

Minutes from February 6, 2024
Volunteer Conference Center, Cordell Hull Building, Nashville, TN

The following Commission members were present:

Randy Boyd, President, University of Tennessee
Dr. Donde Plowman, Chancellor, UT Knoxville
Dr. Yancy Freeman, Chancellor, UT Martin
Dr. Keith Carver, Senior Vice President/Senior Vice Chancellor, UT Institute of Agriculture
Sen. Steve Southerland, Chair, Senate Energy, Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
Rep. Chris Todd, Chair, House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
Jim Bledsoe, Tennessee Poultry Association
Phyllis Ferguson, Tennessee Pork Producers Association
Charles Goan, Chair, UTIA Eastern Region Advisory Council
Jim Huffine, UTIA Middle Region Advisory Council
Reggie Marshall, Tennessee Fruit and Vegetable Association
Stefan Maupin, Executive Director, Tennessee Soybean Promotion Board
Eric Mayberry, President, Tennessee Farm Bureau
Carol Reed, Tennessee Corn Promotion Council

Special guests also present: Carol McDonald, Assistant Commissioner for Policy & Legislation, TN Department of Agriculture; Charles Deal, UTIA Vice Chancellor of Advancement; Dr. Chris Clark, UTIA Dean of Ag Economics; Dr. Hongwei Xin, UTIA Dean of Ag Research; Dr. Ashley Stokes, UTIA Dean of Ag Extension; Charles Martinez, Asst. Professor, UTIA Ag & Economic Resources; and Dr. Todd Winters, Dean, College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences, UT Martin.

President Boyd opened the meeting with welcome remarks and provided a brief update from the UT System that included:

- Record enrollment, retention and graduation rates
 - Total enrollment grew by 4.8%, first-year retention is up to a record 85%, and both 4- and 6-year graduation rates hit all-time highs (49.6% and 64.8%, respectively).
- Key UTIA investments and partnerships with state and federal stakeholders
 - \$28 million to construct the WET Center at Lone Oaks Farm
 - \$12.5 million in stimulus funds to construct the UTIA Protein Innovation Center
 - \$562,600 recurring increase for UT College of Veterinary Medicine

Boyd thanked the members for their strong commitment and advocacy, citing their role in helping to secure \$50 million in federal American Rescue Funds for Ag Research modernization as an example of the group's impact. To underscore this point, he previewed a video with Blake Brown, director of the Milan Ag Research and Education Center, highlighting the ARP funding investment's transformational impact. The video was the first in a series of testimonials from center directors that UTIA will roll out in 2024.

Following Boyd's comments, Dr. Keith Carver gave an update on UTIA's 5-year Strategic Plan, noting a comprehensive, statewide effort to gather input that included 429 individual interviews and 13 listening

sessions – 4 on UTIA’s campus, and three each in East, Middle and West Tennessee locations – drawing participation from nearly 250 students, faculty, staff and stakeholders. Primary themes that emerged were collaboration across UTIA’s four units; recruit, retain and develop top talent in faculty and students; and expand access to high-quality learning experiences.

The ensuing feedback from Commission members and discussion highlighted several areas where UTIA is uniquely positioned to be a national leader in AgResearch and Education, including Precision Livestock Farming (PLF); 4H which is providing strong STEM education to 20,000 students through its STEM Centers across Tennessee; and UT’s Pitch Research Project, a collaboration with Michigan State University to develop a pitch (grass) field for the 2026 FIFA World Cup soccer tournament.

Joe Huffine noted that PLF is key for providing assistance cattle farmers and other meat producers in the state. Stefan Maupin encouraged keeping a watchful eye on regenerative agriculture and sustainability initiatives and communicating trends to TN farmers.

Next on the agenda, Chancellor Yancy Freeman introduced a presentation about UT Martin’s efforts to expand access and outreach for agriculture degrees through its network of regional education centers, and successful Online Enrollment and Dual Enrollment programs.

Todd Winters, Dean of Agriculture and Applied Sciences, shared that UTM offers hybrid-format courses at its Regional Centers in Ripley, Jackson, Parsons, Somerville and Selmer, and 37 agriculture students are currently enrolled. Degrees offered include a bachelor’s in Ag Business and Farm & Ranch Management, and a master’s in agriculture and Natural Resources.

Winters also reported on a partnership with Volunteer State Community College that will allow expansion into Robertson County through a regional site opened on Vol State’s Highland Crest campus in Springfield. A new partnership with Robertson County Schools will offer dual enrollment classes for high school students at the Springfield campus.

Additionally, Winters shared that UT Martin and Tennessee State University are partnering to share online ag courses between the two campuses. This UTM-TSU partnership is possible through an \$18 million NextGen grant from the US Department of Agriculture to specifically assist underserved agriculture students.

To highlight UT Martin’s statewide impact, Winters noted that 8 East Tennessee counties and 16 in Middle Tennessee are represented among the total 1,530 high school students participating in UTM’s dual enrollment program.

Winters concluded with a brief update on Wildwood Farm, a 350-acre horse farm located south of Germantown near Memphis, where UT Martin plans to offer future programs such as Veterinary Technology and Equine Science. Staff at the site are already working with 4-H equine students through UT Shelby County Extension and developing summer programming with the TN Governor’s School for Agriculture Sciences.

Carol McDonald, Assistant Commissioner for Policy and Legislation, gave a brief overview of TDA’s legislative priorities for the current session of the General Assembly, most notably a proposed \$25 million Farmland Preservation Fund and a Forestry Fund designed to better align state forests with how Tennessee’s state parks are managed.

Another issue McDonald mentioned from TDA's "watch list" is livestock vaccines and related mRNA technologies, and Phyllis Ferguson expressed interest in sharing information about the topic and status. Mayberry suggested working with TDA on a statewide prohibition on property taxes, while Reed expressed concern about proposed legislation that would require a written-only drivers license test and how it could negatively impact farmers who are reliant on H2A workers.

The final agenda item was a Land Loss Update by Charles Martinez, Assistant Professor and Director of Agricultural and Resource Economics. His research team found that between 1997-2017, 1.1 million acres of Tennessee agriculture and forestry land – equivalent to 4 Tennessee counties – were converted to other uses. Since then, another 432,941 acres – equivalent to 2 additional counties – have been lost at a rate of 86,588 acres per year or 237 acres per day and 9.8 acres per hour. The projections through 2027 put these losses at 2 million acres, the equivalent of 8 Tennessee counties.

Maupin suggested the Martinez' team work to develop policy solutions, and Huffine commented that the land loss data should be shared with local planning commissions across the state. There being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Carey Whitworth
Secretary