visited producers that were passionate and eager to share their knowledge. Many of their strategies—precision grazing, timely marketing, and genetic selection can be adapted for Alabama conditions. These ideas will not only inform future Extension programming but also guide management decisions on Alabama farms and inspire new research projects.

The fences, the footprints, and the friendships formed will continue to shape how these Extension agents help Alabama farmers thrive. And while the pastures of New Zealand and Australia may be half a world away, the lessons brought home will be impactful for the farms in Alabama.

Sydney Opera House: The iconic Sydney Opera House seen from the dinner cruise deck. A must-see attraction!

New Zealand Educational Experience

Emily Fread

In February, I had the opportunity to travel to New Zealand with NACAA and Explorations by Thor. Not only was it an amazing educational experience, but I also had the opportunity to get to know my fellow NACAA members better, including Amber Yutzy, Ginger Fenton, Margaret Quaassdorff, and Jenny Beiermann.

We explored both the North and South Islands and learned about a wide variety of agriculture, including dairy, beef, sheep, kiwi, wine-making, row crops, and more. As a dairy educator, I found the dairy-related tours particularly interesting. We learned that milk pricing in New Zealand is very different from that in the United States. While much of the United States' milk is processed into products such as fluid milk and cheese, much of New Zealand's milk is processed into dried products such as whey protein. Because of this, the fluid component of milk is expensive and unwanted. Therefore, farmers are paid solely based on milk solids and receive a deduction for volume.

New Zealand is sparsely populated, with 5 million people, but 40 million sheep! We ate lots of lamb while we were there and learned about Merino wool production.

The New Zealand government has a large number of state-owned farms. Unlike the U.S., the purpose of these farms is not research, but to make a profit for the government. One of the government farms we toured raised deer for velvet, sheep, steers, and Holstein bulls. The Holstein bulls they raised were for beef. When asked why they do not castrate these animals, they reasoned that they grow faster, and they are not worried about carcass quality. Much of this beef is used for ground beef and is mixed with U.S. beef because it is leaner. Instead of castrating their sheep, they made them cryptorchids to increase growth as well. The other government-owned farm we toured had a dairy that utilized Halter Virtual Fencing collars. This farm was a big fan of these collars and used them to rotate paddocks for grazing. They said it has eliminated the need for someone to go out and bring the cows in for milking; the collars can do that for them.

We also had the opportunity to tour the Livestock Improvement Cooperative (LIC). The LIC provides 75% of the country's dairy genetics. They also serve as the country's milk-testing organization and provide genomic screening. It was very interesting to see their dairy bulls as they were kept on pasture. Many of the dairy animals in New Zealand are crossbred Holstein-Jerseys.

This tour also included some cultural experiences. New Zealand was the last fertile place in the world to be inhabited, and was home to the Maori people. We attended a Maori cultural experience, eating a traditional dinner and watching them perform traditional songs and dances.

I am very grateful to have received the NACAA scholarship to help fund my trip. This is an amazing opportunity, and I encourage other members to utilize these funds. Going on an international professional development expanded my horizons, and I hope to have the opportunity again in the future.

54th Annual Conference of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)

Jim Davis - University of Florida Extension (IFAS)

I attended the 54th Annual Conference of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), held virtually November 3–6, 2025. Participation in this conference aligned with the NACAA Educational Foundation's objectives to enhance leadership, expand subject-matter expertise, and strengthen Extension programming. The opportunity advanced my professional development in youth environmental education, invasive species awareness, and community natural resource outreach, priority areas in my UF/IFAS Extension role.

I presented on WISE™ Kids, a UF/IFAS program I created designed to teach environmental literacy to youth using hands-on activities, live insects, replica skulls, and field-based demonstrations. Presenting at this conference provided international exposure for the WISE™ model, showcasing how Extension can integrate experiential learning into

scalable community education. The audience included over 1,000 educators, researchers, and environmental professionals representing more than 40 countries. Sharing a successful Extension program at an international event strengthened the visibility of Cooperative Extension and demonstrated how local programs can address global education needs and trends.

