WOMEN LEAD NC

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Ray Starling
General Counsel, NC Chamber
President, NC Chamber Legal Institute

As general counsel of the NC Chamber and president of the NC Chamber Legal Institute, Ray sets strategy for litigation of the NC Chamber, the NC Chamber Legal Institute, and its affiliated entities. He also serves as a key member of the organization's executive leadership team, providing guidance and counsel to the public policy development functions of the NC Chamber, and assessing and advising on current and emerging laws, rulings, and regulations affecting the NC Chamber and business community in North Carolina. Ray is also a respected agricultural industry thought leader, and leads the NC Chamber Foundation and NC Golden LEAF Foundation's efforts to craft a strategic plan for North Carolina agriculture, a project dubbed NC Ag Leads. Ray was elected to the Board of Smithfield Foods, Inc. as an Independent Director in early 2025, contributing governance expertise to one of the world's leading food companies.

Prior to joining the NC Chamber team, Ray served as Chief of Staff to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue where he coordinated execution of the Secretary's policy agenda for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a $140 billion agency with more than 100,000 employees. Ray focused on regulatory and deregulatory initiatives and acted as a point of contact for stakeholders throughout agriculture and rural communities.

He previously served as the principal agriculture advisor to the President of the United States at the White House, served as chief of staff and chief counsel for U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, after serving as general counsel when Tillis was Speaker of the House in the North Carolina legislature, and worked as general counsel for the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, interfacing daily with Commissioner Steve Troxler.

Ray has a deep understanding of North Carolina's economy and has proven experience building relationships that transcend politics. In the fall of 2022, Starling released his book Farmers Versus Foodies in which he shares some perspective on the question of who will call the shots for the future of the farming and food system in the United States and beyond. The book is an Amazon best seller and has been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

In private practice for several years, Ray has taught numerous agricultural and food law courses. He has a bachelor's degree in agricultural education from North Carolina State University and a law degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He grew up on a Century Family Farm in southeastern North Carolina and credits that experience as having more to do with his career path than any other influence or opportunity. His parents continue to farm, as does his eldest brother. Starling was a National FFA Officer and is a former 4-H member.