

MEETING MINUTES

July 22, 2020

The second meeting of the Commission on Agriculture was held at 1:00 pm CST on Wednesday, July 22, 2020 via Zoom.

The following Commission members were present:

- Mr. Jeff Aiken, President, Tennessee Farm Bureau
- Mr. Jim Bledsoe, Tennessee Poultry Association and President, Tennessee Association of Conservation Districts
- Mr. Randy Boyd, President, University of Tennessee
- Dr. Keith Carver, Chancellor, UT Martin (UTM)
- Dr. Tim Cross, Senior Vice President and Senior Vice Chancellor, UT Institute of Agriculture (UTIA)
- Mr. Dave Fugate, Chair, UTIA Eastern Region Advisory Council
- Rep. Curtis Halford, Chair, House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
- Dr. Charlie Hatcher, Commissioner of Agriculture
- Mr. Johnny Heard, Appointee-at-large
- Ms. Jennifer Houston, Past President, National Cattlemen's Beef Association
- Mr. Joe Huffine, UTIA Middle Region Advisory Council
- Mr. Reggie Marshall, President, Fruit and Vegetable Association
- Dr. Donde Plowman, Chancellor, UT Knoxville (UTK)
- Sen. Steve Southerland, Chair, Senate Energy, Agriculture, and Natural Resources Committee
- Mr. John Charles Wilson, Chair, UTIA Western Region Advisory Council

In addition, the following Deans participated in the meeting: Dr. Hongwei Xin (UTIA), Dr. Caula Beyl (UTIA), Dr. Jim Thompson (UTIA), Dr. Scott Senseman (UTIA), Dr. Todd Winters (UTM), and Dr. Chandra Reddy (TSU).

I. President's Remarks

UT President Randy Boyd thanked members for their service and support of Tennessee agriculture. Boyd provided an update on his efforts to visit all 95 UT Extension offices and secure more funding for new agents. Boyd noted the Governor's budget proposal originally contained \$2.3 million to fund 32 new agents in distressed, rural counties, but that due to COVID-19 the funding was removed. He noted that it will remain a priority.

Boyd also highlighted an emerging issue impacting UTIA's work at the Milan AgResearch and Education Center. For over 40 years, UT has leased roughly 60 percent of the Milan property from the US Army. As the Army plans to surplus the land, UT is seeking the support of stakeholders to advocate for a federal land transfer between the two entities.

II. Supporting Tennessee Agriculture Through COVID-19

Commission Chair Tim Cross provided an update on UTIA's efforts to support Tennessee agriculture during COVID-19. UTIA's COVID-19 Task Force has worked diligently to provide framework for off-campus UTIA locations and on-campus procedures largely model UTK. Cross discussed how UTIA's education, research, extension, and service programs have adapted, from shifting student orientation online and making personal calls to check on UTIA students, to distributing masks and providing meals to low income families. Cross also

noted COVID-19's impact to UTIA's budget, including the loss of proposed new state funding for hiring 32 Extension employees in rural, distressed counties. Cross thanked the General Assembly, however, for not implementing budget reductions that impacted UTIA.

Chancellor Donde Plowman provided an update on UTK's reopening plans. Forty-five percent of UTK course offerings will be online. The campus has extensive plans ranging from technology and classroom utilization to residence halls and isolation spaces. Cross thanked Plowman for her leadership.

Chancellor Keith Carver provided an update on UTM's COVID-19 response and its agriculture programs. Enrollment is steady and the campus has approximately 1,000 agriculture majors. UTM will be open this fall and within the UTM College of Agriculture, the hybrid-to-online course ratio will be roughly 50/50. Carver updated the Commission on new majors at UTM, including Veterinary Science and Veterinary Technology.

III. Industry Feedback

Cross asked for feedback regarding industry challenges and needs, including those that have arisen due to COVID-19. Jennifer Houston raised two issues. Livestock market owners have faced "super challenges" to staying in business during COVID-19; although all Tennessee markets have stayed in business with the help of the Department of Agriculture. Further, Houston noted that disruption impacting meatpacking plants took a toll on the beef industry. A possible "silver lining" from the crisis, however, is that the American consumer may be more understanding of the processing channel required to place food on their table.

Cross raised the impact of COVID-19 to the poultry and pork industries. Jim Bledsoe discussed the impact on the poultry industry, where there has been a large shift in demand from restaurants to grocery stores. Jeff Aiken cited an increase in demand for local foods and also a lack of qualified workers for processing facilities as a major issue. Commissioner Hatcher provided an update on the work of the state's Economic Recovery Group and noted that increased processing capacity for all commodity groups is needed. Hatcher mentioned that an agriculture and forestry COVID-19 relief package is being worked on by the state and that an announcement is forthcoming.