The conference theme, "Forward Together," highlighted collaboration and shared leadership across community, education, and governmental sectors. The keynote sessions focused on global environmental challenges, climate literacy, and community resilience. These presentations reinforced the role Extension plays in connecting science-based information with public education and showed how similar programs are being utilized worldwide. The sessions I attended focused on youth engagement, invasive species communication, outdoor learning environments, and nature-based education. These topics strengthened my understanding of current international approaches, tools, and messaging strategies that can be adapted to Extension programming.

A major takeaway was the emphasis on improving evaluation and documenting program impact. Several

sessions shared new strategies for measuring behavior change, stewardship outcomes, and youth learning. These methods will be applied to WISE™ programming and other natural resource initiatives to improve reporting and demonstrate impact to county government, leadership, and partners. This aligns directly with the NACAA objective of improving the effectiveness of Extension programs through enhanced educational delivery and evaluation.

I was also able to build connections with environmental education professionals around the world. Many are implementing models like WISE™, and these contacts will support resource sharing, joint programming, and future partnerships. These collaborations help extend Extension's reach and leadership capacity, another core NACAA objective. The conference also reinforced the importance of hands-on learning, accessibility in program design, and engaging underserved communities; elements I will continue to integrate into Extension programs.

The conference provided a strong return on investment. For a single registration cost of approximately $300 and no travel, lodging, or meal expenses, I gained access to more than 40 hours of international programming, professional development, and networking. I am already applying ideas from the conference into youth programs, volunteer training, curriculum development, and evaluation strategies. The knowledge gained will continue to improve Extension programming and community outreach. This represents a cost-efficient investment with a multiplier effect on future programming.

I have begun incorporating lessons learned into upcoming WISE™ and youth environmental education programs. The content and evaluation methods gained from the conference will support improved curriculum design, engagement strategies, and documentation of community impact. I plan to share several strategies with colleagues through future Extension trainings, regional meetings, and natural resource programming efforts. These improvements will enhance our ability to communicate outcomes to decision-makers and stakeholders while delivering high-quality programs to the public.

Attending the NAAEE Conference met the educational goals of the NACAA Scholarship by enhancing leadership skills, expanding subject-matter knowledge, and improving program delivery. The international platform strengthened the visibility of WISE™ programming and provided information and tools that will benefit Extension programming in Sumter County and across Florida. The conference offered a strong return on investment and will continue to support the mission of Cooperative Extension and NACAA by building community capacity, increasing environmental literacy, and advancing natural resource education.

WANT ASSISTANCE TO UNDERWRITE YOUR COSTS FOR ATTENDING THE AM/PIC? HERE'S ONE WAY TO DO THAT....PARTICIPATE IN THE NACAA INCENTIVE PROGRAM

- $2,000 – $4,999 level: AM/PIC registration reimbursement (Approx. value $450) for one individual with opportunity to use it at any one of the next three AM/PICs and write-up in ***The County Agent*** magazine.

- $5,000 - $9,999: AM/PIC registration (as above) plus $1000 for the state association in the first year of sponsorship and write-up in ***The County Agent*** magazine.

- Sponsorships above $10,000: AM/PIC registration (as above) plus $2500 for the state association in the first year of sponsorship and write-up in ***The County Agent*** magazine.

NACAA New Zealand Agriculture and Cultural Study Tour

Ginger D Fenton, PhD, Dairy Educator, Penn State Extension

A trip to New Zealand has long been an item on my bucket list, so when the opportunity to participate in an agricultural tour arose, I was all in! While the tour focused on agriculture, we were able to experience the culture through our knowledgeable tour guide, seasoned bus drivers, and visit to Te Puia Whakarewarewa, where we were immersed in Maori traditions.

Two pervading themes that echoed throughout our trip were energy savings and biosecurity. Both are viewed differently in New Zealand than in the United States. Our tour group was prepped in advance of the trip that the Kiwis take biosecurity very seriously. In my experience, they do when visitors enter the country. We were greeted by the "beagle brigade" in Customs to ensure that no one brought any food or other agricultural items into the country. However, once in New Zealand, most of the farms we visited lacked additional biosecurity measures, though one dairy required us to wear disposable booties as we tramped through the lush, green paddocks. At the time of our visit, New Zealand was at the end of an ideal grazing season, with sufficient moisture and warm temperatures.

