

**REAL CHRISTMAS TREE BOARD**  
**IN-PERSON BOARD MEETING**  
February 19, 2025

Hampton Inn – Boone, North Carolina

**Welcome, and Roll Call:** Chairman Chuck Berry called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. Eastern time.

**Board Members in Attendance:** Derek Ahl, Chris Aldrich, Charles Fowler, Chuck Berry, Renee Beutell, Mike Jones, Jane Neubauer, JoLynn Stroda, Jan Hupp, Kari Puffer, Ryan Tyce, and Gary Thomas

**USDA Representative in Attendance:** George Webster

**Staff in Attendance:** Marsha Gray and Jenny Tomaszewski

**Guests in Attendance:** Barry Campbell, Carrie McClain, Beau Coan

**Agenda**

It was **MOVED** by Charles Fowler and **SECONDED** by JoLynn Stroda to approve the agenda as presented.  
**MOTION APPROVED.**

**Chairman's Report –**

- Chuck Berry thanked all Board members and guests for being in attendance.
- **Board Nominations:** There will be open seats in the Western, Central, and Eastern regions. Two nominations per open position must be submitted by June 1<sup>st</sup>.
- **Sign Lobbying Certification and Conflict of Interest Statements:** Board members and staff signed Disclosure/Conflict of Interest Statements and Certification Regarding Lobbying statements.

**Meeting Minutes**

It was **MOVED** by Renee Beutell and **SECONDED** by Mike Jones to approve the January 16, 2025 Board meeting minutes as presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Committee Reports**

**Finance Committee –** Mike Jones reported.

- Jones provided a detailed overview of the January 2025 financial statements, pointing out the new line item, receivables, which reflects assessments due as reported by producers. There is a 30-day grace period, making March 18<sup>th</sup> the final deadline to report your 2024 harvest.
- Board members discussed USDA fees as they were substantially higher this year than in the past due to the Order changes and the process it must follow for it to be approved.

It was **MOVED** by Chris Aldrich and **SECONDED** by Charles Fowler to accept the January 2025 financial statement as presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Research Committee –** Renee Beutell reported.

- a. **Current Project Status Update** - Knudson shared that all funded research contracts for the 2024-25 fiscal year have been signed. Annual performance reports will go out in May, and researchers are required to provide the status of their projects.
- b. **NC Research Meeting – Gift SEED** – Knudson, Renee Beutell, and Charles Fowler attended the Specialty Crop Research Initiative Grant meeting on January 23-25, run by researcher Justin Whitehill. The title of the project is the Gift SEED. This four-year grant is 7.4 million dollars for Christmas tree research that involves researchers and growers in several states: Michigan,

Washington State, North Carolina, Florida, Canada, California, and Denmark. Knudson gave the Board a summary of their objectives, starting with the life cycle analysis. John Freeman is representing the growers.

- c. **2025 RFP Process** – The FY 2025-26 RFP is scheduled to be released at the beginning of May, based on when USDA approves the FY 2025-26 budget. Knudson sends the RFPs to the Land Grant Universities, researchers, growers, directly to 100 individuals, and it is published on the RCTB website.
- A question was raised whether the Research Committee and Board should consider decreasing the Research Committee budget for a few years while there is 7.4 million federal grant in place for the industry. Board members discussed this.

**Governance Committee** – Charles Fowler reported.

- a. **Update on Recommended Changes to Order** – George Webster shared that after multiple reviews, the Office of General Counsel (OGC) approved a version of the proposed changes to the Order. The new administration is holding off on any new rulemaking until all political appointee positions are filled. Legislative review is the next step in the order approval process, where it will be published in the Federal Register. Once it is published in the register, there will be a 30-day comment period. Charles Fowler shared that USDA will review all comments received on the Order.
- The new Secretary of Agriculture is Brooke Rollins.

**Compliance Committee** – Derek Ahl reported.

- a. **Compliance Team Report** – Ahl shared that the Board has spent to date the following for each compliance contractor:
  - **Auditor Jim Lantz:** The Board has spent \$125,000 and received \$247,000 in return.
  - **Compliance Contract, Jamie Hanselman:** The Board has spent \$27,000 and received \$103,000 in return.
  - **Compliance Contract, Jason Hanselman:** The Board has spent \$35,000 and received \$65,000 in return.
- These are annual contracts signed and approved by the Board.
- It was recommended that the compliance numbers be communicated more to the industry, whether in the e-newsletters or at State Association meetings. Board members discussed different ideas.
- b. **Recommendation to Reallocate Compliance Budget** – Marsha Gray shared that the Compliance Committee budget is \$50,000. It was recommended to reduce the auditor's budget by \$10,000 and increase Jamie Hanselman's by \$10,000 until the end of July 2025.

