

Commission on Agriculture  
Meeting Minutes  
April 9, 2025

The following Commission members were present:

Randy Boyd, President, University of Tennessee  
Dr. Keith Carver, Senior Vice Chancellor and Senior Vice President, UT Institute of Agriculture  
Dr. Yancy Freeman, Chancellor, UT Martin  
Dr. Charlie Hatcher, Commissioner, TN Department of Agriculture  
Jim Bledsoe, Tennessee Poultry Association  
Phyllis Ferguson, Tennessee Pork Producers Association  
Charles Goan, Chair, UTIA Eastern Region Advisory Council  
Joe Huffine, Chair, UTIA Middle Region Advisory Council  
Stefan Maupin, Executive Director, Tennessee Soybean Promotion Board  
Carol Reed, TN Corn Growers  
Sen. Shane Reeves, Chairman, Senate Committee on Energy, Agriculture and Natural Resources  
Rep. Chris Todd, Chairman, House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources  
Libby Wilson, Tennessee Farm Bureau (representing President Eric Mayberry)

President Boyd opened the meeting by commenting on how important alignment is for the agriculture community in Tennessee and outlined current challenges regarding federal funding and policy changes impacting higher education research efforts. Boyd noted that UT is working through the challenges and has healthy finances to navigate them, noting that challenges can bring new opportunities, such as streamlining bureaucracy.

Maupin asked what was learned from COVID that might help navigate the emerging challenges. Boyd cited three primary lessons:

1. Communicate and share best practices;
2. Be transparent; and,
3. When you have optimal information, be decisive and make the call.

Freeman added how learning infrastructure has changed, highlighting that when COVID began, online learning wasn't widely adopted. The pandemic scaled and accelerated virtual learning in major ways.

Carver added that leadership improved at being student-centric, taking care of students' basic needs in ways that have fundamentally changed operating procedures and processes.

Boyd provided an update on the legislative session as it relates to UT's agriculture interests. He expressed gratitude to the Lee Administration for proposing \$46 million in grant funding to support capital improvements at 4-H camps statewide, and to the General Assembly for supporting several of UT's funding priorities, including a new UT Knoxville Chemistry Building and a new business building at UT Martin. Both capital priorities support elements of agriculture education and impact a wide variety of

students and degree programs. Areas of continued funding challenge included UT's proposed Precision Agriculture funding request. The Commission discussed ways to advance these items as well as a broader solution on farmland loss and preservation.

Carver reported on UTIA challenges with federal funding reductions, most notably the USAID Farmer to Farmer program which was eliminated. He shared important personnel updates, including that Dr. Dave White was promoted to Dean of the Herbert College, and Dr. Paul Plummer had been hired as Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine. Carver reported that the search for a new dean of UT Extension is ongoing, and thanked Justin Rhinehart for his service as Interim Dean.

Commission members learned about UTIA's new Ed.S. and Ph.D. degrees from Dr. Chris Stripling, Interim Assistant Dean of the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications (ALEC). Both programs will launch in Fall 2025 and will provide new advancement pathways for agriculture education teachers across the state. Stripling shared enrollment growth numbers for ALEC bachelor's and master's programs and noted that an additional 900 general education students are receiving some exposure to agriculture through ALEC programs and curricula. Stripling concluded by listing several potential online growth opportunities, including Animal Health and Sciences for undergraduates and Environmental Sciences, and Natural Resources and Conservation for graduate students.

Boyd recognized Sen. Shane Reeves, new chair of the Senate Committee on Energy, Agriculture and Natural Resources. Reeves shared his background as a small business owner and seventh generation Tennessean from Rutherford County and noted the challenge of trying to find ways to help young people stay in agriculture and have profitable careers.

Carver facilitated a group discussion and reflection on key issues emerging during the current legislative session. Members noted amplified challenges this year with national advocacy groups entering state-level conversations on several issues. There was agreement that continued collaboration was increasingly important, and Ferguson suggested the university take a more intentional effort to include food and agriculture issues in UT's public policy discussions and initiatives.

Freeman presented on UT Martin's new strategic plan "Watch Us Soar: 2025-2030," highlighting new capital projects on campus and, through partnership with Nashville State, new regional centers in Waverly and Springfield to advance agricultural education. UT Martin is also looking at ways to work collaboratively with UTIA to use ag extension agents as educators in these centers. Freeman noted that the campus is seeing growth in ag business and ag science and is looking at how to leverage AI in agriculture.

Professor Neal Schrick, Head of UT's Department of Animal Science, provided an update on the new UTIA Protein Innovation Center proposed at Blount Farm's East TN Research and Education Center. Among the amenities of the 15,000-square-foot facility are a 40-seat classroom, research labs and a processing room with an open-floor format for equipment demonstrations. The new Center for Protein Innovation will advance UTIA's extension, teaching and research mission with opportunities for workforce development; education programs for meat processors, producers and consumers; summer camps for 4-H and FFA; and TCAT programs.

Todd Winters, Dean of Agriculture and Applied Sciences, presented on UTM's Animal and Veterinary Science programs, citing the success of its Veterinary Science and Technology program which currently has 344 students, 27 of whom entered vet schools in 2024. Winters noted Tennessee is one of the top beef producing states in the nation, with cattle and calves ranking #3 in cash receipts in the state. Yet, like the nationwide trend, Tennessee faces a shortage of veterinarians, especially large animal.

To address the issue, UT Martin is proposing a Cattle Outreach Workforce (COW) Center that will provide hands-on livestock experience with training in reproductive technologies, precision animal agriculture and pasture and ranch management. UTM has submitted the \$5 million project for consideration of state funding in 2026 and is also proposing the project to federal partners.

Prior to the program's conclusion, Bledsoe shared his positive experience as a participant in the inaugural Tennessee Agriculture and Forestry Leadership Program (TAFLP), launched in 2024 to provide cohorts of farmers and foresters with leadership development opportunities.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.