The notion of conserving energy was apparent in almost every aspect of our tour, including their dairy production practices, which were of great interest to me as a dairy extension educator. We arrived in Auckland, where we had time to explore the harbor and take in the 53 dormant volcanic cones in the area. On Day 2, we started our exploration of agriculture with a tour of a Tatua Dairy Cooperative manufacturing facility. The company relies on just three milk trucks to haul its milk because the 100 plus members are located within a 12 km (7.5 mi) radius of the facility. Tatua has a unique business model with a focus on specialty products such as lactoferrin, caseinates, whey protein concentrate, and products specifically packaged for retail and food service. The cows in the herds that ship to Tatua are all dried off at the end of May until the beginning of July, which allows the plant down time to perform maintenance. Upon leaving the plant, we traveled a very short distance to a cooperative member's farm where we visited his parlor and walked some of his paddocks to view the Holstein Friesian X Jerseys cows (aka "kiwi crosses"). We started to notice there are few to no barns on farms as the animals are always grazing. While at Tatua, we also began to understand the remuneration system for milk, which is different from the U.S. and based on milk solids per kilogram. Our day concluded with a visit to a manufacturing facility for the Gallagher group, where they produce fencing and are working on a solar-powered collar for cows.

The Livestock Improvement Center, our first stop on Day 3, is responsible for the genetics of 80% of the bulls in New Zealand. Company leadership provided additional insight into the dairy industry and the driving forces behind their genetic selection, including grazing, pricing structure, methane reduction, heat tolerance, and the desire to conserve energy and water through breeding for more compact, efficient animals used in production agriculture.

Cows in a paddock wearing Holter collars.

Before leaving the North Island, we toured a kiwi farm and sampled ice cream made from red, green, and golden kiwis. Rangitaiki Station is a state-owned enterprise where sheep, beef cattle, red deer, and dairy cattle are raised. The farm's agronomy program was described as challenging as most crops are produced over a 4-month period with winter crops including

Grape vines at Mt Rosa Winery in Gibbston, NZ.

swedes and kale in the rotation for the paddocks. In the afternoon, we departed for Christchurch on the South Island.

The first visit was to Bradley Fields, where certified seed for mixed crops, including wheat, malting barley, and a dozen types of vegetables, are raised. The farm owner explained that the hedges throughout the countryside were intended to provide protection from the wind. The PĀMU Landcorp, a state-owned enterprise, managed the farm that was our next stop. At this farm, we experienced the application of Holter technology, a solar-powered virtual fencing system. The farm manager programs this technology to move the dairy herd to the parlor for milking at a certain time by systematically shifting the paddock access closer to the milking shed.

Our final destination was Queenstown, a popular, scenic lake town nestled in the mountains. An afternoon ride on the Skyline gondola provided incredible views. On our final tour day, we visited Mt. Rosa Winery, where we tasted wine and cheeses. The TSS Earnslaw ferried our group to the Walter Peak High Country Farm, a remote working farm that offered a delectable buffet and a sheep-herding demonstration.

This trip was a tremendous career-enrichment opportunity, offering exposure to alternative agricultural production practices. Thank you to NACAA for supporting me and allowing me this opportunity.

Mountain view from Lake Wakatipu in Queenstown, NZ.

Looking for a different Extension Position?

DID YOU KNOW … NACAA has a job postings board on our website found at:

https://www.nacaa.com/job-openings

Check it out!

JCEP-Extension Leadership Conference (ELC) February 3-6, 2026, Savannah, GA

Jennifer Werlin, University of Idaho

Conference Summary
The Joint Council of Extension Professional's (JCEP)-Extension Leadership Conference (ELC) provided a valuable opportunity to strengthen my leadership skills, enhance my communication strategies, and explore emerging issues shaping the future of Extension work. The sessions I attended directly support my ongoing professional development and my ability to effectively lead programs, staff, and partnerships. Below is a highlight of some of the sessions that I found to be valuable for my professional development.

