

Vision of Virginia

WINTER 2026



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State Officers (from left to right) Franco Abud, Georgia Grady, Alli Phillips, Kylie Bailey, and Lee Kent, posing for a photo with Dr. Rutherford at the iconic “FFA Founding Fathers” table.

by Lee Kent – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President

On October 15, 2025, Virginia Tech welcomed middle school FFA members from across the state for the VT Middle School FFA Conference. This is a day designed to inspire the next generation of agricultural leaders. My officer team and I had the privilege of assisting with the event while supporting participants throughout their day on campus.

The middle school members were full of energy and curiosity. Our team’s role was to help guide them through the experience. Throughout the day, we worked alongside the leaders of the conference to ensure everything ran smoothly. One of our main responsibilities was helping participants transition between workshops, many of which focused on leadership development, agricultural topics, and skill building. We answered questions, directed participants, and fellowshipped with students. We heard about their chapters, their SAE projects, and their goals within FFA. These conversations were some of the highlights of the day. It was exciting to see how passionate these young members already were and to know that events like the VT Middle School Conference are helping shape passion into purpose.

Serving at the conference reminded us of our times in FFA. The Middle School FFA members who attended left with new skills, new confidence, and new friends.

UPCOMING events

JUNE

8-11: VA FFA Convention

JULY

7-10: VA FFA Leadership Camp

JULY

13-16: VAAE Summer Conference

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State Officers listen as the Dean of the College, Lisa Jordan Powell, explains the greenhouse's functions and highlights student projects in the newly developed facility.

by **Danika Landreth** – VA FFA 2025-2026 *State Sentinel*

On October 22nd, State Officers Alli Phillips, Georgia Grady, and Danika Landreth attended the Celebrating Women in Agriculture forum at Sweet Briar College. The event included a guided campus tour highlighting Sweet Briar's agriculture programs, including its state-of-the-art greenhouse, renowned equestrian center, and commitment to sustainable agricultural practices. Attendees also had opportunities to network with women from across the agriculture industry. The forum featured a plenary session and a panel led by prominent leaders in Virginia's agriculture.

As an all-women's college known for its strong agricultural focus and nationally recognized equestrian program, Sweet Briar College provided an ideal setting for the forum. State officers had the opportunity to speak with Secretary of Agriculture Matt Lohr, Dean of the College Lisa Jordan Powell, and President of the Alumni Board Mary Pope M. Hutson, as well as college representatives and women supporting agriculture throughout the state. The panel featured women from diverse backgrounds who shared valuable insights from their careers, highlighting both professional achievements and personal challenges.

Panelists included Heidi L. Hertz, principal at Cozen O'Connor Public Strategies and a Virginia Tech graduate, who discussed her work shaping agricultural and forestry policy; Natalia Zappernick, Director of Horticulture at Babylon Micro-Farms and an Ohio State University graduate, who shared her perspective on building sustainable agriculture systems; Muriel Forrest, born in Ireland and Co-Founder of Wheatland Farms, who spoke about therapeutic riding and



Jessica Walters, of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, shares her surprising career change during the panel discussion.



State Officers are pictured with Secretary of Agriculture Matt Lohr and President of the Alumni Board, Mary Pope M. Hutson, during the event's social.

para-equestrian dressage; and Jessica Walters of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, also a Virginia Tech graduate, who reflected on working in a male-dominated laboratory field. The event concluded with a social, allowing state officers to continue conversations with Sweet Briar staff and students while celebrating the impact of women in agriculture.



AMONG THOUSANDS *ONE* Purpose



Madelyn Gilkeson, from Wilbur S. Pence, receiving her award for Food Products and Processing.

by Georgia Grady – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Treasurer
and Franco Abud – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President

The National FFA Convention was held in Indianapolis, Indiana, from October 29th to November 1st, 2025. Over 73,000 FFA members gathered in Lucas Oil Stadium and the Indianapolis Convention Center. Virginia FFA engaged in a variety of contests, workshops, and laughs!

Virginia FFA thrived through the National FFA Chorus and Talent. Daniel Ross from Basset FFA was selected to be a part of the chorus. This amazing opportunity unites musicians from across the country to perform for FFA members. Daniel Ross said, “The National FFA Chorus showed me that FFA is much more than just farming.

The program proved to me that FFA is about connection within a trusted community.”

Additionally, three Virginia FFA Members competed in the National FFA Talent Competition. Jack Billings, Leah Moore, and Grayson Long displayed their talent throughout a series of performances during the convention. Grayson Long performed her clogging routine and placed top 10 in the nation!

From public speaking to forestry, Virginia FFA competed nationally in a variety of contests. The Appomatax Veterinary Science Team was gold-



Parker Young, from Turner Ashby, receiving his award for placing sixth in the Environmental Science/Natural Resource category for the Agriscience Fair.



The current State Officer team, with most of the officers from the 2024-2025 State Officer team, after the past Officers received their American degrees.



Henley Higgs and Molly Hylton from Wilbur S. Pence Middle after their 4th place finish in Social Science.

rated and placed 5th in the nation. Participants Autumn Harris, Virginia Covington, Savannah Jones, and Nicole Ballagh worked hard through a series of practicums and tests about veterinary science. Nicole Ballagh shared, “The contest made me more aware of what responsibilities veterinarians have, along with learning species-specific conditions that affect animals.” Virginia FFA made its mark through its outstanding and hardworking competitors.

Proficiency awards allow FFA members to display their SAEs. Savannah Jones from the Appomattox FFA chapter was awarded as an Agricultural Education Proficiency National Finalist. Savannah’s SAE “consisted of three parts: ag ed programs in my local school system, educational director at Dark Leaf Farm, and Virginia Cooperative Extension programs. I helped lead and assisted with programs and events around the state.” She first had to apply

at the state level. After being selected as the winner for Virginia FFA, her application was judged nationally. Due to her diligent labor regarding her SAE, she was announced as one of the top 4 finalists and invited to attend the National FFA Convention.

