

**REAL CHRISTMAS TREE BOARD**  
**BOARD MEETING**  
January 18, 2024

Via Video Conference

**Welcome and Roll Call:** The meeting was called to order at 11:02 a.m. Eastern Time by Chairman, Derek Ahl.

**Board Members in Attendance:** Chuck Berry, Bob Schaefer, Roger Beyer, Renee Beutell, Derek Ahl, Mike Jones, Jane Neubauer, Gary Westlake, Charles Fowler, Mike Cocco, Larry Downey, and Mark Schmidlin

**USDA Representative(s) in Attendance:** Vickie Carpenter and Sarah Richardson

**Staff in Attendance:** Marsha Gray, Cyndi Knudson, and Jenny Tomaszewski

**Guests in Attendance:** Gary Thomas, Gerritt Strathmeyer, Jolynn Stroda, Joshua Koehler, Matthew Priest

**Agenda:**

It was requested to change the spelling of Renee Beutell's last name.

It was **MOVED** by Gary Westlake and **SECONDED** by Bob Schaefer to approve the agenda as corrected.

**MOTION APPROVED.**

**Meeting Minutes:**

It was **MOVED** by Charles Fowler and **SECONDED** by Renee Beutell to approve the October 19, 2023, Board meeting minutes as presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Nominations Committee and Election of Officers:** Derek Ahl shared that the Secretary of Agriculture has yet to make board appointments. Therefore, the election of officers is on hold until appointments have been secured. Vickie Carpenter shared that the packet was submitted to the Secretary on December 15th; Carpenter has stressed the urgency of setting these appointments for the upcoming in-person meeting.

**Committee Reports**

**Finance Committee** – Bob Schaefer reported.

- a. Schaefer provided a detailed overview of the September 2023, October 2023, November 2023, and December 2023 financials. Pointing out several items within the reports to help new Board candidates understand how the RCTB financials work.
- A question was raised about the USDA user fees and why they are so high. Marsha Gray shared a breakdown of how USDA bills the RCTB – USDA provides one bill for the first three months, and there was a potential of a government shutdown, so USDA required the RCTB to pay ahead for staffing. Gray mentioned that the RCTB will go several months without an invoice from USDA.

It was **MOVED** by Roger Beyer and **SECONDED** by Mark Schmidlin to accept the September 2023, October 2023, November 2023, and December 2023 financials as they were presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Research Committee** - Mark Schmidlin and Cyndi Knudson reported.

- a. **Update on Research Contracts, Completed Projects** – Schmidlin shared that seven contracts have been signed. Knudson stated that she is waiting on invoices from many of the researchers.
- b. **Research Library** – Schmidlin shared that five new projects are being posted to the research library, and five more are in the works.
- c. **Seedling Survey** – Knudson shared that USDA has approved the seedling and transplant survey, which should be sent early next week.
- d. **Webinar Series** – The next webinar series will be on the Elongate Hemlock Scale on Tuesday, January 30<sup>th</sup>, at 11:00 a.m. Eastern. Westlake encouraged the Board to spread the word to local growers to attend.

**Industry Relations Committee** – Gary Westlake reported.

- a. **Winter Meeting Presentation Schedule** – Marsha Gray shared she has received a request to speak at the following Winter State Association meetings: Gray will present via Zoom to New Hampshire/Vermont, Indiana/Illinois, Wisconsin, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Gray will attend in person in New Jersey, Pacific Northwest, North Carolina, and Michigan. Jane Neubauer will be presenting at the Ohio Association meeting.
  - Gray shared that State Association groups are already scheduling her for their upcoming Summer meetings.
- b. **Committee Meeting Scheduled** – Westlake shared that the Industry Relations Committee will hold a meeting before the in-person meeting in February – the Committee will have more to report then.
- c. **Webinar Series** - Gray shared that an e-newsletter went out yesterday encouraging growers to attend the upcoming webinar series.
  - The question was asked whether the webinar attendees were tracked from the last webinar. If so, how many attended, and how many watched the webinar after it aired? Westlake and Gray reported that Michigan State University could provide the number of how many watched during the webinar but would need to confirm if they can also count the number who watched the recorded version. Derek Ahl asked Gray and Westlake if they could cross-reference our newsletter list to those who attended the webinar. Gray felt it could be a tricky ask due to confidentiality.
  - Question was raised if staff keeps the state executive directors up to date with information/events of the RCTB. Gray shared that she has a master list of all state directors and connects with them often to ensure they are up-to-speed with the workings of the RCTB.

**Governance Committee** – Charles Fowler reported.

- a. **Update on Recommended Changes to Order:** Fowler shared that the Governance Committee hasn't heard anything from USDA regarding the Order changes. Vickie Carpenter, a USDA representative, stated that they are working to draft all the changes, assemble the documentation to kick-start the process, and submit it to the Office of General Counsel.
  - A question was raised on how long it will take to get a response back. Carpenter stated that she hoped it wouldn't take too long. The Office of General Counsel will need to review all the documentation. USDA will continue to communicate with the Board until it goes to the Federal Register. Carpenter shared that she hopes to have more of an update at the February in-person meeting.

