

**UT COMMISSION ON AGRICULTURE
MEETING MINUTES**

December 5, 2019
Nashville, Tennessee

The first meeting of the Commission on Agriculture was held at 1:00 pm CST on Thursday, December 5, 2019, at Ellington Agricultural Center in Nashville, Tennessee.

I. Charge and Introduction

UT Interim President Randy Boyd called the meeting to order and provided the Commission’s charge – to share how UT is serving industry, listen to industry needs, and find ways to work more closely together in seeking solutions to Tennessee Agriculture’s challenges. Boyd provided an update on the University of Tennessee, highlighting the System’s commitment to access through programs such as UT Promise. Boyd also discussed the improved rankings of the UT Knoxville campus, which recently moved from 52 to 44 among public universities by U.S. News and World Report. Boyd updated the Commission on his efforts to visit all UT Extension offices and marshal UT resources and expertise to address “grand challenges” such as Tennessee’s opioid epidemic. Finally, Boyd provided an overview of the UT System’s highest state budget priority for FY20-21, \$6.6 million in new funding to advance UT Extension, AgResearch, and the College of Veterinary Medicine.

Senior Vice President and Senior Vice Chancellor of Agriculture Tim Cross, Chairman of the Commission, thanked President Boyd and Commission members for attending and for their leadership of Tennessee agriculture. Members of the Commission introduced themselves and noted why they agreed to serve. UT administrators and members of the public were recognized and thanked for attending.

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, Interim President, University of Tennessee
- Dr. Keith Carver, Chancellor, UT Martin
- Dr. Tim Cross, Senior Vice President and Senior Vice Chancellor, UT Institute of Agriculture
- Mr. Dave Fugate, Chair, UTIA Eastern Region Advisory Council
- Representative Curtis Halford, Chair, House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
- Dr. Charlie Hatcher, Commissioner of Agriculture
- Mr. Johnny Heard, Appointee-at-large
- Mr. Joe Huffine, UTIA Middle Region Advisory Council
- Mr. Reggie Marshall, President, Fruit and Vegetable Association
- Dr. Donde Plowman, Chancellor, UT Knoxville
- Mr. Parks Wells, Executive Director, Tennessee Soybean Promotion Board

Mr. John Charles Wilson, Chair, UTIA Western Region Advisory Council

II. Economic Forecast

Dr. Kim Jensen, professor of agricultural economics, presented an agricultural economic outlook to the Commission, providing current and historical data for net farm income, farm structure, sales, and employment within Tennessee's ag economy and highlighting emerging market issues.

III. Industry Feedback

Chairman Tim Cross asked for feedback on the following questions: What is the greatest challenge faced by Tennessee farmers; what presents the greatest opportunity for developing or strengthening the agricultural industry in Tennessee; and, what education, research, or outreach program or activity would have the most beneficial impact on agriculture in Tennessee?

The following items were identified by Commission members:

Challenges

- Urban sprawl;
- Communicating with consumers and combating misinformation;
- Balancing an aging workforce with rapidly changing agricultural technology;
- Addressing rural health challenges, including farmer suicide and mental health, opioid addiction, and rural hospital closures;
- Low commodity prices and finding new uses/markets for products;
- Workforce development; and,
- Low profitability/lack of profit.

Opportunities

- Agricultural industry and career promotion and youth education;
- Capitalizing on youth interest in technology to generate interest in agricultural careers;
- Increasing state and local livestock and crop processing opportunities;
- Establishing incentives such as a "FarmTrack" fund (similar to ECD "FastTrack" funds);
- Expansion of agritourism;
- Access to a meats lab at UT; and,
- Increased access to value added markets for producers.

Education, Research, or Outreach Programs Identified to Have Highly Beneficial Impact

- Expansion of poultry education and research programs;
- Increased communication targeted to youth, teachers, and consumers;
- Establish pathways to farm ownership;
- Bolster support to the food industry;
- Maintain research base and Extension outreach to increase yields and decrease expenses;
- Provide more hands-on agriculture education and experiential learning for UT students;
- Develop better facilities to allow for hands-on/experiential learning opportunities (examples institutions included Cal Poly and Iowa State);

- Strengthen the Tennessee brand of livestock; and,
- Conduct an Agriculture Commission site visit to study “best-in-class” university-industry partnerships.

IV. UT’s Response to Industry Needs

Chair Cross discussed in greater detail the UT System’s top budget priority of \$6.6 million to advance the UT Institute of Agriculture. The request, if funded, would help make up for several years where UTIA received no operating increase. The funding would allow UTIA to hire 32 new extension agents in Tennessee’s rural, distressed counties and provide funds for salary improvements amongst UTIA Vet Med and AgResearch faculty and staff to close the gap between UT and market median salaries of peer institutions.

V. Planning Next Steps

Chair Cross outlined next steps for the Commission, which will include hearing updates on the identified feedback items after they are assessed and prioritized by campus leaders. The next meeting date was announced for July 22, 2020 in the Middle Tennessee region. A meeting report including minutes is to be distributed.

VI. Adjournment

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

Respectfully Submitted,

Carey Whitworth, Secretary