It is a pleasure to have this opportunity this morning. We are in challenging times. One of Florida agriculture’s biggest challenges is the rising cost of fuel. Fuel prices recently have risen over two and a half times. If we have no more fires this year than we had last year; we’re going to pay $2.50 million dollars extra just in fuel costs over last year’s season. So—law enforcement, firefighters, taking your children to school on schoolbuses—everything out there is driving the cost of every single item up by the increase of fuel alone. If you added no other cost whatsoever, the cost of food, fiber, and anything that we buy—and that’s everything that’s shipped by truck, rail, or airplane—costs are going up substantially because of the fuel cost increases. When you look at our economic situation, a lot of it has a direct impact because of fuel costs. We are seeing and hearing a lot about research that is being done on ethanol, which has been tremendous. And I think there is great potential for Florida, for those of you who are used to various types of foliage that we can raise here in Florida, including fruits and vegetables, or grasses, reed grasses and those types of things that we can use for ethanol production. Florida will outproduce any state in the country, in my opinion, based on what I have seen around this State and weather-wise, more biomass per year than any single state in the country. We have the best potential, pretty much a 12-month growing season, except for maybe extreme northern Florida. I think if you grow the right winter grasses up there, assuming that they would be worth anything for ethanol, you can even grow in the winter up there.

One of the things that we have been trying to support in the Department throughout the state, is water conservation. We are trying to do what we can in best management practices to help clean up the water resources starting from Suwannee Valley all the way down to this area and the Okeechobee area. We are using best management practices for the various types of agriculture production. When you’re row cropping or whether you have a dairy or citrus, it doesn’t make any difference. Using the work that the University of Florida and IFAS has done along with the various groups and organizations out there, all are trying to do a better job and be more cost efficient in their production. Best management practices can be adapted to just about any type of production. Including home gardens and flowering areas around people’s homes, how much water can we use, or should we use, or how much do we need to have for optimum growth, so that we don’t over-stress the plants. All of that is being worked out. As you know, back in the 1970s, the University of Florida—actually back in the 1960s—it became obvious that more people were using drip irrigation, and the time of day and all those things that are coordinated for the best uptake of water to use less water in a production area, have been worked on for quite some time. The general public doesn’t get to hear about it. Those of you who are in either flowering plants, fruits, and vegetables and that type of thing, you’ve been working on it for a long time. Some of you probably went to college where that was a big issue back in the 1970s. Being able to coordinate those best management practices and use of water and water quality, those continue to be an issue every day. I think as the pressure for land is sought after more and more in this state, and we all know that that’s the case, we lose large chunks of agriculture land and people say, “Why is it that agriculture is the one that always loses out?” That’s where the privately owned land is. Agriculture owns the private lands in this state. If you take the 10 million acres of fruit and vegetable production area and the 14 million acres of forest in this state, they are owned by private entities, either family owned, individually owned, or corporate owned with family and other businesses joining together. That’s where all the land is. So any time there is a new development anywhere in the state, agriculture is going to be the one that is going to be pressured to sell it. And if you are on the side of agriculture that is barely keeping up with the cost of doing business with fuel costs the way they are—and I know since I am growing a little hay myself—I can tell you that my cost of producing hay has gone up tremendously. As a matter of fact, if you’re not careful, the cost of the hay is the cheapest part of the whole deal because it costs you more to deliver it very far away than the cost of the hay itself.

Are there people who are going to start unloading horses? A lot of people love to keep horses, but at a certain point, it becomes very expensive and we’ve been worried about people unloading horses out in the state parks and state forests instead of putting them somewhere else. They are just going to turn them loose. And that’s happening in other states right now, by the way. So, it’s just a matter of time before it happens here.