Leadership Development and Conflict Management
Several sessions, as well as the poster presentations focused on improving leadership effectiveness and management practices. A session led by a University of Wyoming educator explored five conflict management styles: Owl (collaborating), Fox (compromising), Teddy Bear (accommodating), Shark (competing), and Turtle (avoiding). Through this framework, I increased self-awareness when dealing with conflict. It will help me be more intentional and adaptable in conflict situations.

I also attended a session on navigating difficult conversations presented by educators from The Ohio State University. This session provided practical tools for understanding communication codes, using constructive language to resolve conflict, and recognizing different levels of conflict. These strategies will strengthen my ability to manage challenging conversations with professionalism and clarity.

Improving Communication Practices
A session on improving email communication offered practical strategies to enhance clarity, tone, and efficiency in written correspondence. Given the volume of communication required in Extension work, these tools will help reduce misunderstandings, improve responsiveness, and model effective professional communication within my teams and partnerships.

Artificial Intelligence in Extension
A forward-focused session examined the use of artificial intelligence (A.I.) in Extension. Presenters discussed risks, ethical considerations, and opportunities for improving efficiency, programming, and teaching. I learned how the Extension Foundation is developing recommendations and guardrails to support responsible A.I. adoption across universities. This session reinforced the importance of thoughtfully integrating innovation while maintaining Extension's commitment to trusted research-based information.

Conference Presentation and Professional Engagement
I had a 25-minute "Skill Building" presentation accepted for the conference titled "Recharge, Reset, and Lead: Bringing the Power of Sabbaticals and the Sabbatical Mindset into Everyday Leadership." I collaborated with five interdisciplinary colleagues from the University of Idaho and Utah State University and presented with one of these colleagues. The session allowed me to share lessons learned, provide guidance to colleagues considering sabbaticals, and demonstrate how intentional sabbaticals can strengthen Extension leadership capacity.

Attending the conference exposed me to new ideas and strategies for effectively managing Extension programs and responsibilities while expanding my national professional network. I represented several JCEP organizations, including NACAA. I hold a leadership role within Idaho NACAA as their Early-Career Committee Chair.

Having previously attended two JCEP conferences during my nearly ten-year Extension career, I continue to find national engagement invaluable for understanding broader Extension initiatives and bringing resources back to Idaho. This conference further strengthened my leadership capacity and introduced ideas and innovations I will apply in my work. I will share knowledge gained with state associations, colleagues, county staff, and the board of county commissioners.

Thank you so much for the NACAA Education Foundation Scholarship! The scholarship helps me immensely as I navigate county and state budget cuts. I will be sure to tell others about the benefits one can receive by donating to NACAA and how it creates eligibility for scholarships in return. This is a great program and opportunity!
On the next page are some photos from the trip.


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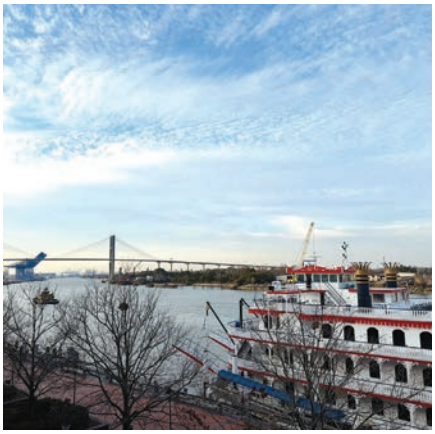

New Zealand: Land of Milk and Honey and Kiwis

Margaret Quaassdorff, Cornell Cooperative Extension

New Zealand…land of milk, honey, and kiwis (the bird, the people, and the fruit) has long held a certain mystique for dairy folks. We've all heard the stories: cows grazing lush pastures year-round, parlors built to be taken to the herd instead of the other way around, and a production system that feels both simple and highly strategic. But seeing it firsthand brings those ideas into sharp focus. On the NACAA New Zealand Tour in Feb 2026, I had the chance to step into that system, and learn how intentionally everything is aligned.