Virginia also excelled on the stage with the Agriscience Fair, with 6 top 10 finishes. Olivia Hartman, from Turner Ashby, placed 10th in the category of Food Products and Processing. Also placing 10th was Rhiannon Mongold from Turner Ashby in Animal Systems. Placing 8th was Madelyn Gilkeson in Food Products and Processing from Wilbur S. Pence. Then, Parker Young placed 6th in the category of Environmental Service/Natural Resource. Parker Young is also from Turner Ashby. Finally, Virginia also had two 4th place finishes: Henley Higgs and Molly Hylton from Wilbur S. Pence Middle, and Noah Barb and Leah Siler from J. Frank Hilyard Middle. Henley and Molly placed 4th in Social Science, while Noah and Leah placed 4th in Animal Systems. Congrats to all of these members!

On the last day of the National Convention, the American Degrees were awarded. The American Degree is the highest award an FFA member can receive, with less than 1% of all FFA members receiving this distinguished award. Some of the requirements for the American Degree include 50 hours of community service, a SAE project, and the applicant must have graduated from high school at least 12 months prior to the National Convention where they would receive the award. All of this, as well as the other requirements that are not listed, go to show how much of an honor it is to receive this award. This year, Virginia had 51 members receive their American degree! Additionally, earlier in the week, honorary American degrees were awarded, and these candidates had to be nominated by their



Virginia FFA’s talent participants, from left to right, Jack Billings, Leah Moore, and Grayson Long, posing for a photo!

home state for their service to agriculture on the national level. This year, Virginia had 7 people receive their Honorary American Degree and those people were Eric Bond, Stephanie Emmel, Steve Evans, Heather McAndrew, Jeff Stout, Governor Glenn Youngkin, and First Lady Suzanne Youngkin. Virginia agriculture and FFA wouldn't be the same without these people!

While all of the fun of National Convention was happening, the Virginia State Officers had the unique opportunity to be a part of the National Delegate Process. The State Officers arrived in Indianapolis a few days earlier to take part in committee meetings in their respective committees. The committees this year were Student Input on Strategic Direction for 2027-2031, Enhancement of Marketing

and Messaging, Evaluation of Degree Program Structure, Cultivating Growth of Leadership Programs, Expanding Belonging and Engagement, and Reviewing the Process of the Delegate Experience. The Virginia State Officers were just a few of the 475 delegates from all 50 states and 2 territories. Throughout National Convention, the State Officers participated in committee meetings, small group discussions, and business sessions to prepare a list of suggestions for the National FFA Board of Directors.

Throughout all of National Convention, new friends were made, amazing memories were created, and agriculture and leadership were celebrated. National Convention is always an unforgettable experience for everyone involved, and this year was no different!



Savannah Jones holding her Proficiency National Finalist medal for her SAE in Agricultural Education.



The Appomatax Veterinary Science Team, including Autumn Harris, Virginia Covington, Savannah Jones, and Nicole Ballagh, with their Gold-Winning Plaque.



BENEATH THE Surface

CULTIVATING TALENT AT THE STATE SOILS CONTEST

Members diving right into the soil and looking at the distinct color differences from the different layers.

by Kylie Bailey – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Secretary

The Virginia FFA State Soils Contest brought together dedicated students from across the state to showcase their knowledge and hands-on skills in soil science. Hosted on a working farm, the event allowed participants to apply classroom learning in real world agricultural settings.

Throughout the year, students prepared extensively for the contest by practicing how to identify soil textures, structures, colors, and horizons. They also learned how to evaluate soil health and overall quality skills that are essential to both agriculture and environmental

stewardship. This preparation required patience and a strong understanding of the role soil plays in supporting crops and ecosystems. One of the highlights of the competition was the hands-on experience. Gabbie Garlock from the Broadway FFA Chapter shared that her favorite part was working directly in the soil pits. “I really enjoy the process of going into the pit and testing the texture of the soils.”

During the contest the teams rotated through multiple stations, carefully observing and evaluating different soil types under real field conditions.

Each station challenged participants to think critically and rely on their training to make accurate assessments. The competition was engaging and fair, helping students build both confidence and practical skills. The contest also emphasized real life agricultural applications by connecting soil evaluation to the work of farmers who regularly monitor soil health. “You do many different types of soil testing like real farmers!” said Olivia Tarbell from the Fort Defiance chapter. This connection helped students better understand how soil science directly impacts agricultural success.

JUNIOR INDIVIDUALS

- 1st - Sierra Stieringer, *Strasburg*
- 2nd - Alison Moxley, *Strasburg*
- 3rd - McKenzie Wymernz, *Strasburg*
- 4th - Colton Woodson, *Nelson County Middle*
- 5th - Caleb Cox, *Amherst Middle*

SENIOR INDIVIDUALS

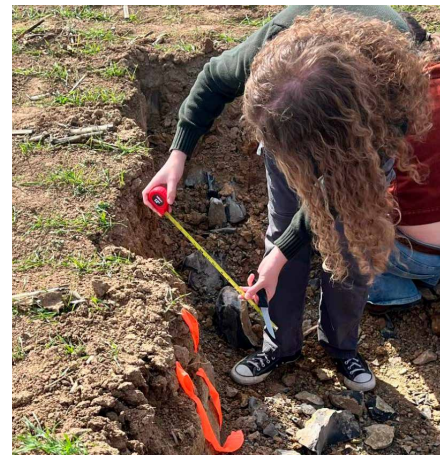
- 1st - Olivia Fisher, *Strasburg*
- 2nd - Piper Dellineer, *Strasburg*
- 3rd - Chloe Rouse, *Holston*
- 4th - Kyle Evans, *Nelson County*
- 5th - Avery Caffrey, *Broadway*

JUNIOR TEAM

- 1st - Strasburg
- 2nd - John S. Battle
- 3rd - Amherst Middle
- 4th - Read Mountain
- 5th - Nelson County Middle

SENIOR TEAM

- 1st - Strasburg
- 2nd - Broadway
- 3rd - Holston
- 4th - John S. Battle
- 5th - Nelson County



Student measuring the soil consistency.