Our biggest threat, bar none, is the introduction of new pests and diseases from around the world through our free trade system. We cannot stop it at the border and it is the biggest threat to
our agriculture production in this state. I don’t care if you are a backyard grower or a commercial grower, or what type of fruit, vegetable, or plant that you have, the introduction of pests and disease can be devastating. I think canker proves the point: that a disease like that could virtually destroy the citrus industry in this state. When we tried to get it out of the cities and the counties where the populations had it in the backyards, everybody tried to say, “Well, that’s not a problem so you shouldn’t worry about it there.” We’re saying, well, if wind and rain are going to be the carriers, and we do have a few blows through southern Florida from time to time that could pick it up and move it miles at a time, it is a danger in somebody’s backyard. It’s going to hurt the state of Florida. My charge under the constitutional office and the directive of the legislative laws of the state is to protect and defend, not only the people, but also the economic value and viability of the state of Florida. When you start losing a 9 billion dollar industry because of a disease, Florida’s economic viability is being challenged and damaged irreparably. For those of you growing whatever crop you may grow or whatever type of industry you are in, when one of these pests or diseases can wipe your industry out, and the hundred of thousands if not millions of dollars you’ve invested for your family and yourself, it’s not only hurting you when you lose it, it’s hurting the state of Florida’s economy and its viability to compete in the world. And I’ve always indicated to USDA and to Customs and the Border Patrol—I’m sitting on a joint program with them right now in Washington—what you think is not an issue because it’s not an issue in the rest of the country can be a big issue in Florida. Especially when you’ve got all of the groups coming out of the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Africa that are landing in either Ft. Lauderdale or Miami and unloading and bringing diseases and pests into the state, you’re putting Florida agriculture and our ability to do business in jeopardy. Just because our problem in Florida is not a problem in Georgia, or maybe Virginia or Arkansas or wherever it’s going to in the country, it could ruin our economy in the state of Florida. It could cost us hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars in damage from which we would have to try to recover. Now that affects you, that affects the general population and the products that you’re selling. Think about it in bigger terms; that is what I have to do. Every lending institution that you have borrowed money from is going to be affected along with you. And if they’re affected, then your losses are also going to fall over into the losses of the people in other businesses who have to depend on that bank’s viability. So, this is not just a “you against the world” program here. This is our ability to sustain a business environment in the agricultural industry of this state—and that’s a big one. That’s 280 different commodities in the state of Florida. That affects the state as well as ourselves, our families, and this nation. Because if Florida goes down, I can assure you as one of the top four states in the country, one of the top two in the production of specialty crops in this nation, especially in food supply, it’s going to affect the whole country. That is what I’m trying to get across when I meet with these people who have to understand how the dominoes line up and how they fall. So we’re looking at some issues both on the plant and animal side.

Of course on the animal side it gets a little bit more complicated, because 85% of all diseases that animals carry can also be transferred to humans. Well, that makes a very dangerous proposition. If you want your personal health to stay well, we’ve got to keep some of these diseases from overseas from getting into the state of Florida and into this country. Simply because they can be transferred from pets to owners and on the commercial side, from cattle, horses, sheep, goats—you name it, everything that’s grown here. Another problem that is just an absolute nightmare for me is the introduction of all these non-native invasive species that we have allowed to come in. We have allowed them to come in without any real way to control them. For those of you who stay up with what you do, you probably are going to work hard to control one of these species. Now, for the average citizens who see it in their backyard and don’t know what it is, they are not going to control anything. They won’t know what it is until it has already taken over most of what they have. We are finding 200 breeding pythons in the Everglades. That’s what we found last year; that’s not how many are out there. We’ve got a problem because, sooner or later, somebody’s small child in these highly developed areas next to the Everglades is going to get killed by one of these things. We worried about gators all of our lives, but we knew gators were there; they have been here for eons. But, pythons have not been here that long. Another one of our problems that I think requires us to readjust how we think in this state is just because you’ve seen something here and your grandparents saw something here 100 years ago, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a good thing. When people start calling some of these plants a native species because it’s been for 100 years, that’s not necessarily the best thing to do—because that says we’ve gotten used to it being here, so therefore it’s a native plant. That doesn’t mean it’s not invasive; it doesn’t mean it’s not going to be destructive. When you have the problems that we’ve had over the years controlling some of these things and some of them out there account for 800,000 acres or so worth of infestation. It’s going to cost a lot of money to eradicate.

The use of pesticides and herbicides is a very sticky issue now. Where we used to be able to stop the “medfly” by aerial spraying, we have to really be careful now because people are so sensitive about using spray materials. You’ve got a horror story on each end of that deal. If we don’t do it and we need to, then that medfly ends up destroying our food supply in the process while we are trying to figure out how to control it. Now the cost of food goes up, and people are out of business because they’ve lost huge amounts of money that’s been invested. Somebody has to have the guts to stand up and say, “Look folks, I know this is a bad deal; I didn’t like to come down and get into people’s backyards and take their citrus trees, but we knew scientifically it was the only way to try to stop the disease from spreading and taking out other people’s backyard trees as well as the whole industry.” Sometimes we have to do that whether we like it or not. I can guarantee you I would have loved to have been doing just about anything in people’s backyards other than taking their trees out. At least I wasn’t like California in people’s backyards taking their chickens out. They did that. And the next thing will be some horse disease where we’re going to have to go to people’s homes and take their horses. That’s why it is so important we stop these pests and diseases before they get to the border, before they get spread in our state. That’s why we need the veterinarians who we have in the state and the plant industry personnel that we have to help us to look for pests and diseases in plant material. That’s why we need the different societies and groups out there that will work with us to help find these things as quickly as possible. We can’t do this on our own, folks. I can’t hire enough state people to do this on our own. It’s going to take us working with the horticulture societies, the veterinarians of the state, other than state veterinarians, our local veterinarians, the University of Florida, every school that has some type of horticulture program, to convince those that
graduate from those schools. They’re important to the state to keep pests and disease from escaping. By finding them fast and getting to us as quickly as possible, we can get a plan put together to stop the spread of these pests and diseases.