In New Zealand, it's not about volume, it's about components. Fat and protein drive dairy value. In fact, producing excess fluid milk without components can be penalized. That might sound foreign to many of us, but it makes perfect sense when you consider that the island nation exports most of its dairy products to Asia and Europe, and shipping water isn't economical. A visit to a processing facility reinforced the point that though regular dairy products (fluid milk, cheese, yogurt, cream) are produced, milk buyers are focused on efficiently processing fat and protein into the higher value products of specialty proteins, peptones, and natural flavorings.

That focus on efficiency is carried through to genetics and herd management. The "KiwiCross" cow is a cross between a Holstein and Jersey bred for grazing ability, moderate size, fertility, and high component output with minimal inputs. At New Zealand farmer-owned agritech cooperative organization, Livestock Improvement Corporation (LIC), there's a strong emphasis on seasonal breeding. Farms operate on a tight annual calving schedule, with most cows calving within a narrow window. This calls for excellent repro management (without the use of hormones) for a concentrated breeding season supported by coordinated efforts in semen collection and technician deployment. It's a system truly built on precision timing and teamwork. New Zealand's pasture-based dairy breeders are also proactively adapting their genetics to stay ahead of climate warming challenges by strategically incorporating the "slick gene" into more dairy sires. While historically more common in tropical breeds, this naturally occurring genetic trait results in cattle with shorter, smoother hair coats that are better able to dissipate heat, helping them maintain intake, production, and fertility under heat stress.

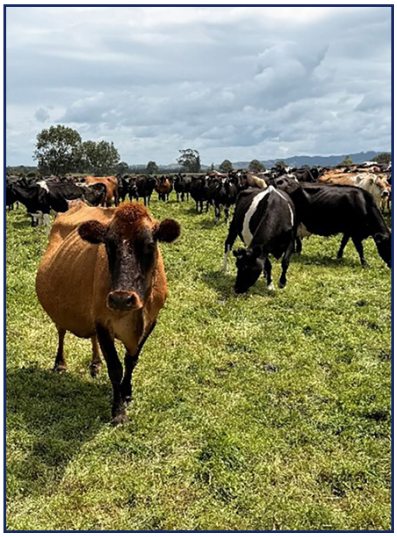

Figure 1. "KiwiCross" cows on pasture.

Figure 2 A KiwiCross cow with the "slick gene" (right) stands next to KiwiCross with a regular haircoat.

Cows are typically moved twice daily (after milking) to fresh paddocks to maintain pasture quality and intake. Though labor-intensive, technological tools are changing the game, using solar-powered, GPS-enabled smart collars to create "virtual fences" allowing farmers to manage, move and track cattle 24/7. Instead of opening gates, farmers can shift cows between paddocks with a tap on their phone. The trained cows respond to system sound and pulse cues, and because they're already creatures of routine, adoption is surprisingly smooth. Beyond grazing, these collars also provide real-time tracking and health monitoring, offering a level of oversight that fits neatly into pasture-based systems. Hoof health issues in cows are minimal due to

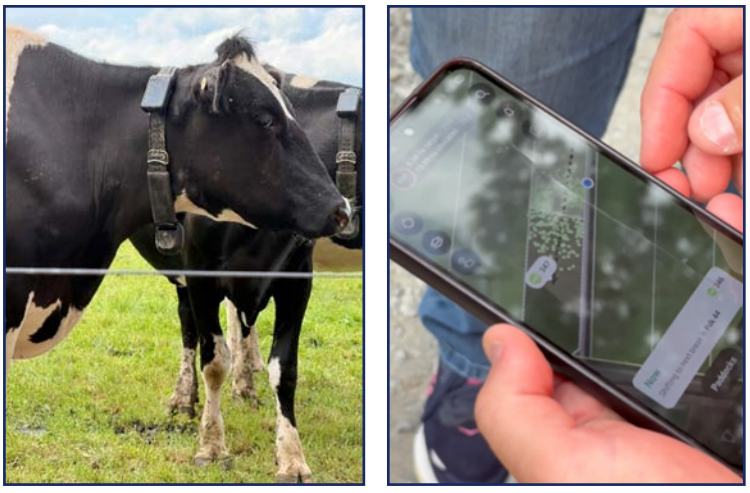

Figure 3 Cow wearing Halter's invisible fence collar and phone app to move and track cows from paddock to paddock.

regular movement on natural surfaces promoting proper wear and reducing the need for frequent trimming. The biggest pressure point I learned was around calving, when nearly the entire herd calves within a short timeframe. Close attention is critical for successful calvings and for managing fresh cow health, including metabolic issues and mastitis risk.