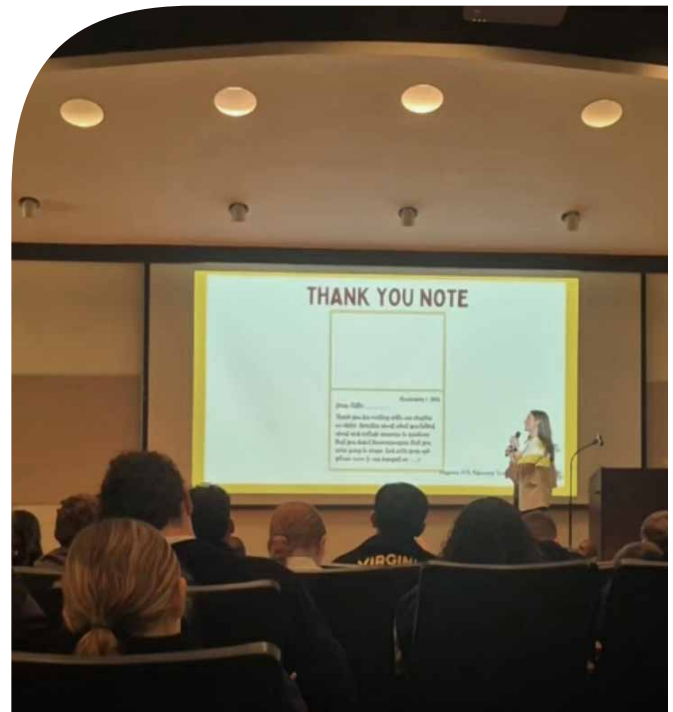
Students in the Northern Area developing an Advocacy Plan.

by Alli Phillips – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Reporter

Virginia FFA hosted six advocacy trainings across the six areas in preparation for the third annual FFA Day at the Capitol. These trainings were held across the state and gave members the opportunity to learn how to effectively share their voice and represent agricultural education. With nearly 1000 total participants, the sessions showed strong interest from members statewide who are eager to advocate for FFA and the agriculture industry.

Each training was led by Tess Seibel and focused on breaking down the advocacy process in a creative and engaging way. Participants learned how advocacy can be compared to making a movie, emphasizing the importance of planning, teamwork, and delivering a clear message to the intended audience. This unique approach helped members better understand how their voices can make an impact.

These trainings played an important role in preparing members for Day at the Capitol. By the end of the sessions, participants were better equipped with the knowledge and confidence needed to advocate for FFA, agricultural education, and the future of agriculture in Virginia.



Tess Seibel leading a training in the Blue Ridge Area.



Virginia State Officers watched the infamous “Enter Sandman” from the sidelines on Lane Stadium.



VIRGINIA FFA TAKES ON VIRGINIA TECH

Game Day

by Emma Alexander – VA FFA 2025-2026 State President

Virginia FFA proudly partnered with the Virginia Farm Bureau for an exciting Virginia Tech game day experience, bringing over 500 FFA members together on campus. Members filled the stands, representing chapters from across the Commonwealth and showcasing the strength and unity of Virginia FFA.

The collaboration highlighted a shared commitment to agriculture, leadership, and advocacy. Throughout the day, members connected with Farm Bureau representatives, learning more about the importance of supporting Virginia farmers and telling agriculture’s story beyond the classroom.

The partnership demonstrated how industry and student organizations can work together to invest in the next generation of agricultural leaders.

Beyond the game itself, the event created meaningful connections and lasting memories for members while increasing the visibility of agriculture on a large public stage. The Virginia Tech game day served as a powerful example of how collaboration between Virginia FFA and the Virginia Farm Bureau continues to strengthen agriculture and rural communities across Virginia.



FROM COLONIAL STREETS TO
County Seats:
THE 2025 VIRGINIA FARM BUREAU CONVENTION

Governor Glenn Youngkin and First Lady Suzanne Youngkin with their Honorary American Degrees presented by the 25-26 Virginia FFA State Officer team.

by Franco Abud – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President

Surrounded by passionate reenactors and historic buildings, Williamsburg lit up for the 2025 Virginia Farm Bureau Convention! On December 2nd-3rd, 2025, Farm Bureau members from across the Commonwealth united for competitions, workshops, and valuable delegate sessions. Amidst all the exciting activities, a beautiful community developed throughout the convention.

Virginia Farm Bureau has almost 137,000 members. Their issues, stories, and successes need to be shared. This is done through the Meeting of Voting Delegates. Each of the 88 counties represented by Farm Bureau has a certain number of voting delegates. One mission of the voting delegates is to create the policy book for 2026, which includes critical agricultural issues that Virginia Farm Bureau will advocate for. According to Virginia Farm Bureau, “These policies are the result of our grassroots approach to advocacy. Each policy began as a single idea at the county level and was refined through thoughtful

debate and careful consideration. The result is a comprehensive framework that truly reflects the collective wisdom of our policy makers from every corner of Virginia.” Additionally, caucus meetings were held where members from districts could share their opinions with producers from their area. The



Virginia FFA State Sentinel Danika Landreth calling bids during the Young Farmers and Ranchers auction.



The Virginia State Officers listening to the Meeting of Voting Delegates.

Meeting of Voting delegates is a beautiful experience that puts farmers’ voices in action!

During a delegate session, Governor Youngkin made an exciting visit! He shared an inspiring speech where he urged the public to share their voice,

as it can be the difference that *makes* a difference. The 2025-2026 Virginia FFA State Officer team excitedly awarded the Governor and First Lady, Suzanne S. Youngkin, with their Honorary American Degree. As the first gubernatorial couple to ever receive this award, it is due to their incredible commitment to supporting agricultural education throughout their years of service.