OK, other than that, I’ve had a great term. We only had to go out and collect that doggone hedgehog from Madagascar that got out that had the monkeypox. That’s the first thing I had to tackle other than citrus canker: running around the state of Florida trying to find out every place where those little hedgehogs from Madagascar were sold, because some of them were infected with monkeypox that could have spread to people. We found out that even though USDA knows we shouldn’t allow anything in from that area, there’s stuff over there the pharaoh had we still haven’t identified yet. Since the Fish and Wildlife Service were separate from USDA, they were allowing some of these things to come in. And by doing so, they jeopardized the health, safety, and welfare of the public because they didn’t check with anybody else to find out if there might be a problem. Until we really get a coordinated effort by USDA, Customs Border Patrol, and Fish and Wildlife as to what we are bringing in here, we need to make sure that the states know what’s coming into their state and what that potential is, and that they’re holding to the quarantine limits. That’s why we had a horse problem a couple of years ago. Somebody decided that the horse looked OK. It wasn’t quite up to its full term in quarantine, so they turned it loose. And then they loaded about eight more horses with that horse coming out of New York, through Virginia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and on into Florida. All of a sudden we had a disease outbreak on our hands. And horses died and we had to quarantine the animals. That one little slip-up could have been multi-hundreds of millions of dollars worth of losses in horseflesh in the state of Florida. Racehorses, hobby horses, backyard horses, we could have lost a lot of animals over that. So, I go through this every day knowing how easy it is for one slip-up to cost us our businesses, our homes and the state’s economy. Whoever comes in behind me better have that same feeling because if they don’t, they are going to be run over like a freight train. It will take groups like yours to stand up and talk when people say, “No, we don’t want you to take this or take that—you shouldn’t do this.” Groups like yours that know what growing a crop is about, what the horticultural society is all about, need to step up to the plate and say, “Wait a minute. Let me tell you how bad this can be.” If I’m doing it by myself, I’m one person and I’m a politician. And you know that puts me 50% down right there because nobody’s going to trust a politician anyway. So, I’m 50% behind. But those of you who are in this field, those of you who have had the training and the education in this, need to be the ones stepping to the plate and saying, “Wait just a minute, South Florida Sun Central or Miami Herald, or Palm Beach Post, or wherever you happen to be from: Let me tell you what can happen if this gets out and gets into these industries.” You need to come out and talk because I can’t do it all by myself, because I end up going to court anyway—but the court of public opinion is what influences a lot of this problem to start with. If the public is of the opinion that what we are doing is wrong or somehow we don’t need to do this, then it’s hard for me to fight that. We have to go to court to fight it all out, step by step. And by then, the whole state of Florida could be infected. So, I want the people in this room, and you are only here because you are interested, you’ve been trained in horticulture, you know what’s going on. The next time we have an outbreak in your field, whatever that field may be, your societies and your groups need to get together and write some letters to some of these newspapers. You need to explain from your viewpoint of the person who’s in the business trying to make a living, how bad this could be to you if we can’t get it under control. That will help a lot—whether it’s me or the person comes after me in this field. And, I can assure you there’s an awful lot of people who are sitting in the Florida legislature and in Congress who don’t understand one bit of this. I have to go explain to them why it’s important. I have to explain to them what can happen to their budgets and everything else if this goes wrong, and why the University of Florida and IFAS is important for us, along with the other universities that are doing research, to help us get by some of these pests and disease problems and help us to develop new technologies.