Another subtle but striking observation was the overall tidiness and organization on farms, in processing plants, and across the broader industry. Whether influenced by export expectations, global partnerships, or simply a culture of doing things well, it's clear that attention to detail matters. New Zealand dairy isn't about pushing for maximum milk per cow, it's about optimizing the whole system for efficiency, market demand, and available resources.

No visit to New Zealand would be complete without mentioning manuka honey, one of the country's most unique and valuable agricultural products. Produced by bees that forage on the native manuka bush, this honey is known for its distinct flavor and natural antibacterial properties. It's graded based on its potency, often labeled with a UMF (Unique Manuka Factor) rating, and is marketed globally as a premium health product. You'll find it infused into yogurts, paired with cheeses, or enjoyed all on its own.

Figure 3 New Zealand Manuka Honey, know for its health benefits, produced by bees that forage on native manuka bushes.

Figure 4 Did you know kiwifruit grow on vines? New Zealand exports several varieties today, including the golden kiwi, which is sweeter and less fuzzy than its green counterpart. Named for their resemblance to the kiwi bird, kiwifruit is packed with vitamin C and fiber, and you'll often find them stateside in stores like Costco or Sam's Club. (They are also good in ice cream.)

History behind the name "Kiwi".

The kiwi bird, a small, flightless native species, has long been a national symbol of New Zealand. During World War I, New Zealand soldiers were nicknamed "Kiwis," and the name stuck, eventually becoming a proud identifier for all New Zealanders. The fruit came later; originally known as the Chinese gooseberry, it was rebranded as "kiwifruit" in the mid-20th century for export marketing. It was named for its fuzzy brown skin, which resembles the kiwi bird. So, while the bird came first, today all three (the people, the fruit, and the bird) share the name and a strong association with the country.

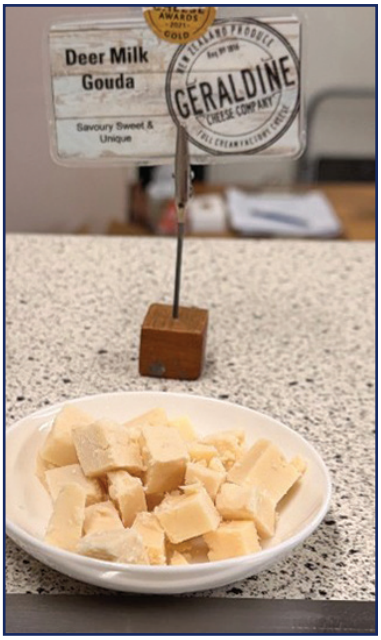

Figure 5. There are the extras that make a trip memorable. I had the chance to try deer milk cheese, something I have never encountered before. Small-batch gouda, slightly reminiscent of cheddar; it paired beautifully with fruit and crackers.

2026 JCEP Extension Leadership Conference (ELC)
Savannah, Georgia
February 4–5, 2026

Sarah DeBour, County Director & ANR Program Coordinator
Iowa State University Extension and Outreach – Cerro Gordo County

The JCEP Extension Leadership Conference (ELC) provides opportunities to strengthen leadership competencies, expand national professional networks, and enhance the impact of Extension programming. Attending advances Cerro Gordo County ISU Extension and Outreach goals by supporting leadership development, program innovation, and connection with national Extension trends. From my attendance this February I can confirm that the conference was very high quality and tailored to extension agents' growth with others in the profession in different areas. It amazed me that we all have the same drive to do good for the people in our communities even with the challenges that we are facing for property tax reform bills that support extension in many states across the country.