The two-day convention includes a series of competitions and workshops. Virginia FFA State Reporter, Alli Phillips,



The 25-26 Virginia FFA State Officer team awarding former Culpeper Middle Advisor Stephanie Emmel with her Honorary American Degree.



The 25-26 Virginia FFA State Officer team posing with Newly Appointed Virginia Secretary of Agriculture Katie Frazier.

competed in the final four of the Discussion Meet Contest. Participants are given an agricultural issue and must discuss its impact and solutions. The State Officer team also engaged in a variety of workshops. The Mind Your Melon foundation reminded participants that “they are not a burden, and there are people in your life who care about you” while discussing mental health in the agriculture industry. Kelly Leighton and Dr. Amanda Weakley-Scott discussed how to use trust to tackle tricky conversations about agriculture.

When this convention began, every Farm Bureau member walked in with ideas. Following delegate sessions, workshops, and community, they left as stronger individuals. The Virginia Farm Bureau family is kind and excited to welcome others! You can become involved by competing in the youth discussion meet competition or getting involved in your county’s Farm Bureau!



Virginia State Officers posing with the staff of Virginia’s Department of Agriculture.



FFA STATE OFFICERS
Celebrate
THE SEASON IN D.C.

Jon Pardi hits the stage with his Christmas song “400 Horsepower Sleigh,” firing up the crowd.

by **Danika Landreth** – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Sentinel

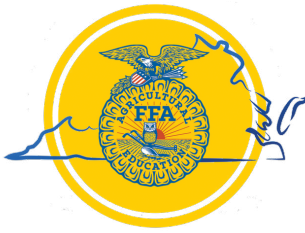
On December 4th, State Officers Emma Alexander, Franco Abud, Georgia Grady, and Danika Landreth had the opportunity to attend the 2025 National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony in Washington, D.C. Despite the harsh cold weather, the officers thoroughly enjoyed the experience alongside numerous distinguished attendees. The event featured remarks from President Donald Trump, live performances by several musical acts, including Jon Pardi and the United States Marine Band, and the breathtaking moment when the National Christmas Tree was illuminated.



President Donald Trump highlights the importance and long-standing tradition of this nationwide event.



FFA State Officers prepare to take their seats for the 2025 National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony.



The Room

WHERE IT HAPPENS: A LEGISLATIVE ROUNDTABLE IN VIRGINIA'S 5TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT



Members of Virginia's 5th congressional district engage in a tour of Riverview Farms by Steve Hopkins, Garrett Hopkins, and Blake Hopkins.



by **Franco Abud** – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President

On November 24, 2025, State Officers Emma Alexander and Franco Abud joined Representative McGuire and agricultural leaders from Virginia's 5th Congressional District for a legislative roundtable in Louisa County. Held at Southern Revere Cellars, the event brought together Farm Bureau members, including Louisa Farm Bureau President Charles "CT" Thiemann, Louisa Cooperative Extension Agent Charles Rosson, Louisa 4-H representatives, and other agriculturists across the region.

The day included a roundtable discussion followed by local farm tours, giving Representative McGuire the opportunity to hear directly from producers about the challenges they face. These conversations highlighted the importance of agriculture education, recent agricultural issues, and policies that allow rural communities and agricultural programs to continue to thrive.

This experience shared the perspective of Virginia FFA and the issues impacting agricultural education across the Commonwealth. Austyn Frame, a 4-H and FFA member from Louisa, got to share that "While eating with Representative McGuire, Lily Hix and I got to discuss various topics with him. For example, we discussed how Virginia passed a law (§ 22.1-207.7) that allows for 4-H activities to count as field trips. This law enables other 4-H members to participate in valuable experiences without fear of penalty due to absence, which was a beneficial outcome."

Events like this help ensure that voices are represented and that local politicians understand the role agriculture education plays in growing the next generation of leaders who will change the world.

Virginia's 5th House District weighs in on discussions about important agriculture issues facilitated by Representative McGuire.



Smiling for the photo, State Officers Emma Alexander and Franco Abud pose with Louisa 4H members and Representative McGuire following lunch at Southern Revere Cellars.



State Officers Emma Alexander and Franco Abud smile for a photo with Representative McGuire following the farm tours.

LIVING TO Serve

by Georgia Grady – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Treasurer

As the year continues and brings new experiences for the State Officer team, one thing that has remained constant are the chapter visits. Since September, the State Officers have visited Culpeper County, Valley Career and Technical Center, Gloucester, Fauquier, Liberty Bedford, Kettle Run, Fluvana, SG Stewart Middle, Riverheads, Mechanicsville, James Wood, Wilbur S. Pence, Read Mountain, Aylor Middle, WR Legge, Caroline Middle, Warren County Middle, Highland, Virginia Beach Technical Center, Broadway, Sherando, and Floyd T. Binns Middle. This has been a busy part of the year for the State Officers, but they wouldn't trade it for the world.

At these workshops, students learn all about leadership skills and FFA knowledge. Grace Faulk, a senior from Fauquier High School, said that her favorite part of the workshop was that the "officers gave us activities that first taught us leadership skills and then gave us the opportunity to apply those skills." Activities and games play a huge role in the State Officers' workshops as they are a fun and engaging way for students to learn the skills that are being taught. Pearl Correia, a senior from Virginia Beach Technical Center, said that the untying knot activity where students had to untangle a ball of string was her favorite because she "learned that even though things may be hard eventually they can always be untangled." No matter what games are played or what skills are taught, the members always learn something!



One of the activities that students from James Wood High School participated in during the "Growing into Your Corduroy" workshop required them to untangle a ball of string with their classmates, teaching them about the importance of community and teamwork.



