

# Thompson Annual Activity Report

August 2020 – April 2021

I assumed the responsibilities as the Executive Director (ED) for the Southern Association of Agricultural Experiment Station Directors (SAAESD) on August 24, 2020. The SAAESD office is hosted by the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture and is physically located in the Don Tyson Center for Agricultural Sciences Annex at the Milo J. Shult Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Fayetteville, AR.

During the last month of the third quarter and throughout the fourth quarter of 2020 the majority of my activities centered around establishing the office, connecting with relevant stakeholders, and conducting virtual visits of each of the member stations. I had several conversations with Don Jones of Cotton Incorporated regarding the history, current status, and assessments for the Cotton Winter Nursery and CottonGen. I met virtually with Steve Turner and Rachel Welborn to learn more about the SAAESD involvement with the Southern Rural Development Center and participated in three interviews for the SRDC Director. The SAAESD nominates three representatives to serve on the SRDC Board of Directors and the Technical and Operational Advisory Committee (TOAC), and I worked with the SAAESD chair to nominate two new members to the TOAC.

Two-hour virtual visits (see dates below) were conducted with the SAAESD members institutions. The goal of these visits was to learn from the directors and the SAES staff about the research priorities and strengths of each institution as well as their overall SAES structure and facilities. Discussions with the directors of Extension and communications were included in most of the visits. A document summarizing the research strengths for each institution was developed, including a follow-up survey of strengths based on the initial discussions during the virtual visits. This document identified research platforms based on areas of strength across the region and was distributed to the COOs. Strategies to initiate collaborative research among SAAESD institutions is being developed in the area of artificial intelligence.

## SAAESD Virtual Visits

|                              |          |                                  |         |
|------------------------------|----------|----------------------------------|---------|
| Virginia Tech                | Sept. 15 | University of Georgia            | Oct. 15 |
| Clemson University           | Sept. 17 | University of Tennessee          | Oct. 16 |
| Louisiana State University   | Sept. 25 | University of Kentucky           | Oct. 19 |
| University of Puerto Rico    | Sept. 25 | Texas A&M University             | Oct. 27 |
| Mississippi State University | Oct. 7   | University of the Virgin Islands | Oct. 28 |
| University of Florida        | Oct. 9   | Oklahoma State University        | Nov. 2  |
| Auburn University            | Oct. 13  | North Carolina State University  | Nov. 17 |

A significant amount of time was devoted to developing the HR documents necessary to conduct a search for the full-time Program Coordinator position who would ultimately replace two part-time positions (Donna Pearce and Cindy Conyers) at NCSU. A search and screen committee composed of myself, Donna Pearce, and Dr. Nathan McKinney reviewed applications and conducted virtual interviews of four candidates. Ms. Cindy Morley was hired as the SAAESD Program Coordinator and began work on December 1, 2020.

Much of the time during the first quarter of the new year was devoted to organizing the SAAESD office, including reviewing the NCSU financial documents and transferring the budget to the University of Arkansas. Likewise, the website and listservs were transferred from NCSU and reconfigured. We have begun a comprehensive review of the website content and are working to update and reorganize the content. A twitter account @SouthernAES was established as an initial step to employ social media on behalf of the SAAESD.

Activities in support of the region include the development and presentation of two *Best Practices for New and Emerging Directors* webinars. The first webinar entitled “Navigating the Alphabet Soup:

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Making Practical Sense of APLU” was presented on December 9, 2020 to 14 registrants from nine SAAESD institutions. The second webinar entitled “Making of the 2023 Farm Bill: Roles for SAES Directors” was presented on March 10, 2021 to 22 registrants from 13 SAAESD institutions. At least one webinar is being planned for each quarter. In December 2021, I worked with the chair to charge a working group (see below) to review and update the SAAESD strategic plan as a guiding document for SAAESD as we collectively address issues of importance to our research enterprises. The working group initially met in December and then every two weeks from January 14 to April 13 to develop a draft strategic roadmap for discussion and input at the Spring meeting.

### **SAAESD Strategic Plan Working Group**

John Davis, University of Florida

Susan Duncan, Virginia Tech

Bob Godfrey, University of the Virgin Islands

Michael Toews, University of Georgia

David White, University of Tennessee

Gary Thompson & Cindy Morley, SAAESD

Throughout this evaluation period, I’ve been working to develop the Southern Research Communicators Initiative. Initial discussions occurred with a small group of communicators, including Faith Peppers (NIFA), Ruth Borger (University Florida), and Frances “Frankie” Gould (Louisiana State University), which resulted in a small grant proposal submitted to ACE for a workshop to start this initiative. This proposal was not funded but the content served as a guide to plan a workshop at the SAAESD Spring meeting. The initial organizing group now includes Cindy Morley and Nick Kordsmeier (University of Arkansas).

Other regional activities include organizing the SAAESD Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 meetings and participating in a SERA review committee, the South Central Regional Sun Grant review panel, and the 2021 Southern Region Mini-Land-grant Meeting organizing committee. Initial contact has been made with Arkansas Secretary of Agriculture Wes Ward who is chair of the Southern Association of State Departments of Agriculture (SASDA). The SASDA Annual Meeting will be held in Arkansas this year from June 5-9, which represents an opportunity to interact with an important regional agricultural organization. I’ve also been introducing myself and engaging faculty at multistate project annual meetings. As the Association of Southern Region Extension Directors Liaison, I met with ASRED during their virtual Fall Meeting on August 26 and Spring Meeting on April 6.

National activities include providing support to Mark McGuire, ESS Policy Board of Directors representative and Marty Draper, ESS Strategic Realignment Implementation Committee representative. Other ESS activities include serving as an ED representative to the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources (FANR) staff meetings, NRSP1 Management Committee member, Diversity Catalyst Committee member, and ESS Annual Meeting organizing committee. I am continually supporting initiatives such as the Climate Change Survey, Agricultural Research Infrastructure Advocacy (ARIA), and participating in the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (FACA) Ag Research Working Group.

To conclude, I am striving to develop a positive working relationship with all of the directors and to provide timely information in response to individual requests or through group announcements. In the upcoming year, I will continue to engage the members through the New and Emerging Directors webinars and the development of research initiatives. As a group, we will complete the SAAESD Strategic Roadmap, implementing strategies through annual action plans. The office will continue to engage communicators with activities designed to enhance local research outcomes by telling the regional story. I will continue to meet with the SAAESD Executive Committee on a quarterly basis and work to update procedural documents for the organization. Nationally, I anticipate increasing my involvement in activities that will enhance and create opportunities for our members.