My goals for attending included:
- Strengthening leadership skills relevant to county operations and program coordination
- Gathering new strategies for workforce wellness, AI integration, and organizational communication
- Connecting with national colleagues to gain insights and best practices
- Bringing back tools to enhance staff engagement and county-level programming

The 2026 ELC featured keynote speakers, concurrent workshops, poster presentations, and networking opportunities, all centered on visionary leadership, innovation, and workforce resilience. Keynote Speakers included Dr. Jaye Hamby, NIFA Director — national insights on the future of Extension and federal priorities; Nick "Ranger Nick" Fuhrman — humor-infused keynote on teaching and leadership; and Tony McIntosh – Ten Leadership Principles I Learned from a Coffee Bean. I enjoyed the federal priority update we were given from Dr. Hamby. I can see that Cerro Gordo County is aligned with the national initiatives in provide agricultural education on careers for young people and the support we are giving farm families on transition due to the age of farmers nationally. We have opportunities in our country to find ways to support small farmers and meat producers, expanding markets, protecting farms from invasion/disease pressure, and in AI education for 4-H Members.

I served as a presenter for the session, Breaking the Burnout Cycle: Strategies for Personal and Professional Resilience, delivering a workshop addressing burnout within the Extension workforce. The session focused on helping professionals recognize early signs of burnout, understand systemic contributors, and adopt sustainable practices to support well-being and performance. I had 46 people in attendance to my session at 1:00 PM that day. This was developed during my NACAA leadership academy group last year with other colleagues.

I attended many breakout sessions throughout the conference, and several stood out as especially applicable to my work. Cultivating Wellness for Extension Leaders and Professionals: Building a Resilient and Supported Workforce offered practical strategies for strengthening organizational well-being and supporting staff resilience in high-demand Extension environments. Small Gestures, Big Impact: The Leadership Power of Hospitality highlighted how simple, intentional acts of welcome can elevate leadership effectiveness and foster stronger relationships. I also appreciated There's a Reason They Aren't Reading Your Emails, which provided actionable communication techniques for crafting clearer, more engaging messages that cut through inbox overload. Together, these sessions offered meaningful tools I can apply immediately in my county and program leadership roles.

I most enjoyed the session called "Exploring AI Futures in the Land-Grant System". The session highlighted how artificial intelligence is rapidly influencing Extension work, from program delivery to data-informed decision-making. Presenters Dr. Aaron Weibe, Mark Locklear, Dr. Dhruti Patel, and David Warren emphasized both the opportunities AI offers—such as improved efficiency and expanded access—and the need for ethical, equitable implementation across land-grant institutions. We worked together at our tables

with people from Alabama, Ohio, Illinois, and Utah. This was the highlight of my time at the conference because the AI is so new and the rules of the road have not been established fast enough to keep up with its use. From the group of speakers, I suspect that guidelines will eventually be established for universities in the future.

This conference was truly a great fit for my professional goals and roles. Even the downtime was very valuable to get to know others and interact with similar interests even across program areas. Thank you to my county staff members who took care of the people in our county while I was at the conference. I sincerely appreciate the Cerro Gordo extension council and NACAA Scholarship Committee for providing the financial support that made my participation in the 2026 JCEP Extension Leadership Conference possible. Their investment in professional development allowed me to engage with national colleagues, strengthen my leadership skills, and bring back valuable insights that will directly benefit the communities and programs I serve. I am truly grateful for their continued commitment to advancing the work of Extension professionals.

Applications of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Technologies in Agricultural Development and Practice Symposium

Jason de Koff, Tennessee State University Extension

In October, I had the opportunity to travel to Dublin, Ireland to participate in the symposium, "Applications of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Technologies in Agricultural Development and Practice hosted by the journal, Advancements in Agricultural Development. The symposium featured research and discussion on how these technologies can be used in agricultural extension. In addition to adoption rates of AI and examples of chatbots developed (i.e. PeachBot, FarmerChat, iFarmWell) for use by Extension agents or farmers, there were also points made on the current gap between AI tools and the human interactions involved in extension and how this might change in the future. It was also proposed that good critical thinking skills will become even more important as AI-created material can lead to more emotion-based decision making.