As a part of the "Century of Blue and Gold" workshop, students from Read Mountain Middle School had to dress up one of their classmates with their best impression of official dress.

More importantly than that though are the connections that the State Officers make with the members and students they meet. Camryn Scott, a freshman from Kettle Run High School, said that "I especially loved how you shared your stories and how different they all were. It really showed that you can come from anywhere and still find a place in FFA." Now that the State Officers are halfway through their year, they are starting to see members for the second or third time and are building even deeper connections. Pearl said that she loved "getting to catch up with a friend I hadn't seen in a while," and Camryn said that "when you came, it definitely made a huge impact on me. I'm now more involved in FFA than ever and have made new friendships along the way." These connections the State Officers have made and the impact that the State Officers have had on members is special to both the Officers and the members, and the State Officers are so excited for the chapter visits throughout the rest of the year!



Students from Fauquier High School played the "Human Knot" game as a part of the "Team Conflict" workshop. This activity was designed to teach the students about effective communication.



Virginia FFA Staff and Board.



VIRGINIA
FFA FOUNDATION

BLUE CARPET FOR *Blue Jackets*

by Alli Phillips – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Reporter

On December 6, Virginia FFA hosted its annual Blue Carpet Gala, welcoming FFA alumni and supporters from across the state and nation. This special event provided an opportunity for guests to come together in support of Virginia FFA and the continued growth of agricultural education. The gala was held at Hotel Madison and brought together individuals who are passionate about investing in the future of FFA.

The evening began with a cocktail hour, allowing attendees to connect and network, followed by a meal and a formal program highlighting the impact of Virginia FFA. The night



Items available during the live auction.

concluded with a live auction, which encouraged guests to further support the organization through generous bids and donations.

The event was organized by the Virginia FFA Foundation and its Board, with leadership from Foundation Executive Director Jennifer Armstrong and Board Chair Rebekah Slabach, along with other board members who helped make the event a success.

As a result of the Blue Carpet Gala, Virginia FFA surpassed one million dollars raised during the current fiscal year. This milestone was made possible in large part by the generosity of donors, including a significant \$25,000 contribution from Rockingham Petroleum, whose support played a key role in reaching this achievement.



Rockingham Petroleum presenting a donation to Board Chair Rebekah Slabach (left) and Foundation Director Jennifer Armstrong (right).

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A Passport to Leadership,

VA FFA STATE OFFICERS TAKE ON ILSSO 2026



ILSSO participants eagerly listen as the local farmers explain how they create their organic fertilizer.



State officers are watching the process of how cork is punched through a machine.

THE CRAFT BEHIND *the Cork*

by **Danika Landreth** – *VA FFA 2025-2026 State Sentinel*

On January 7th, the third day of our trip, we visited De Maria, a factory specializing in the production of cork for bottle stoppers. Cork is harvested manually from the bark of Spanish oak trees, which must reach about 70 cm in circumference before being stripped. Most of the cork processed at De Maria comes from the outskirts of Toledo, Spain, though we also saw many of these trees scattered across farms and pastures we visited. Remarkably, after the bark is removed, it regenerates and can be reharvested every 9 to 12 years.

At the factory, the bark is first boiled to clean, rehydrate, and remove impurities. Machines then punch out the corks, which are individually inspected for scent, color, and imperfections which determine their quality and price. Samples are also sent to a lab to test durability and sealing performance, ensuring each cork keeps oxygen out while being easy to remove from a bottle. De Maria produces roughly 60,000 to 80,000 corks per day, blending modern machinery with traditional craftsmanship. The visit highlights Spain's status as one of the world's leading cork producers.

Baix Llobregat AGRICULTURAL PARK

by **Franco Abud** – *VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President*

Our first tour for ILSSO was right on the outskirts of Madrid! The Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park grows lettuce, figs, artichokes, tomatoes, and many more vegetables. 1 year ago, they began a transformation in their production. A complete switch to regenerative agriculture. This includes no-till plots of land and permaculture. Dry toilets are strategically placed to collect nutrients to pour back into the farm. Additionally, they create their own organic soil by mixing microorganisms, minerals, and organic matter, then fermenting it. One of the farmers stated it best, "Our future is to keep us, our families, and farms clean." This visit shows the impression of what Spain's agriculture and amazing hospitality have to offer!

Dairy FARM

by Lee Kent – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President

While in Spain, the state officers visited a fifth generation dairy farm that milked approximately 1,600 cows on over 600 hectares of land. The dairy was very modern and operated a double-16 rapid-exit milking parlor. A fun fact about this farm is that all of their cows originated from the same four Holsteins that were purchased in the 1940s.

In recent years, the dairy has expanded into several industries beyond traditional milk production. One major area of expansion is agritourism, which includes a petting zoo and guided farm tours that educate visitors about the dairy industry and explain why certain farming practices are used. Another unique feature of the farm is its on site restaurant, where the U.S. state officers enjoyed an excellent meal. Overall, the dairy tour was very informative, and we learned a lot about modern dairy farming and how the operation has evolved over generations.

