

**REAL CHRISTMAS TREE BOARD**  
**BOARD MEETING**  
January 15, 2026

Via Video Conference

**Welcome and Roll Call:** Chairman Chuck Berry called the meeting to order at 11:01 a.m. Eastern time.

**Board Members in Attendance:** Chuck Berry, Jan Hupp, Jane Neubauer, Chris Aldrich, Ryan Tyce, JoLynn Stroda, Renee Beutell, Gary Thomas, Scott Powell, Sophia Stajduhar, Sam Cartner

**Board Members not in Attendance:** Kari Puffer

**USDA Representative in Attendance:** George Webster

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

**Guests in Attendance:** Alan Pursell, Kevin Torline, and Berry Campbell

**Agenda**

Chuck Berry requested the addition of item B, Sign Lobbying Certification and Conflict of Interest Statements under Chairman's Report.

It was **MOVED** by Chris Aldrich and **SECONDED** by Sam Cartner to approve the agenda as corrected.

**MOTION APPROVED.**

**Meeting Minutes:**

A question was raised regarding the international meeting. Cyndi Knudson shared that Christmas growers are welcome to attend. Cyndi Knudson and the chair of the Research Committee will likely be in attendance.

It was **MOVED** by Renee Beutell and **SECONDED** by JoLynn Stroda to approve the September 18, 2025, Board meeting minutes as presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

It was **MOVED** by Renee Beutell and **SECONDED** by Chris Aldrich to approve the October 7, 2025, Board meeting minutes as presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Nominations Committee Report and Election of Officers**

George Webster, USDA, led the officer election as follows:

The Nomination Committee of Chuck Berry, Derek Ahl, and Jane Neubauer has recommended the following slate of officers for 2026: Chairman – Chuck Berry, Vice-Chairman – Gary Thomas, Treasurer – JoLynn Stroda, and Secretary – Ryan Tyce.

**Chairperson:** The Nomination Committee recommended Chuck Berry. George Webster asked Chuck Berry if he would accept this nomination, and Berry accepted. Webster asked for any additional nominations. There were none.

It was **MOVED** by Scott Powell and **SECONDED** by Renee Beutell to close nominations and cast a unanimous ballot for Chuck Berry for the Chairman position. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Vice Chairperson:** The Nomination Committee recommended Gary Thomas. George Webster asked Gary Thomas if he would accept this nomination, and Thomas accepted. Webster asked for any additional nominations. There were none.

It was **MOVED** by Chuck Berry and **SECONDED** by Sophia Stajduhar to close nominations and cast a unanimous ballot for Gary Thomas for the Vice-Chairman position. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Secretary:** The Nomination Committee recommended Ryan Tyce. George Webster asked Ryan Tyce if he would accept this nomination, and Tyce accepted. Webster asked for any additional nominations. There were none.

It was **MOVED** by Scott Powell and **SECONDED** by Renee Beutell to close nominations and cast a unanimous ballot for Ryan Tyce for the Secretary position. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Treasurer:** The Nomination Committee recommended JoLynn Stroda. George Webster asked JoLynn Stroda if she would accept this nomination, and Stroda accepted. Webster asked for any additional nominations. There were none.

It was **MOVED** by Jan Hupp and **SECONDED** by Gary Thomas to close nominations and cast a unanimous ballot for JoLynn Stroda for the Treasurer position. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Chairman's Report** – Chuck Berry reported.

- a. **Appointment of Committee Chairs** – Chairman, Chuck Berry, recommended the following appointments:
  - **Compliance Committee:** Chair – Jan Hupp
  - **Governance Committee:** Chair – Jane Neubauer
  - **Promotion Committee:** Chair – Kari Puffer
  - **Industry Relations Committee:** Chair – Chris Aldrich
  - **Finance Committee:** Chair – JoLynn Stroda
  - **Research Committee:** Chair - Renee Beutell

It was **MOVED** by Sam Cartner and **SECONDED** by Gary Thomas to approve the slate of Committee appointments as they were presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

- b. **Sign Lobbying Certification and Conflict of Interest Statements:** Berry requested that all Board members and staff sign the Disclosure/Conflict of Interest Statements and Certification regarding Lobbying statements and email them to staff, Marsha Gray, or Jenny Tomaszewski.

