

The Conner Years

A dynamic era in Florida agriculture and politics will come to a close on January 8, when Commissioner of Agriculture Doyle Conner retires, turning over his Cabinet seat and leadership of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to Commissioner-elect Bob Crawford.

During his 30 years as Commissioner, Conner has served while six U.S. presidents and seven Florida governors were in office. Add in 10 years as a state Representative and Conner's career in public service spans the modern history of Florida.

For Conner, who often noted that he never aspired to higher office than Commissioner of Agriculture, agriculture and politics have always been inseparable.

THE EARLY YEARS

A native of Bradford County, Conner grew up on the family farm, which he began to manage before he was a teenager when his brother joined the U.S. Air Force and his father worked at Camp Blanding during World War II.

"I loved the farm," Conner said in an interview, noting that it led him to become involved in 4-H and Future Farmers of America, organizations that were to remain important to him throughout his political career.

"I knew then that I loved agriculture, I found it rewarding," he said of the farm, which provided spending money and funds for college.

As a youngster, Conner also was introduced to politics and progress by his grandfather, a pioneering farmer in Florida and a long-time Bradford County Commissioner.

"He was my idol," Conner said of his grandfather, who lived to be 98 years old and was

"one of the most visionary persons I ever knew."

Other early influences on the direction Conner's life was to take were his vocational agriculture instructor, football coach and the county agent who managed the 4-H program.

"They inspired me to think that you could be something," Conner said. FFA was the vehicle that really launched Conner's political career. During summer FFA forestry camps at Camp O'Leno, near High Springs,

Conner laid the groundwork for his successful campaign to become state FFA president in 1946.

"I have very fond memories of that camp," Conner said, noting he made a lot of long-

time personal and political friends there.

Conner continued developing his political skills as a freshman at the University of Florida, where he was elected class vice president.

He then dropped out of UF for a year when he was elected to the full-time position of national FFA president.

This position gave him an opportunity to travel throughout the country and meet such prominent national political figures of the time as Vice President Alben Barkley and Secretary of Agriculture Charles Brannen, as well as members of the state's Congressional delegation, like Spessard Holland and Claude Pepper.

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FFA "opened up a lot of doors to give me an opportunity to peek in at what was going on in the political world," Conner said.

Meeting prominent officials in state and national office, along with the influence of his grandfather, "whetted my appetite a bit to be a part of (the political world)," Conner said.

Returning to UF as a sophomore, after his stint as national FFA president, Conner plunged into another campaign, this time a successful run for the Florida House of Representatives.

COMMISSIONER OF AGRICULTURE

After serving five terms in the House, including one session as Speaker at the age of 28, the youngest person ever to serve in that leadership position, Conner was elected Commissioner of Agriculture in 1960.

Conner took over an office which had been held by Nathan Mayo for 37 years, until he died in office in 1960.

Conner credits Mayo as a "person with vision," who started such things as a pesticide monitoring program in the Department of Agriculture long before any environmental movement existed.

After taking office, Conner immediately began implementing a reorganization of the Department, which had been ordered by the Legislature under his leadership. The reorganization expanded the Department by creating the divisions of Plant Industry and Animal Industry, which had previously been the independent State Plant Board and Live-stock Sanitary Board.

Later, Conner created the Office of Consumer Services, which was to become a division in 1969, when the Department

was officially renamed the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

The Florida Forest Service was also brought into the Department then as the Division of Forestry. Today, the Department has 11 divisions and some 3,600 employees.

Conner said his goals when he became Commissioner were to see that farmers got a better return for their products through sophisticated marketing and to develop an agricultural industry that the world appreciates.

To promote international sales of Florida farm products, Conner led annual trade missions to countries around the world.

He also organized promotional trips each year to fruit and vegetable wholesalers and retailers in Florida's major winter markets, from Chicago to Montreal. In addition, tours of Florida farms and packing houses were arranged, so that dealers could see how their produce was being raised and packed.

An early effort to promote "SunFLavor" as a logo for Florida-grown products never caught on, though in recent years, this marketing approach has been adopted by several other states and is being revived now in Florida.

Meanwhile, regulatory activities have always been a major responsibility of the Department.

"Our regulatory programs have been enormously successful," Conner said. "Our regulatory people lead the world in pursuing problems and being thorough. Consequently, they've recorded some unprecedented records on eradication."