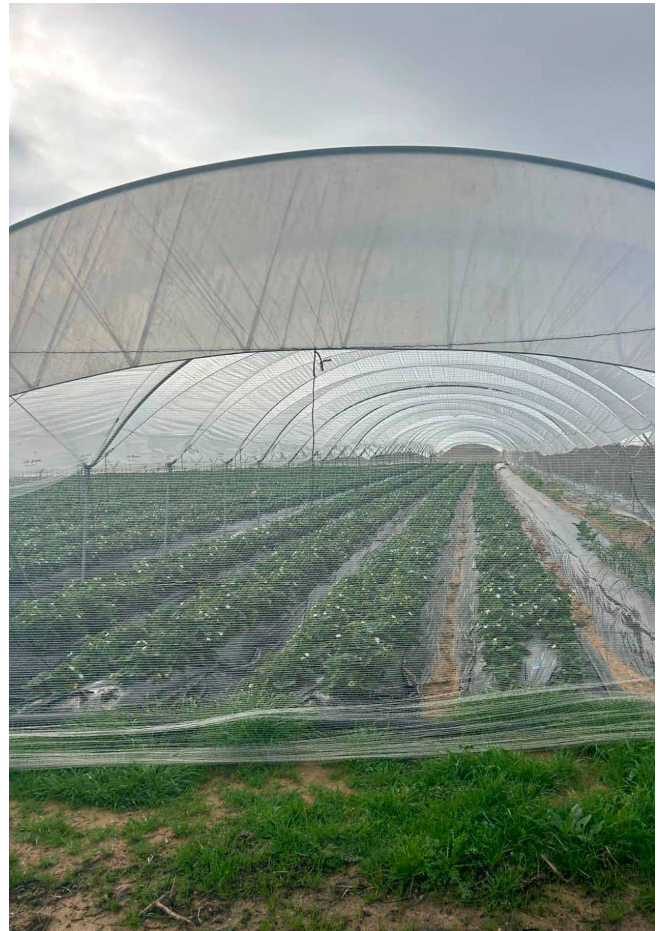


Fish auction (live).

FISHING Port

by Kylie Bailey – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Secretary

During the National FFA International Leadership Seminar, state officers visited Isla Cristina, Spain, home to one of the region's most important fishing ports and a major seafood auction. The officers learned how the local community depends on fishing, with nearly 300 boats using traditional, hands on methods to ensure high quality nets for fish, shrimp, lobster, and octopi. With guidance from Laura and Manwell, and translation help from our tour guide Juan, the group explored how timing, stability, and supply and demand shape the live auction process. One interesting thing about the live auction is that they will start the bidding from high price to low dollar but the trick is that it'll never reach zero; they just re-start if no one bids. The visit allowed officers to connect global agricultural practices with leadership and culture. Juan reflected on the port by stating, "fishing here is more than an industry, it's a community built on tradition and timing."



This is just one of the many tunnels of strawberries on the local Spanish farm. The plastic helps the berries grow throughout the entire year.

RED FRUIT Farm

by Georgia Grady – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Treasurer

While in Sevilla, the State Officers visited a red fruit farm in the province of Huelva that is managed by a husband and wife pair. The farm is around 17 acres big and contains strawberries and blueberries. The fruits are grown in what the farmer calls "macro-tunnels-" rows of crops with plastic over top to protect the fruits from the elements. In the winter, the plastic helps to keep the berries warmer and the plastic also helps prevent evaporation. The plastic also helps with ventilation for the plants. On top of that, the berries are very sensitive to flooding, so the farmers aim for the soil to be moist, but avoid standing water. To accomplish this, they use automatic drip irrigation which also delivers the fertilizer the plants need. While teaching us about their farm, the husband and wife duo talked about the importance of having a passion for agriculture and always trying new things. This was a very insightful visit for all of the State Officers, both when it comes to growing strawberries and blueberries, but also what it looks like to truly love agriculture.



Riding through the female enclosures, state officers learn about the breeding process from a professional bullfighter.



State officers learn about the culture and history of *La Corrida de Toros*, the traditional Spanish bullfight.

Toros & Tradition: BEHIND THE SCENES WITH STATE OFFICERS

by Danika Landreth – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Sentinel

On January 10th, state officers visited a farm specializing in breeding bulls (toros in Spanish) for bullfighting, where they learned firsthand about its operations and culture from a professional bullfighter. The 3,000-acre farm houses 400 to 450 animals and follows a selective breeding process in which the strongest bulls are paired with multiple females for reproduction. These females are never sold for meat and are kept lean to ensure easier births. After birth, calves are evaluated to determine whether they will be sold or raised for bullfighting. Bulls kept for shows are raised until the age of four, then housed in groups of 10 to 12 and fed primarily corn to develop a light layer of fat while maintaining agility. Officers toured the enclosures by wagon, gaining insight into animal care practices and the cultural significance, time, and dedication required to raise bulls for bullfighting, a tradition that remains an important part of Spanish culture, especially during *fiestas*.

Iberian Ham PRODUCER

by Emma Alexander – VA FFA 2025-2026 State President

We began our day with a visit to a local jamón production center, where we toured the facility and learned about the detailed, time-honored process used to produce Iberian ham. Our guides explained how the pigs are raised and fed exclusively on acorns from nearby oak trees, a diet that plays a key role in developing the jamón's rich flavor and unique texture. The experience concluded with a guided tasting, during which our hosts walked us through the flavor differences among the various cuts and curing styles. This immersive visit offered valuable insight into Spain's agricultural traditions and the craftsmanship behind one of its most celebrated culinary products.

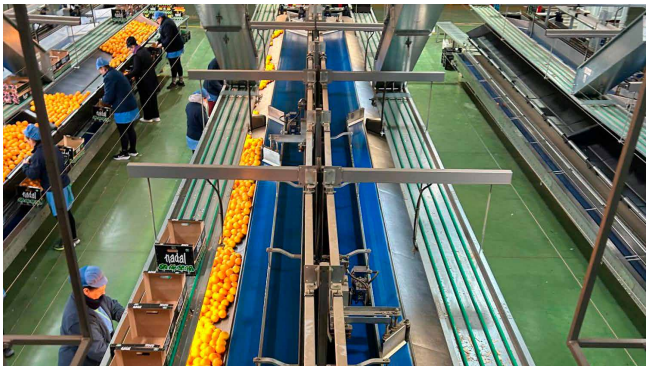


Just a glimpse of the gorgeous olive trees covering the countryside.