Cross reiterated supply chain issues and noted possible collaborations with UT Knoxville's supply chain program, which is one of the highest ranked in the country. Reggie Marshall raised hemp processing, irrigation and rate issues with municipal water, and encouraging youth interest in agriculture as key issues. Rep. Curtis Halford noted that northwest Tennessee has done relatively well during COVID-19, citing that while prices of beef and pork have risen, lack of supply hasn't been as prominent.

John Charles Wilson raised an issue impacting the forestry industry. Producers along Tennessee river this year lost entire forestry crops to straight line winds. Wilson mentioned that no USDA support system exists to assist these producers, unlike the row crop and livestock industries. Johnny Heard reiterated the issue and gave an update on the overall forestry market.

Sen. Steve Southerland reiterated agricultural youth education as key issue and offered his assistance as Senate Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources Chairman. Dr. Chandra Reddy also provided an update on how COVID-19 has impacted TSU's agriculture programs.

IV. USDA Innovation Agenda

USDA Deputy Undersecretary for Research, Education, and Economics Dr. Scott Hutchins provided an overview of the Agricultural Research Service, the Economic Research Service, the National Agriculture Statistics Service, and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Hutchins discussed the USDA Science Blueprint, including the following priorities: sustainable agriculture intensification, agricultural climate adaptation, food and nutrition

translation, value added innovation, and agricultural science policy leadership. Hutchins then presented on USDA's Innovation Agenda, which has goals to increase agriculture productivity by 40 percent while decreasing the environmental footprint of U.S. agriculture by 50 percent. There is a significant research workstream component of the agenda, focusing on the following innovation theme clusters: genome design, digital/automation, prescriptive intervention, and systems-based farm management. USDA has requested public input on the agenda and hopes to have an initial strategy based on feedback by the end of the year.

Plowman asked Hutchins what the biggest need was from USDA's perspective where land-grant universities could play a role. Hutchins answered that land-grants can help significantly by amplifying the value proposition of agriculture – helping with storytelling as it relates to ag-science being the cutting edge of science.

V. Emerging UTIA Plans Addressing Innovation and Technology

Dr. Hongwei Xin provided an update on emerging UTIA plans addressing innovation and technology. Xin detailed key priorities, including genomics, agricultural synthetic biology, One Health (animal, human, plant, and environment), and digital/precision/smart agriculture. An overview was also provided on proposed feedback to USDA on the innovation agenda, which is due August 1, 2020. Cross moved that the Commission consider the proposed feedback. Houston raised that agricultural innovation needs continued buy-in from society. Xin referenced gene editing as an example, noting the need for consumer education. Dr. Scott Senseman mentioned that a new genomics hire will have an Extension appointment, paving the way for greater consumer education in Tennessee. Wilson moved approval of the Commission's feedback to USDA, with Houston providing a second. Aiken asked a question regarding the feedback on digital automation and why switchgrass was identified but not hemp. Aiken also raised a statement included in the feedback document regarding "increased control" of agriculture. Cross addressed the hemp issue, citing that UTIA currently lacks a faculty member with expertise in hemp and that the list is not exhaustive. Xin addressed the issue of "control" of agriculture, citing that the reference is to give farmers more control of their farming operation – not increased government control. The Commission approved the proposed feedback, representing a statewide response to USDA's Innovation Agenda.

Wilson revisited the issue of UTIA's presence in Milan, voicing his concern over possible loss of the Milan property currently leased from the US Army. Wilson stated that the University should aggressively pursue a land-transfer or other means to secure the property, which is critical to no-till research and innovation in the state and nation. Boyd thanked Wilson and noted the critical nature of the Commission's support. Houston offered her assistance, as did Jim Bledsoe. Wilson moved that the Commission consider a resolution supporting a land-transfer. Halford provided a second and the Commission concurred via voice vote. A resolution will be prepared and circulated for Commission approval.

Joe Huffine provided an update on how COVID-19 has impacted the Tennessee Farmer's Cooperative, noting the challenges with ensuring employee safety while operating as an essential business. Huffine also covered the major impact COVID-19 has had on the dairy industry. Aiken also raised the recent court ruling on dicamba as major concern for soybean and cotton industries in Tennessee. Cross acknowledged that it was certainly an issue that needs attention by the UTIA team as it relates to working with these industries in Tennessee.

VI. Adjournment

With no further business to come before the Commission, the Chair adjourned the meeting.

Respectfully Submitted,

Carey Whitworth, Secretary