There were also participants representing other agriculture and extension-based journals and the opportunity to discuss the effects of AI on publishing. As the NACAA representative on the Journal of Extension editorial board, I was able to participate and learn how other journals are handling some of these important policies for both the author and the reviewer. Currently, most journals require authors to identify how AI was used in their articles and reviewers are not allowed to use AI due to concerns about releasing unpublished material to an AI tool.

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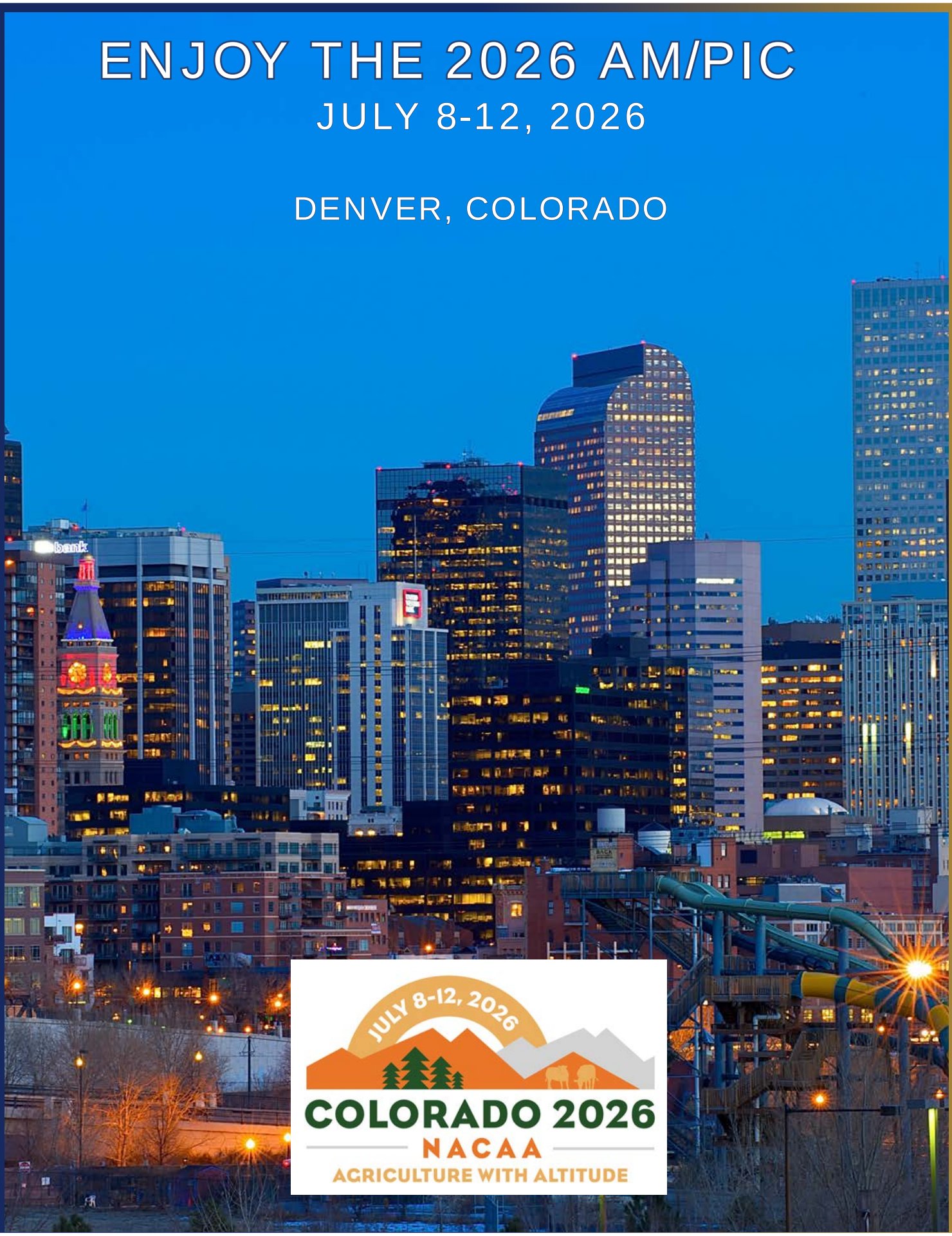

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