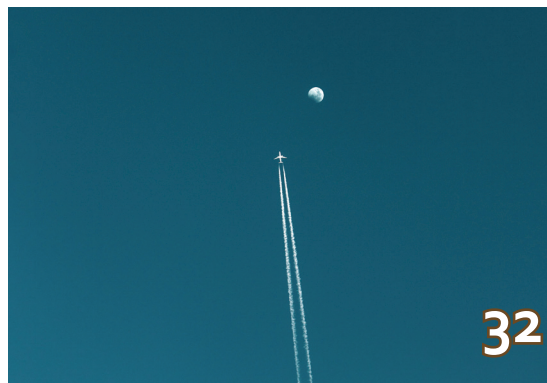




URBAN **AG** COUNCIL MAGAZINE

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Keeping Georgia's green industry informed



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Advocate. Educate. Promote.

Sine Die

UAC members invest in Capitol relationships

by Bryan Tolar, Tolar Capitol Partners

After years of working closely with UAC staff and members, I was given the opportunity to serve as the eyes, ears and voice of UAC members at the Georgia State Capitol during the 2019 session of the Georgia General Assembly. I'm grateful.

A key element to your business success is having insight and engagement with elected leaders from across the state.

All 180 Members in the House and 56 in the Senate need to know about UAC issues and opportunities so we can continue to advance and protect policies that are important to UAC members. It's an honor to put my experience to work to work for you, Georgia's leading landscape, turfgrass, and horticulture association.

2019 legislative session

With the 2019 legislative session behind us, it could best be summarized in one word: **Progress.** With a new Governor in Brian Kemp, a new Lieutenant Governor in Geoff Duncan, and a long list of over 40 new state legislators, it was important for UAC to cement relationships that will build in the years ahead. Most importantly, we took cues from your member survey responses and kept our eye on the ball. **Your feedback focused on labor shortages, water use, advancing agriculture, and state budget priorities.** This input served us well as the session concluded in early April, but our work is just getting started. Here's a quick look at key issues and what's ahead for UAC members.

► Ag Workforce Senate Study Committee

To help address our industry workforce challenges, the Georgia Senate approved SR 460, the Senate Agriculture, Forestry, and

Landscape Workforce Access Study Committee. This effort by **Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman John Wilkinson** could help uncover workforce solutions for UAC member companies, among others. Planning is already underway and, starting this summer, this study committee is planning to host three hearings across the state to gather input from business and industry leaders, as well as state agency heads and state lawmakers.

The Committee consists of nine members and includes the **Executive Director of the Georgia Urban Agriculture Council, Mary Kay Woodworth.** Three Senators, the Commissioner of Agriculture, the State School Superintendent, the Commissioner of Labor, and two appointed citizen members (to be named in the weeks ahead) round out the committee.

Employers in landscape, agriculture, and forestry will have the opportunity to share their struggles to find the necessary workforce to meet production demands.

It's crucial that this committee recognize the important role of agriculture, forestry, and landscape jobs and the economic benefits provided state wide. Following meetings across the state, the committee will report their findings by the end of the year. We hope you will make time to attend a meeting along the way as UAC continues to engage on this critical challenge of workforce access.

► Hemp production

The "Georgia Hemp Farming Act," HB 213 by **Representative John Corbett** was signed into law by Governor Brian Kemp on May 10. This sets the stage for Commissioner of Agriculture Gary Black, in consultation with Governor Kemp and Attorney General Chris Carr, to submit a plan to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture for state regulation of industrial hemp production by the Georgia

Department of Agriculture. **Senator Tyler Harper** carried it in the Senate and made several helpful adjustments along the way. Numerous UAC members took an interest in the hemp production process, whether growing seedlings in greenhouses, handling certification, farming of the hemp crop, or plant processing. Hemp grown for this program has a very low maximum of .3% THC level. This is much different from the medical cannabis oil used for seizures and other approved treatments that contains up to 5% THC. The Georgia Department of Agriculture is working to provide hemp production details soon, but we understand **Mike Evans, Program Director of Plant Protection, will be a primary contact.** He can be reached at 404-586-1140 or Mike.Evans@agr.georgia.gov.

► Pesticide reporting exemption

HB 223 by **Representative Robert Dickey**, a Georgia peach grower near Macon, clarifies that pesticide application practices are not considered a “release of a hazardous



UAC membership benefited from many legislative leaders this year including Senator John Wilkinson (left) and Representative Tom McCall (right).

substance.” This is common-sense to most folks, but it was a good move to lock it down in Georgia law moving forward. **Senator John Wilkinson** carried it the Senate and Governor Kemp signed the bill into law on May 6. Like most new laws, it becomes effective on July 1, 2019.

► State budget

Governor Kemp signed the \$27.5 billion state budget, the largest budget in Georgia's history, on May 10. It includes several enhancements to projects of interest to UAC, most notably is the \$2.5 million in state bonds for the **UGA greenhouse complex** project in Athens. We'll need to keep pushing for additional funding for this project, but this is a good start.

In addition, the **Department of Agriculture** received \$204,000 to add a staff position and funds for managing the Georgia Ag Tax Exemption (GATE) program and **UGA Extension** received \$656,000 to add a dozen new county educators, plus \$641,000 to add a couple of precision ag positions and a vegetable breeder.

On the environmental management side, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division got \$215,000 to assist with the farm irrigation metering program, \$134,000 to add two new compliance specialist positions, and \$109,000 for statewide water planning.

Our UAC member poll showed there was great interest in school teachers receiving a \$3,000 raise, which was also included in this historic budget along with a boost in wages for all state employees. **This budget will run July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020.** With state tax revenue growth of 5% above the previous year and population on the rise, we could see an even larger budget proposed by Governor Kemp in January 2020.

► Right to Farm

Very important policy discussions started this year regarding enhancements to Georgia's existing Right to Farm protections. With key legislative champions in **House Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom McCall** and **Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman John Wilkinson**, consideration is being given to changes to would strengthen this important nuisance protection policy. Legal challenges regarding nuisance issues have long been a big potential problem for Georgia farm facilities. We are seeing legal challenges made to farms in other states – we know the threat is real. As

farm operations change and property swaps hands, we must carefully strike the balance of farm rights and neighboring property rights to be successful. **With UAC member input, the leadership of elected leaders, and a strong partnership of all of our agriculture and forestry allies, we will continue our work in the 2020 legislative session.** Building the right balance and establishing the best legal protections for these farm operations is the right move for our future.

Support and gratitude

UAC membership benefited from many legislative leaders this year and I wanted to highlight just a few: **Senator John Wilkinson, Senator Tyler Harper, Senator Jack Hill, Senator Freddie Powell Sims, Representative Tom McCall, Representative John Corbett, Representative Patty Bentley, Representative Robert Dickey, and Representative Terry England.** Time and time again, they support UAC issues and I know we are grateful for each of them.

Most of all, thank you for your support of UAC. Your dues, engagement, participation, and encouragement help build our brand. With your continued help, we will further advance our reputation in the public policy arena. Our issues will lead to a better Georgia and a thriving economic environment for all aspects of our diverse industry. We can't do it without you – thank you! 🌿

About the author



Bryan Tolar is principal of Tolar Capitol Partners, Inc. which brings over 25 years of governmental and political affairs experience to best serve clients. They have a long list of legislative and regulatory successes while leading in the government affairs arena.

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