

GROWERTALKS

JZ on D.C.

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Q&A With Tal Coley

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During Cultivate, I was able to grab a few minutes with the Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association's (FNGLA) new CEO Tal Coley, who spent the last few years as Director of Government Affairs with AmericanHort before making the move. Tal (who is a Florida native) is taking over for the recently retired Ben Bolusky, who'd been with FNGLA for over 20 years. I wanted to hear about how the transition was going and his future plans for the organization.

JZ: What are your general goals with FNGLA?

TC: Short-term, getting a lot of the gears moving again for the association that were there prior to COVID. Over the past couple of years, there were some things that were paused. Like our divisions—citrus and nursery, floriculture, landscape—all of these different ones that met pretty routinely pre-COVID and then during COVID didn't meet as much. So a lot of the levers are there internally, ready to pull, in getting those people talking again and trying to develop solutions to their problems.

JZ: How has the transition gone from national to state-level politics?

TC: With AmericanHort we had trade shows, we had the advocacy. The cycle of the association I didn't have a hard time adjusting to. Now it's just how to smartly use your time. There are so many opportunities for you to do things—where's the most opportune place for you to be for the benefit of the organization?

We do have a wonderful lobbyist, Jim Spratt, who had worked at FNGLA previously and now has a few clients. He's out of Tallahassee, so he's running point on the legislative side of things for us. So we're very present in the state legislature on pretty much all the issues thanks to Jim and that gives us an advantage.

I think if I had come in blindly to this job, and not had the four and a half years to work with the really knowledgeable people that were at AmericanHort, the learning curve would have been too steep. With the diversification of the industry and the different issues at hand—it would probably take 10 years. And I'm still learning.

JZ: Is there a particular project or something new for FNGLA that you want to explore?

TC: The beauty of what I've come into is that this organization has had so much stability throughout so many years. It's our 70th anniversary. I'm only the fifth CEO. We have wonderful staff that have been here a long time. As far as

an organization goes, I'd put us up against anybody from the grassroots level and just the interest among the industry. And I feel very blessed with that.

Granted, I do think we're coming into a new era and there might be some ways to go with some new projects. I look at Florida and we have three of the largest media markets in the country (Tampa, Orlando, Miami)—how do we break into the routine programming? There's natural intersections with our industry in the public discourse, whether that be new varieties in the spring or how to take care of your lawn this year or getting your trees trimmed because hurricane season is coming. Things like that where you can build a routine with these media outlets, whether that be with print or with TV or radio. I think we're doing ourselves a disservice if we don't try to become part of that general discussion.

JZ: How much does your experience with lobbying for AmericanHort help with this new position?

TC: It's stakeholder management. It's PR and public policy. That's a key component for any executive. Ben was in the same position that I was when he went to FNGLA and made the same jump. [Editor's note: It was the American Nursery & Landscape Association at the time before it merged with OFA to make AmericanHort.] Ben spent 24 years with FNGLA and loved it so much he never left and I think that's what this type of opportunity is.

JZ: And you get to stay in the same industry, too ...

TC: I do. And I wanted to be part of this industry that I've grown to love over the last four and a half years. We all have to work together on a lot of these issues and it's important that we continue to do so. You need to have someone on the watch at both the federal and state levels, and you accomplish that by being involved at both levels.

JZ: What's the difference between dealing with federal policymakers versus state and local?

TC: I haven't done a lot of rounds with the state and local yet, but what you're going to find is—from talking to folks who have done both—at the state level, you're not going to have a full-time staff that you're working with for a particular lawmaker. So the learning curve might be a little higher, but you don't have so many layers to go through to get to the policymaker.

Each state and each legislature has its own unique things, but again, that's where we're well-positioned because we have someone like Jim who knows all these folks and we have a state-level PAC (political action committee) that has the ability to support industry champions at the state level.

JZ: What are the major legislative issues for growers at the Florida state level?

TC: From the growers' side, there doesn't seem to be anything really "hot-button," other than the typical issues like labor. We have a lot more people turning to H-2A in Florida and I feel like that will only continue. That is definitely the No. 1 issue, as it is with every grower.

What I've come into, that I didn't necessarily touch at the national level, is that a lot of the landscape issues seem to be at the county and municipal levels, whether that be banning of fertilizers or irrigation and water issues.

JZ: Sounds like this will be an exciting few months for you ...

TC: It is. It's exciting to be home. You kind of go through the Rolodex of your life from places you've been and people you've interacted with and it all comes back. There is something to be said for being a native and coming home and knowing the particular quirkiness of an area and how people operate. I think Florida is just a big melting pot. I feel comfortable in every area and I've lived in all of them and that helps.

The beauty is that there's already a bedrock for this organization. We keep everything running and we do a lot of things well. And a lot of folks can't say that.

H-2A/H-2B Service Organizations Merge

másLabor, a provider of comprehensive services for employers participating in the H-2A and H-2B visa programs, has merged with AgWorks H2, LLC, a Georgia-based H-2A and H-2B consulting firm.

Under the new structure, AgWorks will expand its service offerings to align with those offered by másLabor, including assistance with domestic job applicants, comprehensive audit services and other visa categories. The companies will also consolidate their compliance teams to provide clients with expertise and best practices unrivaled in the industry. Integration also comes with a significant investment in technology to provide clients with a more efficient and effective process throughout.

“AgWorks has a proven success model, with a deep compliance focus and highly knowledgeable leadership,” said Edward Silva, CEO of másLabor, who recently purchased másLabor in July 2021. “But as we and the market continue to evolve and grow, there are clear benefits to integration, shared systems and knowledge, and more active collaboration.”

The two companies obtain approvals for their clients to employ over 60,000 foreign workers per year—more than the next three largest service providers combined. This gives the companies unique insight into issues faced by clients in every geography and industry.

“Together, we have a detailed view of the labor market for the entire country as it relates to H-2 workers, across nearly every industry. We know the challenges, the opportunities and we have best-in-class solutions,” said Dan Bremer, current President of AgWorks, who’ll remain in a key leadership role to both másLabor and AgWorks.

—JZ

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