

**UT Commission on Agriculture  
MEETING MINUTES  
January 31, 2023  
Murfreesboro, Tennessee**

The following Commission members were present:

Randy Boyd, President, University of Tennessee  
Dr. Keith Carver, Chancellor, UT Martin  
Dr. Donde Plowman, Chancellor, UT Knoxville  
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  
Reggie Marshall, Fruit and Vegetable Association  
Stefan Maupin, Executive Director, Tennessee Soybean Promotion Board  
Eric Mayberry, President, Tennessee Farm Bureau  
Jeff Aiken, Deputy Commissioner, TN Dept of Agriculture (on behalf of Charlie Hatcher)  
Larry Pitts, Middle TN Vice President, Tennessee Forestry Association (on behalf of Tom Skaggs)

President Boyd opened the meeting with a brief welcome to Members, then shared that Keith Carver will assume the role of Senior Vice President/Senior Vice Chancellor of UTIA effective March 1, and thanked Carver for agreeing to serve in this critical statewide leadership role.

Boyd provided a UTIA progress report, beginning with an overview of the Agriculture Extension program, his visits to all 95 county extension offices and the goal to improve or find new offices for many of the existing programs. There are 10 new offices but others need to be upgraded. While 32 new agents have been added, Boyd would like to secure new investments in extension agents and continue to improve their working relationship with our county partners.

Jim Bledsoe commented that the Rutherford County Extension office is the “gold standard” and a model for the state – with multiple services available within one facility. Joe Huffine added that the facility serves as a hub and resource for the entire community and is completely booked at all times, which Boyd said would be a great sales pitch to other counties. Chancellor Plowman stressed the “one stop shop” aspect of the office and Boyd commented that this should be a priority for the Commission – working together to similarly improve Extension offices all across the state.

Boyd continued his update by highlighting that, while the Herbert College of Agriculture is one of the smallest in the country, UT Knoxville’s infusion of additional resources, including a direct investment of \$11.7 million, will help with improvements for infrastructure, OneHealth, and salary support.

Boyd said one major thing to focus on is compensation and keeping up with inflation across the state. He wants to conduct a compensation study across UTIA to determine gaps and identify plans to address them, adding that pay for extension agents is an area of particular concern.

To conclude his update, Boyd shared his personal goals and “big ideas” to create the Greatest Decade in the history of UTIA, including: provide college credit for 4-H participation; create a vet tech program in the College of Veterinary Medicine; increase online curriculum offerings; double amount of research grants annually; grow enrollment to over 3,000; and create a protein innovation center (“meat processing lab”). These could be incorporated in an overall strategic plan for the Institute, which Boyd said Dr. Carver will reinvigorate with input from internal and external stakeholders.

Charlie Goan suggested expanding the audience of UTIA’s Land, Life, and Sciences magazine to include local elected officials, county officials, legislators, and other key stakeholders. Boyd invited the Commission to submit lists for inclusion.

TDA’s Jeff Aiken commented that the entire Institute would benefit from producing an annual report, like what the offices of Ag Research and Extension currently provide.

Stefan Maupin noted that UTIA should continue to bring visibility to 4H efforts, and asked how UT can better leverage the relationship with Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) to benefit agriculture. Boyd addressed the relationship structure with ORNL, which includes the Oak Ridge Innovation Institute (ORII) created to help align and coordinate efforts around UT research.

Joe Huffine asked about enrollment – how to accommodate and balance growth at the UT Knoxville campus. Chancellor Plowman provided an update and highlighted the biggest challenge is housing. She shared that the size of this year’s incoming class was reduced to match the amount of housing on campus, and that the campus is working with the City of Knoxville on more options. Huffine encouraged strategic growth.

Goan brought forward concerns about FFA teachers who need help establishing their curriculum, and that some UTIA department heads don’t know they can assist. Larry Pitts shared that the Forestry Association will soon introduce a certification program for FFA students.