It was **MOVED** by Derek Ahl and **SECONDED** by Renee Beutell to reduce the budget by \$10,000 for auditor Jim Lantz and increase contractor Jamie Hanselman's contract by \$10,000. **MOTION APPROVED.**

- It was suggested that the Board introduce their compliance contractors to the industry to make growers aware of who they are.

The Board recessed at 11:13 a.m. and reconvened at 11:23 a.m.

**Industry Relations Committee** – Chris Aldrich reported.

- a. **Update on Committee Selection and Call with Michelle Rothmeyer** – Aldrich shared that Rothmeyer has been instrumental in getting information to growers through the e-newsletter.
- The Industry Committee is looking for several growers to join the Industry Relations Committee. Their first meeting will be held at the beginning of March.
- The Committee would like to recommend that the RCTB provide sponsorship or host a booth at the

Michigan Summer Meeting to promote the RCTB. Board members discussed different ideas for leveraging the RCTB.

The Board recessed for lunch at 12:00 p.m. and reconvened at 1:00 p.m.

**Promotion Committee** – Jane Neubauer reported.

- a. **Presentation of Campaign Results** - Neubauer welcomed John Armato, Jake Ferguson, Tyler Andersen, and Carli Million from FleishmanHillard via Zoom to provide an overview of their agency's work for the 2024 season and entertained questions from the Board.

After their presentation, John Armato, Jake Ferguson, Tyler Andersen, and Carli Million left the meeting.

The Board took a break at 2:52 p.m. and reconvened at 3:07 p.m.

- Neubauer would like to welcome new members to sit on the Promotion Committee.
- Jan Hupp volunteered to sit on the Research Committee, and Kari Puffer volunteered for the Promotion Committee.

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

- a. **Assessment Collection Report** – As of February 17, 2025, we have received 811 payers through the lockbox and online portal for \$807,060.75 and Import assessments received via US Customs for \$221,617.46, totaling \$1,028,678.20.
- b. **Online Reporting System** – Gray shared that 650 producers have reported their harvest using the new online reporting system. 36% are paying via ACH.
- c. **Importer Assessment Collection Process** - Gray shared that the RCTB is in the second year of having assessments collected at US Customs. The numbers received match the reports well.

**Old Business** – No old business.

**New Business:**

- a. **Independent Evaluation Process** - Marsha Gray shared that USDA requires the Board to conduct an independent evaluation every five years to see how the Board has impacted the industry. Timothy Richards from Arizona State University conducted the last study. The Board will split the cost between two fiscal years, \$15,000 per each. Gray will collect quotes to present to the Board.

**USDA** – George Webster reported.

- **Status – Non-responding Importer** – Webster provided an overview of the non-reporting Importer for the new Board members. Webster shared that USDA received a few questions from OGC to clarify how much is due, and a response has been provided. Everything is set; however, it is on hold until the new political appointees have been set. Currently in a wait-and-hold status.
- Webster shared that he addressed whether the OGC fees could be added to the importers' balance with leadership, and they will look into the request.
- a. **Status – Recommended Order Changes** – Webster covered the order changes under the Governance Committee report.
- b. **Staffing Updates** – Webster shared that Sue Coleman, Deputy Director, is on detail as the Director for the Cotton program. George Webster's direct supervisor, Alex Caryl, is on detail at Commodity Procurement. George Webster is currently serving as the acting Branch Chief.

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

- Derek Ahl suggested that the Board stop using terms like "media authority" and "voice of the

industry” and work together with the National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA) to speak to the media as one. Board members discussed.

- Marsha Gray stated she hopes to connect with NCTA regarding RCTB’s retail locator. Gray would like to offer our retail locator to the NCTA and State Associations as a widget on their website. There would be a web developer cost to install the widget, which would be the responsibility of the other organization.
- The Board directed Chuck Berry and Mike Jones to engage the NCTA Executive Board regarding the retail locator and working together. They will report back on the outcome of their efforts.
- Chuck Berry thanked the Board for their time and patience today.

**. Meeting Schedule:**

- a. **Next Board Meeting** - RCTB’s next meeting will be a conference call on Thursday, March 20, 2025, at 11:00 a.m. Eastern.
- b. **Summer In-Person Meeting** – July 24, 2025 – Dutchman Tree Farms, Manton, Michigan, in conjunction with the National Christmas Tree Association meeting.

**Adjourn:**

It was **MOVED** by Charles Fowler and **SECONDED** by Chris Aldrich to adjourn the meeting. **MOTION APPROVED.**

Chairman Chuck Berry adjourned the meeting at 4:13 p.m. Eastern.

Respectfully Submitted,  
JoLynn Stroda  
Secretary