Jeff Ishee: Well, hello everyone. I'm Jeff Ishee and I want to thank you first of all for inviting me to take part in this very interesting educational session about Virginia agriculture and local food systems and how they're trending. It's a great honor to be with you today.

Jeff Ishee: I was asked to introduce myself and tell you a little bit about my role in Virginia agriculture. I moved to the commonwealth of Virginia with the intention of being involved in agriculture. My personal history was not in agriculture. All of my family were farmers, everything from beef cattle producers to catfish growers down in Mississippi and Alabama. And I wanted to be involved with agriculture in some regards so I went out and moved to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in 1994. I wanted to be involved in local agriculture.

Jeff Ishee: There was a new county fair starting up at the time with the Augusta County Fair and there was a brand new farmers market starting in Stanton. , it was called the Stanton Augusta Farmers Market. And that was the first thing I got involved with as a grower for the Stanton Augusta Farmers Market. I had four acres of vegetables out in Middlebrook, Virginia and Augusta County. And, I had a great time, worked my way up to be on the board of directors and eventually the market master for the Stanton Augusta Farmers Market. Spent several years as the market master and, we eventually opened a new market in Verona, Virginia. It was a mid-week market. And that was a great experience. And so, that's how I got introduced to Virginia agriculture was through local farmers markets.

Jeff Ishee: Also got involved with agricultural communications writing for a newspaper in Middlebrook at that time called Augusta Country. It was a monthly newspaper and that led to a job in radio with WSVA in Harrisonburg. And my mentor and my predecessor was the, the great Homer Quan who spent 49 years as a farm broadcaster. I learned a lot from Homer. He told me Ish, farmers want to know three things. They want to know the long-term weather forecast. They want to know market prices, and they want to know what other farmers are doing. If you remember those three things you'll be a success in farm radio.

Jeff Ishee: And, I sure miss Homer. He's been gone now for almost 20 years, but learned a lot and we've developed the radio program, started off in Harrisonburg. And I started getting affiliated radio stations here in Virginia, West Virginia, and as of this point the winner of 2019. , we are now up to 70 radio stations all across the eastern seaboard that carry my radio programs. I get up every morning and in my home studio I produce six radio programs for various affiliates, all the way from south Georgia to upstate New York and out far west as the state of Kentucky. So really honored to do that and be involved with agricultural communications.

Jeff Ishee: The radio gig led to a job in television with Virginia Public Television, and WVPT in Harrisonburg. And we started a brand new program, a television program, back in 2003 called Virginia Farming. , within a year it had syndicated to Roanoke and to the Richmond and Charlottesville markets, and then about a year later we were picked up by RFDTV and now Virginia Farming has been running on RFD-TV for a number of years.

Jeff Ishee: I was also involved with the Rockingham County Fair for a number of years as the general manager. , such an honor to be the general manager of the Rockingham County Fair. It is known widely as one of the leading agricultural fairs in all of North America, recognized so on many occasions. And it was really an honor to be the general manager there at the Rockingham County Fair for five years.

Jeff Ishee: So, that's a little bit of introduction about my past and myself. So it's a real pleasure to be with you today and I've been provided with a list of questions and I have not rehearsed any of these answers or, or written down my response. This is all going to be spontaneous. But, I was asked to please provide a brief history and background of Virginia agriculture, all areas.

Jeff Ishee: Well Virginia of all places has an amazing history when it comes to agriculture, as the, as the license plate on your car says, we've been farming since 1614. More than 400 years we've been involved in commercial agriculture and it is a fascinating history. It all started with tobacco and hemp. And of course, hemp is back in the news now. It's been legalized for 2019. So there's always something going on in Virginia agriculture.

Jeff Ishee: When I first moved here tobacco was king. , all of the economic factors and charts showed tobacco was by far the number one crop in the commonwealth of Virginia. And that has changed amazingly over the past 30 years. Now, hay is the number one economic crop in Virginia, followed closely by soybeans and corn for grain. So things change. The greenhouse industry has blossomed over the last several years. The wine industry has truly grown.

Jeff Ishee: When I moved here in the late 1990s I believe we had two, perhaps three, wineries in the entire commonwealth of Virginia. Now we have close to 300 according to VDACS. Is it a bubble? I don't think so. I really think the wine industry is here to stay. , there's a lot of money invested in the wine industry. I will say this about the craft beer industry, and you, you might not like it, but I do think that's a bubble. I think there's just too many breweries trying to do exactly the same thing and it's going to weed itself out, kind of like the food truck industry has done over the past few years. We don't see as many food trucks as we did two or three years ago. And I, I don't know if we call that a fad, but craft beers, there will be some really good ones that stick around and, and have some legs, so to speak. But, other than that I think a lot of them are going to fade away over the, over time.

Jeff Ishee: Another question, what areas of agriculture represent the largest sectors in our state? Well that's an amazing thing about Virginia agriculture is our diversity, from seafood around the Chesapeake Bay to the poultry industry, from dairy farming to tree fruit with apples and peaches, , tobacco, of course, cotton, peanuts, corn, soybeans, , the wine industry growing, and horticulture. There are just so many areas of Virginia agriculture that are important to our agricultural economy.

Jeff Ishee: I remember Carlton Porter, who was our commissioner of agriculture several years ago, he used to, to give speeches and so forth at various conferences, and he would go down the list of all the things that we produce, Virginia farmers produce here in the commonwealth of Virginia. And it was a very long list. And then at the very end he'd say, "Poor Idaho." I always loved that. But we do have a great diversity in agriculture. Some of the largest sectors of course, the poultry industry, the beef cattle industry, row crops, corn and soybeans. , a lot of those going to exports now so, and horticulture, I believe is number five as far as the economic numbers are concerned here in the commonwealth of Virginia.

Jeff Ishee: But you may be surprised as I mentioned just a few moments ago, the number one crop in Virginia, economically speaking, is hay. I know that the US Department of Agriculture recently released some figures on that and in 2017 Virginia farmers produced $346 million worth of hay. So that's certainly the top industry here in the commonwealth of Virginia.