Olive Oil PRODUCTION CENTER

by Emma Alexander – VA FFA 2025-2026 State President

The ILSSO group traveled just over 40 minutes outside the city of Sevilla to visit a family-run olive oil production facility. Upon arrival, we learned about the differences between various types of olive oil, including extra virgin and organic, and the factors that influence quality and flavor. We then moved to the tasting room, where we experienced the true depth of olive oil flavor. One of Spain's common desserts—olive oil paired with ice cream—was elevated even further at this farm. Dark chocolate ice cream was topped with orange-infused olive oil, creating a balance of rich chocolate, a sweet citrus note, and the bold bite of the oil. Following the tasting, travelers had the opportunity to purchase products directly from the farm, with many choosing to take home a small piece of Spain to remember the experience.



This is just one of the several sorting lines where the oranges and mandarins were sorted by hand.

Citrus & Cereal COOPERATIVE

by Georgia Grady – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Treasurer

While driving to Cordoba, the State Officers stopped at a Citrus and Cereal Cooperative along the way. Here, the ILSSO participants had the opportunity to learn about the cooperative itself as well as tour one of the local farms that is a part of the cooperative and tour the processing facility. This particular cooperative was formed in the 1960s, and contains over 300 members. While participating farms have to pay a fee to be a part of the cooperative, they get several benefits, including a guarantee that their product will be sold, use of the cooperative's technical advisors, and workers during harvest season. While this cooperative's main crop in the beginning were cereal grains, it has switched to mandarins and oranges in the last fifteen years. They also process a large amount of watermelon and persimmons. All of the crops that arrive at the processing facility are catalogued electronically and then sorted by size. All of the fruits are washed, and some of them, depending on the product, are given a fine layer of wax. Then, the fruit is sorted by quality, with the rotten fruit going to feed livestock, the lower quality fruit going to make juice, and the high quality fruit going to be sold as is. During the whole process, the organic fruit is separated from the traditionally grown fruit to help prevent decontamination. At the end of the process, the fruit is sold! This visit showed the State Officers exactly how the process works, and it was awesome to see such a unique facility.

TOUR OF *Mezquita*

by Alli Phillips – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Reporter

While in Spain, we had the opportunity to tour the Mezquita in Córdoba, a historic landmark, rich in culture and history. As we walked through the arches and columns, we learned about the Mezquita's unique blend of Islamic and Christian

influences and how it has transformed over time. It served as a model of how we, too, could combine our cultures and influences to make something great. The experience allowed us to gain a deeper appreciation for Spain's history while reflecting on how traditions and cultures can come together in one place.

TOUR OF SEVILLA AND *Sevilla Cathedral*

by Alli Phillips – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Reporter

Also during our time in Spain, we explored the city of Sevilla, highlighted by a tour of its world-famous cathedral. As we walked through the Sevilla Cathedral and its surrounding courtyards, we learned about the site's historical importance, intricate architecture, and lasting influence on the city. I also took note of Sevilla's iconic orange trees, which line the streets and fill the air with a distinct citrus scent, showcasing how agriculture is woven into the city's culture and daily life.

John Deere INNOVATION CENTER

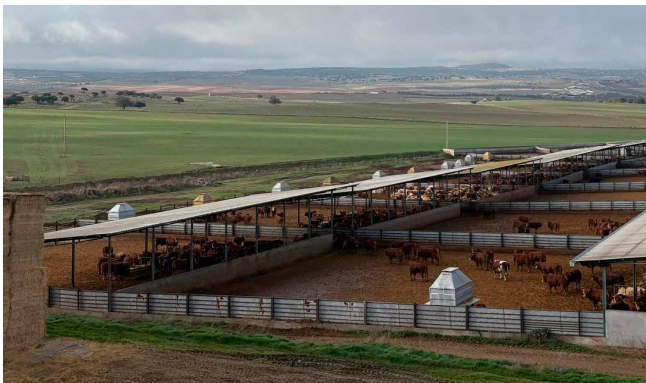
by Lee Kent – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President

During our ILSSO trip, the state officers had the pleasure of visiting the John Deere Innovation Center. During this visit, the state officers were able to see new and advancing technology in the specialty crops industry, including grapes, olives, fruit, and citrus production.

A major labor demand in specialty crops is spraying, which is where John Deere has focused much of its recent innovation. One of the new technologies we learned about was a fully automated crop-spraying machine called **GUSS**. This machine can perform the work that normally requires six operators in tractors, reducing it to one person managing six machines. This technology has already been introduced in the United States, with around 400 units currently in operation, many of which have reached or exceeded 6,000–7,000 operating hours.

Another technology we explored was a “see-and-spray” system that uses sensors to detect the density of tree canopies. Based on the thickness of the leaves, the system automatically applies more or less product, which can eventually reduce chemical usage and product costs by up to half.

Overall, this visit was extremely informative and exciting, as it allowed us to see cutting-edge technology and learn about specialty crops that are not very common in Virginia.



Landscape of the farm.



Charolais cross bred cattle in their waiting paddocks.

Ganados Ruigan, BEEF CATTLE FARM

by **Kylie Bailey** – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Secretary

On one of the last days in Spain, state officers visited a family owned cattle operation led by Jesus, whose parents started the business when he was young, to learn about the Spanish cattle industry and its management practices. Jesus explained that success in agriculture depends on the people behind the operation, emphasizing animal health, nutrition and quality over quantity. As meat prices vary based on the type and condition of the animal. The farm raises primarily Limousine and Charolais cattle, keeps calves with their mothers for eight months, and avoids castration to preserve natural growth and energy, producing high quality meat. Officers learned about efficient feeding systems using straw instead of alfalfa, carefully balancing protein levels, strict mineral limits, and limited antibiotic use, as well as heat management through shade hydration and herd health care. Reflecting on the experience, Jesus shared, “Things are constantly changing whatever problem you have, you can always find your solution in the fields, you just have to know where to find it” leaving officers with a deep appreciation for innovation and responsibility in Spain’s Cattle Industry.



All ILSSO Participants take a photo at the US Embassy in Spain with Evgenia Ustinova.

