

## MEETING MINUTES

July 22, 2021

The meeting of the Commission on Agriculture was held at 1:00 pm CST on July 22, 2021 at the Middle Tennessee AgResearch and Education Center in Spring Hill, Tennessee.

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)
- Rep. Curtis Halford, Chair, House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
- Dr. Charlie Hatcher, Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Agriculture
- 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 individuals participated in the meeting: Dr. Hongwei Xin (UTIA), Dr. Keith Barber (UTIA), Dr. Ashley Stokes (UTIA), Mr. James White (Governor's Fellow, Tennessee Department of Agriculture), and Mr. Lee Maddox (Tennessee Farm Bureau).

### I. Chair's Remarks

Dr. Tim Cross called the meeting to order. Cross underscored the infrastructure needs facing Tennessee agriculture that the Commission has discussed in previous meetings and stated that UTIA is taking steps to address those needs through a proposal to the state for American Rescue Plan (ARP) stimulus dollars. He introduced Dr. Hongwei Xin, Dean of AgResearch, to deliver a more in-depth presentation on the funding proposal.

### II. Ag Infrastructure Presentation and Discussion

Xin's presentation covered five primary topics – a brief profile of UT AgResearch, examples of AgResearch hallmark impacts, the state of infrastructure and equipment at AgResearch and Education Centers (AgRECS), the AgResearch Strategic Action Plan (ASAP), and the projected impact of the proposed ARP state investment. Xin noted that it is difficult to conduct 21<sup>st</sup> Century research and workforce training with equipment/infrastructure from the 1950s and highlighted both modernization needs as well as updates for workplace/employee safety. The infrastructure needs presented align with UTIA Strategic Plan Research Priorities, including: One Health, Digital Agriculture, Agriculture Genomics/SynBio, Bioeconomy Advancement, and other emerging opportunities. In all, the ARP funding request totals \$49,767,000, with impacts anticipated in improved faculty and student recruitment and retention; focused problem-solving; facilitating cutting-edge research; increased ability to compete for

extramural funding; expanded capacity to train future ag workforce; elevated academic reputation nationally and globally; and increased economic prosperity for Tennesseans.

### **III. Industry Feedback**

Commission members followed the presentation with a discussion. Chancellor Donde Plowman asked what constituted AgResearch's most critical need. Xin responded that equipment was the highest need, followed by related infrastructure and star faculty. Joe Huffine reiterated the major safety concerns that exist for the 120 employees working across the state at AgRECS and suggested this be factored into the arguments for the ARP funding request, as well as the Commission's resolution of support. Jennifer Houston added that sustainability should also be considered. Commissioner Hatcher mentioned that demonstrating return-on-investment was also critical.

President Boyd asked about other industry needs and how the university could help. Discussion ensued about workforce development and training. Xin noted that UTIA will be increasing certificate program offerings online, as well as programs in meat science. Jennifer Houston raised questions about recruiting students to study agriculture, and a disconnect that seems to exist between advisors/guidance counselors who may not see the high tech/high science side of agriculture. Chancellor Keith Carver mentioned that UT Martin has started to work with 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Weakley County to show them opportunities that exist with a 4-year agriculture degree.

John Charles Wilson reiterated workforce development and partnership needs with K-12 schools. Dean Stokes offered UTIA's partnership between Lone Oaks Farm and Hardeman County schools as an innovative example of partnering with K-12 schools.

Stokes also commented on agriculture needs that exist in urban settings, such as Davidson County, and how these efforts can help address food deserts and food supply during emergency situations. House Agriculture Committee Chairman Curtis Halford noted the continued need for poultry expertise in West Tennessee. Xin responded that UTIA is funding a poultry extension specialist position to meet that need. Commissioner Hatcher highlighted needs in precision agriculture, dairy innovation, meat science, food technology research, manufacturing research, as well as the continued need for processing facilities in the state.

### **IV. Approval of Resolution**

Joe Huffine moved passage of the resolution, pending amendatory language emphasizing worker safety and sustainability. John Charles Wilson seconded. The resolution passed unanimously and will be submitted to the State Department of Finance and Administration as part of the funding support materials. Cross and Boyd thanked the Commission for their support.

### **V. Announcement**

President Randy Boyd announced the naming of the Precision Agricultural Technology Unit after long-time UTIA supporter Waymon Hickman, Sr.

### **VI. Adjournment**

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

Respectfully Submitted,

Carey Whitworth, Secretary