I see in the future in Florida that we’re going to be producing 3 billion gallons of ethanol in this State. Not by using corn, corn has been the scapegoat. Corn is not efficient, we know that. Corn is not what we’re looking at. And by the way, when you read in the newspaper where somebody says, “The reason why food prices are high is because we are using corn for ethanol,” it’s probably paid for by one of two groups—the oil industry, who don’t want to have to mix ethanol anyway, or we found out that the national grocers group hired a big PR firm to go out and spread that message. They did a great job because I saw it on nighttime television: “Food’s going up because we’re using corn for ethanol.” We’re planting more corn today than we have ever planted in this country. And even with the 20% increase of corn-based ethanol, we’re still planting more corn than we’ve ever planted in this country. There is more corn being planted around the world than ever before, as well as soybeans and peanuts and some of the crops that we have here in Florida. There’s people starving now, don’t get me wrong. But they’re mostly starving because of either ethnic or political situations. Not because there’s not real food out there. The food is available if they would get it out, but it’s being controlled because of those two reasons more so than the fact that there is not enough food out there. I have to try to explain this, but like I said, I am only one person. I can’t get all the information out there. I will tell you I am not running for this office or any other office. So it’s not because I’m running for office. I don’t plan to run for another office. But, I’m telling you it is up to you as well as myself and others in our department, to get the message out that needs to be gotten out about what’s really going on in this world.

Thank you again for having me here. I probably have already spoken more than I intended to.

Questions and Answers

Q: What is the relationship of agriculture and water?
A: Everybody knows that agriculture uses a lot of water and that is why we are trying to find the most efficient way to use our water supply without overusing water. Quite frankly, nobody wants to admit that we waste water in this state, in general, not necessarily through agriculture but when we are turning water out to the sea by the billions of gallons instead of finding a way to do deep well injection. I worked on this when I was in the Florida Senate. I thought it was a practical idea. Of course, the first scream was, “Oh, it’s going to be dirty water and we shouldn’t put it in the ground.” Well, the fact was it was going into pockets of muck that would have held quite a few million gallons of water in each well. If it is to be used for human consumption, it’s going to have to be put through filters and purified or processed anyway. But we wanted to make sure that we had water and that we didn’t overuse the available drinkable water. We could bring that water
back up for agriculture and other purposes if we needed it, in the right conditions. So, I’m going to step out and tell you what my thinking was on that and I heard from the groups, and mostly the environmental groups, that didn’t want to do it. I think the true reason was not because they didn’t think we could put the water down there and keep it and/or purify or cleanse it when it came back out, but if we could learn how to store water, then you can support growth. And I think that was the driving factor behind the environmental groups that did not want us storing water. “Uh oh, if you can do that then you can keep the growth pattern going.” So, it was probably an anti-growth move more so than anything else. But, there is the capability to do it, and we can still do it today in some areas. It probably wouldn’t work in every area, but it could work in areas where we have enough rock column to be able to store that kind of water.

One of the big issues with ethanol is that it’s going to use too much water. But everybody keeps forgetting, except maybe you who are knowledgeable about these things, there is a lot of water that comes out of all those plants. What you’ve got to do is figure out a way to clean the water that comes out of that plant material, recycle and use it, and then hopefully you’ve minimized the amount of water you’re going to have to bring back into the process. I think with some of the new technologies that the University of Florida is working on that there’s probably going to be a capability to split the fuel and the water and be able to reuse the water in the process. All of those technologies are going to have to be worked out. It’s kind of like the blue-green algae thing, you know. I mean, we could probably grow more blue-green algae in Florida than anybody could imagine, and that may be one of our best sources of diesel fuel before it’s over with. We’ve got to find a way to do it right, find a way to still keep our water column straight and of course, the algae is going to help clean the water anyway. So, you’re going to use the byproduct to mix with other minerals and elements to feed animals with because it’s all reusable. Very little of it is going to be considered an industrial waste because it can be reused all the way down the line. So you know, there are all kinds of things out there with new technologies and development with which I think this state has such great potential. I just hope we don’t hold ourselves back. But, water will be a factor there. We’ve got to find a way to stop putting all that water back in the ocean and find a place to keep it where we need it.

Q: I used to be with the Department of Agriculture and now I am a commercial grower. What can you do to ensure that the Department of Agriculture interacts with FSHS growers and researchers?

A: As far as I know—I mean I haven’t given any directive to our people that they can’t come to these meetings if they’re in the areas. Now, travel is going to be a problem because I’ve cut my travel back by over 50% already. Traveling any long distance is going to be a problem because of the cost of fuel, and we don’t have it budgeted in our office. But if people from the Division of Plant Industry are in an area where a meeting is going on, and they can come and gather that information and share it with the rest of the people in the division, that’s the kind of thing I support heavily. I don’t think there is any mandate that we don’t send anybody. Not that I know of.

—Thank you very much!