Boyd then introduced Dr. Hongwei Xin, UTIA Professor and Dean of AgResearch, who gave an overview and update on the proposed Protein Innovation Center. Tennessee is overdue for a facility of this type, and there is a huge need to address workforce and capacity issues for meat processing in the state.

Xin reported that the new center will be integrated among all the UTIA mission centers – research, extension, and education – and that all meats will be included. Two sites in east Tennessee are under consideration for the location – Blount Unit and Holston Unit, both of which are part of the East Tennessee AgResearch and Education Center and approximately 8

miles from the UTIA main campus. The size of the facility would be similar to one currently at Mississippi State University.

The project steering committee is ready to begin gathering input in preparation for working with an architect and design team to further develop the facility design. Xin noted the need to add industry stakeholders to the steering committee, and asked Commission members to share names and ideas with him.

Reggie Marshall suggested that rabbit meat be considered; it is a quick turn-around, high-protein food source that is ideal for small and mid-sized farms, and changing ethnic demographics in areas like Nashville could mean increased demand.

After commission members raised several questions about how the center will be funded, Whitworth gave a funding overview to explain that the project is being considered for federal American Rescue Plan funds allotted to states for economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Tennessee has about \$150 million in ARP funding left to spend, and the meat lab has been deemed eligible. Boyd has been meeting with legislators to advocate and build support for securing state funding. The current ask is \$12.5 million, but Xin noted this number is subject to change depending on labor, supplies, how many lab units are included, and inflation. Final decisions on funding are yet to be determined, but likely in the spring of this year.

Both Whitworth and Boyd commented that now is a good time to engage with stakeholders, to keep them in the loop and ask for their input.

Next on the agenda was an update from Chancellor Carver on Agriculture programs at UT Martin. He first recognized UTM student Julia Law, who attended the meeting and is serving as a legislative intern in the UT Government Relations & Advocacy office.

Currently UTM has almost 1,100 students studying agriculture, and the retention rate in agriculture is high. Carver highlighted efforts to expand education opportunities beyond the Martin campus, including a collaborative partnership with Nile University in Egypt and a 3-month study abroad program in Sienna, Italy, that offers courses in Ag, Agribusiness, and Animal Science. Also mentioned was a new partnership agreement that allows students who complete the Farming Operations Program at the Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) in Crump to receive up to 30 credit hours at UT Martin.

UT Martin recently opened a new STEM building on campus, and Carver said biggest users are Agriculture students. He also noted the potential for undergrad research is vast, and that partnerships with UT helps students in multiple areas of research, and in west TN.

Through its collaboration with Wildwood Farm in Germantown, UTM will be able to increase course offerings in veterinary technology and foster greater collaboration with UTIA for other hands-on teaching and demo labs in ag science. Carver shared that Melanie Smith Taylor,

whose family owns the farm, hosts four ag interns each semester, and is constructing four academic buildings on the site for animal science programs. Dual enrollment labs with Shelby County public schools are also offered at Wildwood.

Following Carver's presentation, Aiken asked what percentage of agriculture students participate in an internship program and commented on the need to increase internship opportunities. His question prompted a group discussion and shared feedback concerning workforce trends and students' learning experiences since COVID-19. Carver shared that UTM and UTIA are working regionally with commodity groups who are hiring graduates, and asking what skills the students are missing when they enter the workplace. The takeaways were that students need improved conflict resolution skills, training on persistence, adapting to change, and help dealing with ambiguity.

Suggestions from Commission members included:

- Offering courses/modules that teach conflict resolution skills;
- Implementing the Clifton StrengthsFinder;
- Offering a 'career orientation';
- Educating about different communication styles and differences across generations;
- Getting students engaged in communities and with mentors to encourage good decisionmaking.

Boyd opened the floor for any additional feedback. Pitts commented that the meeting is a testament to the commitment and ongoing efforts UT is initiating to serve the state.

With no further business, the Commission adjourned.