**Compliance Committee** - Renee Beutell and Marsha Gray

- Marsha Gray provided an overview of our current compliance staff, Jason Hanselman and Jamie Hanselman, who work part-time and up to \$10,000 per year. Also, Jim Lantz conducts yearly grower audits.

It was **MOVED** by Renee Beutell and **SECONDED** by Charles Fowler to renew a contract with the auditor, James Lantz, CPA, to complete grower audits not to exceed \$30,000. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Promotion Committee** – Jane Neubauer reported.

- a. **Highlights of the 2023 RCTB Campaign:** Neubauer gave the Board a detailed PowerPoint presentation of the 2023 campaign highlights. Members of FleishmanHillard will attend the in-person meeting in Portland, Oregon, to provide a recap of the 2023 campaign.
- A question was asked about the voice used in the iHeart podcast generic ads, whether human or AI. Marsha Gray will contact the FleishmanHillard team to get an answer.
- Derek Ahl thanked the Promotion Committee for all their hard work on a successful 2023 campaign!

**Management Staff Update** - Marsha Gray reported.

- a. **Assessment Collection Update:** Gray shared that we are transitioning from our current database to the new online reporting and payment system, which isn't running yet. Instead of entering the data twice, we are on hold until the new system is fully functioning, which should be ready tomorrow or Monday.  
As of January 17, 2024, we have received a total of 474 payers through the lockbox for \$275,456.78 and Importer Assessment received via US Customs for \$240,130.50, totaling \$515,587.28.
- b. **Collection of Import Assessments by US Customs:** Gray shared that we have received two lump sum payments from US Customs of \$240,130.50. Due to this being a new computer system, the US Customs reports don't provide the details that staff need to know – we do know which Importers shipped trees and how many trees, but the dollar amounts on the report don't match. USDA is aware of the issue.  
Gray shared she has inquired with various Importers to see how the process went, but overall, the RCTB hasn't received a complaint, a question, or a concern from any Importers. As Importers receive their invoices from their brokers, some questions could arise.
  - Question was raised regarding refunds and how much should be given back. Gray shared that, at this point, a refund would be provided to an Importer who shipped fewer than 500 trees upon their request to the RCTB.
  - Larry Downey shared his experience with shipping trees across the Border, and the overall experience went very smoothly, with no problems encountered.
  - Gray shared she has been working to set up a meeting with USDA and US Customs to go over the US Customs report.
  - Question was raised to see if there was a way to get a species breakdown of the trees that cross the border? Gray shared that there are three HTS codes, Douglas Fir, Fir that's not Douglas, and all others – which are not very specific to each species.
- c. **Update on Online Reporting and Payment System:** Gray shared the new system is currently being hosted on a developmental site, and within the next few days, Jenny Tomaszewski, on the back end, should be able to start inputting payments received.  
Gray shared that the database has been transferred to the new database system, which will be housed on the RCTB designated server through our current web hosting company, Firefall. The grower can log in on the site and enter their harvest numbers for the year. It will then update the database and create a PDF of the report, either exempt or assessment, depending on the harvest number entered. This report will be saved under their account for the grower to view anytime. At the same time this is created, it will then update the RCTB QuickBooks that this specific producer has paid.

**New Business:** No new items to report.

**USDA** – Vickie Carpenter reported.

- a. **Status – Fake:** Carpenter will check the status with USDA and provide an update at the February meeting.
- b. **Status - Board Appointments:** Carpenter provided an update at the beginning of the meeting under the Nominations Committee and Election of Officers.
- c. **Status - Non-Responding Importer:** Carpenter shared that she has contacted management for updates and will hopefully have a response within the next couple of weeks.
- d. **Status – Recommended Order Changes:** Carpenter provided an update under the Governance Committee.
- e. **USDA Agriculture Marketing Initiatives:** On February 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, the 100th Anniversary of the Ag Outlook Forum will be held in Alexandria, Virginia. Registration is open to anyone interested.
- f. **Specialty Crop Initiative:** AMS would like to gather information from Industry Boards about how they can better serve the industry. It is listed on the Federal Registry - if the Board chooses to comment, it must go through USDA first. The deadline to comment is March 8<sup>th</sup>.
  - **Specialty Crop Block Grant** – Sarah Richardson shared that on the AMS website, they just announced which states are now open to accept applications. The question was raised about how much each state is allocated. Marsha Gray will send the direct link to the Board.

**For the Good of the Order/Announcements:**

- Mark Schmidlin shared that he is on the search committee to help find a replacement for Chal Landgren at OSU, who is retiring. The job will be posted promptly.

**Meeting Schedule:**

- a. Next Board Meeting will be in person in Portland, Oregon, on February 15, 2024.
- b. Summer In-Person Meeting – Consideration of International Meeting in Nova Scotia, August 1-3. Jane Neubauer suggested meeting at the Ohio Association meeting on July 20<sup>th</sup>. Marsha Gray requested that Board members send any other suggestions directly to her.

**Adjourn:**

It was **MOVED** by Bob Schaefer and **SECONDED** by Renee Beutell to adjourn the meeting. **MOTION APPROVED.**

Chairman Derek Ahl adjourned the meeting at 12:54 p.m. Eastern Time.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Chuck Berry  
Secretary