



**Meeting Minutes  
September 24, 2025**

The following Commission members were present:

Randy Boyd, President, University of Tennessee  
Dr. Keith Carver, Senior Vice President & Senior Vice Chancellor, UT Institute of Agriculture  
Donde Plowman, Chancellor of UT Knoxville  
Dr. Yancy Freeman, Chancellor of UT Martin  
Andy Holt, Tennessee Commissioner of Agriculture  
Rep. Chris Todd, Chairman, House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee  
Stefan Maupin, Executive Director, Tennessee Soybean Promotion Council  
Jim Bledsoe, Member, Tennessee Poultry Association  
Phyllis Ferguson, President, Tennessee Pork Producers  
Carol Reed, Tennessee Corn  
Joe Huffine, Chair, UTIA Middle Region Advisory Council  
John Charles Wilson, Chair, UTIA Western Region Advisory Council  
Candace Dinwiddie, Executive Director, Tennessee Forestry Association

President Boyd opened the meeting with a welcome to members. He emphasized the importance of agriculture in Tennessee and the gathering of this group to discuss issues critical to the industry across the state. UT is committed to partnership and providing solutions for Tennessee's farmers, ranchers, and the agriculture industry. He noted increased enrollment numbers for the University System and highlighted important work the UT Institute of Agriculture is doing in research. He also touched on the upcoming legislative session, and the advocacy UT will be doing to establish the Center for Agricultural Innovation with a focus on precision agriculture to keep farmers sustainable and successful, as well as the proposed UT Martin Cattle Outreach and Workforce (COW) Center.

President Boyd thanked those whose terms on the Commission are coming to an end, Dr. Charlie Hatcher and Dr. Charles Goan, and welcomed new members Candace Dinwiddie and Commissioner Andy Holt. Dinwiddie and Holt each gave a brief introduction.

Chancellor Freeman welcomed members to the Martin campus. He reflected on recent campus activities hosting USDA Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Stephen Vaden and USDA Director of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture Dr. Jaye Hamby. Freeman remarked on the opportunities students have on campus that allow them to get hands on experience outside the classroom that makes UT Martin a top choice for students.

US Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Stephen Vaden joined the meeting via Zoom. He commented on the state of the farm economy and USDA's efforts to work with the White House on options available to farmers as input prices continue to rise and commodity prices are at an all-time low for row crop farmers. He emphasized the Department will be focusing on fertilizer costs to ensure farmers are paying fair prices but will likely expand to other sectors of agriculture. The Department is also working with the Administration to offer a bridge to 2026 for farmers to deal with low commodity prices. The Deputy Secretary noted USDA will be sending out \$31 billion to American farmers for disaster relief payments already appropriated by Congress. This year alone in disaster relief payments, USDA will pay \$3 billion more to farmers than all the Market Facilitation Payments spread out over multiple years in President Trump's first term.

The Deputy Secretary touched on trade, noting it is not the only part of the farmer success equation and that we must create new markets domestically. This includes markets for products like biofuels in E15, Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF), and ethanol use in the maritime space. Deputy Secretary Vaden ended his time with the Commission stating USDA will continue working for farmers in Tennessee and across the country and will take back comments from the Commission to the Administration.

Commission members entered open discussion time with President Boyd, focusing on challenges and opportunities faced by their commodities and how UT play a role. Executive Director of the Tennessee Soybean Promotion Council Stefan Maupin spoke about hosting the US Soybean Export Council and a delegation European feed millers in west Tennessee. The group visited the UT AgResearch and Education Center at Milan to learn about no-till and soil conservation efforts implemented by Tennessee farmers. The delegation commented they had never heard such an in-depth discussion of soil health practices and was highly impressed at the 40+ years of continuous no-till production at the Milan farm. This is important as they noted sustainability is their first criterion when looking for new markets.

Maupin also discussed the difficult times rural communities are experiencing. Losses in the row crop industry are impacting financial health of farmers as well as mental health –

highlighting this as an important topic to keep in mind when supporting farmers now and in the future.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Todd expressed farmers in his area have seen increased recent crop damage by deer. This was a problem many Commission members also echoed citing a rising deer population driving the issue. Options for studies to establish economic impact and farm impact from deer damage as well as the development of policy proposals were discussed. Maupin cited the challenges associated with spongiform encephalopathy diseases including chronic wasting disease (CWD) and the need to better control the deer population. He encouraged the university to study CWD disease and commit wildlife biology resources to study combatting this issue.

Dr. Carver gave an update on UTIA working to acquire additional acreage in Milan to expand research opportunities for row crop research.

UT Martin students joined the Commission to showcase select agricultural education learning opportunities. Presentations focused on a full-semester, faculty led study abroad mission in Siena, Italy, agriculture internships with UT Extension and Tennessee Farmers Cooperative, and a travel-study mission to Kenya focused on service learning to help improve food security and nutrition in schools. All students shared insights gained from the hands-on learning experiences.

The award winning UTM Tractor Team demonstrated their latest tractor used in international competition. Students detailed how the agriculture and engineering programs collaborate to apply lessons learned in the classroom to be successful when competing. This year, the team placed 10<sup>th</sup> at the American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers (ASABE) International Quarter-Scale Tractor Student Design Competition, a best finish for the team since they began competing thirteen years ago.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.