The Agricultural Attaché FOR SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

by **Franco Abud** – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President

Evgenia Ustinova, the Agricultural Attaché for the US Embassy in Spain, hosted us for our final visit on January 15th. As the USDA representative for Spain and Portugal, she focuses on foreign agricultural service, trade policy, food security, and market development. Agricultural Attachés recommend trade policies to various US agencies at over 100 similar offices across different countries. Ms. Ustinova also promotes the United States Agriculture. This is done at events across Spain and Portugal. If you are interested in a similar job in agriculture, Evgenia Ustinova recommends working for The Peace Corps, as 50% of her colleagues have that background.

FAREWELL DINNER/ Flamenco Performance

by **Alli Phillips** – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Reporter

To conclude our time in Spain, we gathered for a farewell dinner that celebrated the country’s culture and cuisine. The evening began with a variety of traditional tapas, followed by a main course of seafood paella that highlighted Spain’s rich agricultural and culinary traditions. The dinner was accompanied by a traditional flamenco show, where officers experienced the passion and storytelling behind the music and dance. This final night provided a meaningful opportunity to reflect on the experiences of the trip while celebrating the connections made throughout their international journey.



CTE programs all in a photo together.



Marching Leadership Forward

VIRGINIA FFA STATE OFFICERS WALK IN THE INAUGURATION PARADE

by Kylie Bailey – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Secretary

Virginia FFA, alongside other Career and Technical Education (CTE) organizations, proudly participated in the inauguration parade for Governor Abigail Spanberger, representing the unity and impact of CTE programs across the Commonwealth. State officers had the opportunity to connect with fellow CTE leaders while celebrating a shared commitment to leadership, service, and career readiness. The experience was made especially memorable through an interaction with Governor Spanberger, who emphasized in her speech that “Virginia is strongest when we work together”. With the inauguration occurring only once every four years, the opportunity to take part in such a historic and meaningful event was both humbling and unforgettable. Virginia FFA wishes Governor Spanberger the very best as she begins her term in service to the Commonwealth.



Virginia state officers getting ready to march with FCCLA behind and 4H just in front.



Day at the Capitol attendees with Governor Spanberger, Secretary Frazier, Legislative Director Gammon, and Commissioner Green.

by Alli Phillips – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Vice President

Nearly 1,000 FFA members from 93 chapters across Virginia gathered in Richmond on January 22 to participate in FFA Day of Advocacy. Students traveled from all corners of the Commonwealth to represent agricultural education and share the impact of FFA on them with Virginia legislators. Throughout the day, members met with delegates and senators to advocate for FFA while also extending invitations to their chapter banquets and local community events.

In addition to meeting directly with legislators, students also had the opportunity to observe the legislative process firsthand. Representatives from each chapter were sent to both the Senate and House galleries, where they were formally recognized during the session. FFA members were introduced by Speaker Scott in the House of Delegates and Senator McDougle in the Senate, both of whom are FFA alumni themselves, highlighting the strong impact of FFA.

The day concluded with all members assembling on Capitol Hill to hear remarks from Governor Spanberger. Students also had the opportunity to meet Secretary of Forestry and Agriculture Katie Frazier, Commissioner of Agriculture Charles Green, and Legislative Director Davis Gammon. As members returned home, they carried with them renewed motivation to serve their communities and continue advocating for agriculture, leaving a lasting impression on Virginia's leaders.



The Amelia FFA Chapter meeting with Senator R. Creigh Deeds.



Chapter Representatives being recognized in the House Gallery.



In spite of the weather, the State Officers and their facilitator were able to make a change that worked using Zoom.

Snowed In FOR CHECKPOINT 2

by Georgia Grady – VA FFA 2025-2026 State Treasurer

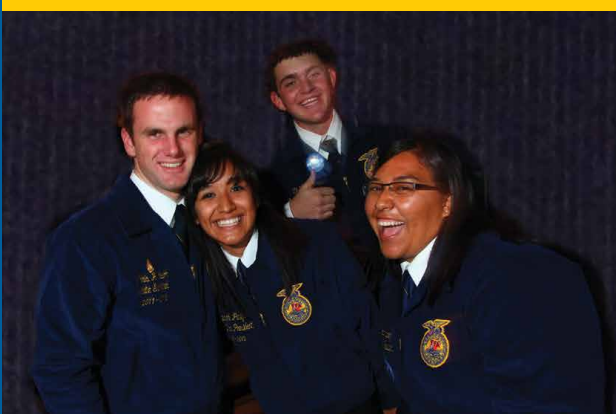
Virginia FFA State Officers have three trainings done by National FFA. The first happened two weeks after State Convention, the second happened during the first week of July, and the third happened during the last week of January. While Checkpoint 1 happened at FFA Camp, Base Camp happened at Virginia Tech, and that was also where Checkpoint 2 was also supposed to be held until a massive snow storm swept through the weekend before the training was supposed to be held, and it forced everyone to pivot. So, instead of

Checkpoint 2 happening at Virginia Tech, it happened virtually, with State Officers and the facilitator from National FFA at their homes, a callback to the days of virtual school. Yet, that didn't phase anyone as the activities meant to be done together were switched to activities that could be done over Zoom and the paper handouts were made into Google Docs.

Checkpoint 2 focused on Public Speaking and Speech Writing as well as Team Dynamics. For Public Speaking

and Speech Writing, the State Officers learned about the parts that make up a good speech, and the order to write a speech in. With banquet season coming up soon, the State Officers focused on writing their banquet speeches. After they learned about the parts of a good speech, they also learned about how to deliver a speech, from the different types of body language to verbal and nonverbal queues. Then, the second half of their training focused on team dynamics, and ways to work more effectively as a team.

Even though the training was virtual, everyone had an amazing time hanging out together on Zoom, learning more about each other, and learning more about themselves in the process!



  
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