**Board Introduction** - Board members took a few moments to introduce themselves.

## **Committee Reports**

**Finance** – Marsha Gray reported.

- a. Marsha Gray provided a detailed overview of the September 2025, October 2025, November 2025, and December 2025 financials. Pointing out that the RCTB never had receivables until the new online reporting system, it automatically creates a receivable in QuickBooks. Once payment is received, it is removed from the receivables. There is currently a large receivable from a non-reporting producer from harvest year 2024, who completed the domestic sales report, but never sent payment. Compliance staff worked diligently last summer to collect those funds, without success. In July 2025, the Board chose to turn the case over to USDA for collections. Gray also pointed out that several years ago, \$117,350.50 was earmarked in the reserve funds for the Research Committee for use if approved projects exceeded the budget.
  - A question was asked regarding the Importer who is non-responsive, if they are listed as a receivable as well? Marsha Gray shared that the non-responsive Importer is not listed, as it was prior to the online reporting system.

It was **MOVED** by Gary Thomas and **SECONDED** by Sam Cartner to accept the September 2025, October 2025, November 2025, and December 2025 financials as they were presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

- b. **CDARS Investment** – Gray shared that \$700,000.00 is invested in the CDARS product, which

matures today, January 15<sup>th</sup>. Gray consulted with the Executive Committee, and they agreed to reinvest the \$700,000.00 for six months and to deposit the interest into the checking account.

- c. **Budget Amendments** – Gray shared that the original budget was approved back in April, and three areas need to be adjusted:
  - **Budget Amendment 1** - Originally, \$150,000 was allocated for the Research budget. At the summer meeting in Michigan, the Board approved \$168,234.00 in projects and agreed to go over budget to complete them. In October, Washington State University returned \$5,000 to the Board for funds that were provided and not used. Gray recommended that the Board increase the Research budget to \$168,234.00, then decrease it by \$4,000, leaving a \$1,000 in flex for possible website updates. \$164,234.00 in the Research category.
  - **Budget Amendment 2** – Reducing the Gray Management fee by \$4,000 and increasing the Industry Relations budget by \$4,000. Gray volunteered to forgo \$4,000 from her contract, provided the Board agreed to contract with Michelle Rothmeyer for communications services.
  - **Budget Amendment 3** – Reduce the Independent Evaluation line item from \$15,000 to \$11,500 as it is complete and came in under budget.

It was **MOVED** by Sam Cartner and **SECONDED** by Sophia Stajduhar to approve the three budget amendments as presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Research Committee** - Renee Beutell and Cyndi Knudson reported.

- a. **Update on Research Contracts and Completed Projects** – The FY 2026-27 RFP is scheduled to be released at the beginning of May, based on when USDA approves the FY 2026-27 budget.
- b. **International Christmas Tree Research and Extension Meetings** will be held next in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, on June 7-12, 2026. Many of the international and national researchers will be present.
- c. **January Webinar Series** – Two upcoming webinars:
  - Tuesday, January 20, 2026, at 11:00 a.m. Eastern, Dr. Gary Chastagner with Washington State University, will talk on filling research gaps to improve the management of Phytophthora root rot.
  - Thursday, January 22, 2026, at 11:00 a.m. Eastern, Dr. Philipp Zerbe from the University of California Davis, will talk on Christmas tree genetic improvement through the identification of stress defense mechanisms.

**Industry Relations Committee** – Chris Aldrich and Marsha Gray Reported.

Aldrich plans to meet with George Webster to learn about the referendum process.

- a. **Winter Meeting Presentation Schedule** – Gray shared the upcoming winter meeting schedule and encouraged all Board members to be visible at local State Association meetings.
  - Maine – January 13<sup>th</sup> - Gray presented via Zoom.
  - Wisconsin – January 19<sup>th</sup> – Gray will present in-person.
  - New Hampshire/Vermont – January 24<sup>th</sup> – Gray will present via Zoom.
  - New Jersey, Indiana and Illinois – January 31<sup>st</sup> – Gray will present via Zoom.
  - Pennsylvania – February 6<sup>th</sup> – Gray will present in-person.
  - Pacific Northwest – February 20<sup>th</sup> – Gray will present in-person.
  - North Carolina – February 20<sup>th</sup> - Chuck Berry, Cyndi Knudson, Renee Beutell, and Sam Cartner will attend the meeting.
  - Minnesota – February 20<sup>th</sup> – working on the details of this meeting.
  - Ohio – February 20<sup>th</sup> - Jane Neubauer will present in-person.
  - Michigan - February 27<sup>th</sup> – Gray will present in-person.
  - Quebec – February 27<sup>th</sup> – Gray will present via Zoom.
  - Connecticut – March 7<sup>th</sup> – Gray will present via Zoom.