"It was a great feeling to eradicate hog cholera," Conner said of one successful program, where he thought the Department would be spending money forever.

The Giant African snail was also eradicated in Florida, the first time the pest had been wiped out anywhere in the world after it had become established.

Conner said he was hoping

that brucellosis, a disease of cattle, would be eradicated before he left office. But, he noted, "we're near. It will come soon."

The Mediterranean fruit fly has been the most persistent pest during Conner's tenure, having been detected and wiped out several times in the last 30 years.

"Our people are very, very professional," Conner said.

"They set the standards for the world in (Medfly) detection. The Florida trapping and monitoring method is being adopted world-wide now."

Conner said the Department's eradication programs over the years have ultimately been successful, even in the case of citrus canker, despite widespread political hype by the media in general.

After citrus canker was detected in a nursery in 1984, Conner, acting on the advice of state, federal and university specialists, ordered the burning of acres of nursery stock to prevent spread of the disease.

A committee was formed to determine a value for the stock destroyed and, for the first time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture agreed to contribute half of the cost of a plant indemnification program.

While the USDA paid its share in the program, the Florida Legislature allocated only about 60 percent of the funds for the state's contribution.

In subsequent years, growers filed lawsuits to collect more for burned plants and the Legislature established administrative procedures for handling compensation claims. In a ruling last fall, the Florida Supreme Court declared those procedures were constitutional, vindicating the authorities completely for their recommendation to burn the nursery stock.

Conner said one of his concerns resulting from the canker situation was that the courts would make it nearly impossible for regulatory agencies to move forward on a timely basis in future eradication efforts.

"We've been very effective in eradication programs, because we've been able to get out and

get the job done," Conner said.

"The (canker) program will have to go down in history as a well-managed bureaucratic program," because it was flexible and changed as the scientific evidence changed, he said.

Conner noted that his actions were always based on the best professional advice available at a given time. But he said that he bore the brunt of criticism in the joint federal-state program because he was "the only elected official involved."

Among the things he is most proud of, Conner said, "We kept agriculture viable through some lean times. Agriculture has maintained a respectable profile," which took a lot of work on the part of the Department and the industry.

During his tenure as Commissioner, annual farm cash receipts in Florida soared from \$869 million in 1960 to \$6.2 billion in 1990, even as the state's population grew from less than five million to almost 13 million.

A MODERN DEPARTMENT

Conner said he hopes history will record that there was "not a void in agriculture during the 30 years I was in office. It was progressive. The state of the art (in regulatory matters) was sought and pursued with vigor.

"The Florida Department of Agriculture is the most modern department of agriculture in the country, with the best equipment and the best personnel," Conner said. "I think that's something to be proud of."

Conner said he is also pleased when people of all ranks in the Department receive national awards for their outstanding work. "It makes me proud of our people and our Department," he said.

Conner picked up his own share of awards for his contributions to agriculture in the state, the nation and around the world over the years.

Among the more prestigious honors were a Certificate of Merit and the Superior Service Award, both from the USDA,

the Silver Bucranium Award from the World Meat Congress, the Order of Francisco de Miranda award from the Government of Venezuela, the Wiley Medal from the Food and Drug Administration and induction into the Florida Agricultural Hall of Fame.

In December, more than 1,500 friends, government officials, Department employees and industry representatives turned out for a Doyle Conner Appreciation Dinner at the Florida State Fairgrounds in Tampa.

At the last Florida Cabinet meeting in December, Conner was presented with a resolution honoring him for his "commitment to public service to Florida and the Nation" during a career that "spans the modern era of (Florida) history."

In a move that appropriately brought Conner's career full circle, the Commissioner introduced his own Cabinet resolution honoring five FFA members from around the state who had won individual or team contests at the recent national FFA convention.

Several of the young people cited Conner as serving as a role model. Of his plans now for retirement, Conner said he expects to stay busy attending to his cattle and timber operations in Jefferson County, which he said he has "sadly neglected" during his years in public service.

Conner said he has received some employment offers and will pursue a few, but he has not accepted any yet. He said he will continue to be involved in agricultural issues and will devote time to promoting the Florida Agricultural Museum, which he initiated in Tallahassee.