- b. **Communications Contractor Activities** – Aldrich shared that he is pleased with the work Michelle Rothmeyer has provided in the e-newsletters. Gray shared that having Rothmeyer has been beneficial, providing two newsletters each month, preparing social posts for private Christmas tree Facebook groups, and journal articles. Gray and Rothmeyer have begun assembling the data for the Annual Report.
- It was requested that Gray provide guidelines for RCTB board members outlining the difference between representing the RCTB and your own farm. Gray shared that she would draft guidelines for board members on how to discuss the referendum.

**Governance Committee** – Marsha Gray Reported.

- a. **Update on Recommended Changes to the Order** – George Webster shared that the final rule has been cleared by the Office of General Counsel and the Legislative Review Office, which is one of the last steps before being published in the Federal Register. The final step is for the Deputy Undersecretary to sign off on the Order. Once published in the register, changes take effect 30 days after the publishing date. Once Webster receives any additional information, he will provide it to the Board.

**Compliance Committee** - Marsha Gray Reported.

- a. **Auditor Contract** - Auditor Jim Lantz, CPA, is interested in continuing as our auditor and has agreed to conduct grower audits for \$165 per hour plus travel expenses. This rate has not increased.

It was **MOVED** by Renee Beutell and **SECONDED** by Sam Cartner to renew the contract with auditor Jim Lantz, CPA, to conduct grower audits. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Promotion Committee** – Jane Neubauer reported.

- a. **Highlights of the 2025 RCTB Campaign** – Neubauer shared that a full report on the 2025 campaign from FleishmanHillard will be provided at the upcoming February Board meeting. Neubauer thanked Gray for all her hard work and the many news interviews that she did for the campaign. Marsha Gray presented the Board with a high-level PowerPoint on the 2025 campaign. Focusing on the three areas: Media Authority, Consumer Motivation, and Industry Engagement. Overall, the media season was very successful.
- b. **Virtual Farm Tours** – JoLynn Stroda shared that in 2025, RCTB hosted three virtual farm tours. Gray and Stroda shared the positive feedback that they have received from Virtual Farm Trips, the teachers, and the students. The Promotion Committee just received a new proposal from Virtual Farm Trips; they will be assembling the information to present to the Board.

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

- a. **Assessment Collection Report** – As of January 14, 2026, we have received 463 reports through the lockbox and online portal and \$222,936.60 in assessments, and Importer Assessments received via US Customs for \$185,665.30, totaling \$408,601.90.
- a. **Collection of Import Assessments by US Customs** - Gray shared that US Customs collects on behalf of the RCTB at the Border. Customs provides reporting and deposits for the funds collected. There can be a delay in reporting, so the Import assessment amount is not final.
- b. **Report on Online Reporting and Payment System** – Gray shared that the system has been working smoothly, and more and more producers are using the online portal. Gray stated that many producers are completing the form online and mailing in a check.

**New Business:**

- a. **Approval of Commodity Roundtable Membership** - Gray shared that the Commodity Roundtable is

a group for the Executives of the various Research and Promotion Programs. The RCTB's yearly membership cost is \$1,389.

It was **MOVED** by Scott Powell and **SECONDED** by Sam Cartner to approve the Commodity Roundtable Membership for \$1,389 for 2026. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**USDA** – George Webster reported.

- a. **Status – Non-Responding Domestic Producer** – Webster shared an overview of the current non-responding producer and the process through USDA. Since the process of working through the Office of General Counsel tends to take a little longer, USDA is now referring them to the Treasury Department. A letter was sent to the producer outlining what will happen if they are non-responsive to the Treasury. The Treasury Department has more leverage to ensure these funds are paid. If no response is received by the end of February, the Treasury Department will take the next step in the process.
- b. **Status – Non-Responding Importer** – Webster shared that he is hopeful that the non-reporting Importer can be sent to the Treasury Department as well. Since it is a Canadian Importer, it is unclear whether the Treasury would have the same authority over a non-US company.
- c. **Status – Recommended Order Changes** – Webster reported on the Order Changes under the Governance Committee report.

Board members discussed different compliance ideas.

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

- Renee Beutell shared information regarding research on the Elongate Hemlock Scale of Fraser Fir. The project referenced was not funded by the RCTB.

**Meeting Schedule:**

- a. **Next Meeting** - The RCTB's next meeting will be held on Wednesday, February 18, 2026, at 11:00 a.m. Eastern.
- b. **Summer In-Person Meeting** – Will be held near Madison, Wisconsin, on August 6<sup>th</sup> in conjunction with the National Christmas Tree Association meeting.

**Adjourn:**

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

Chairman Chuck Berry adjourned the meeting at 1:19 p.m. Eastern.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ryan Tyce  
Secretary