

**REAL CHRISTMAS TREE BOARD**  
**BOARD MEETING**  
May 21, 2026

Via Video Conference

**Welcome and Roll Call:** Vice-Chairman, Gary Thomas, called the meeting to order at 11:01 a.m. Eastern time.

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

**Board Members not in Attendance:** Chuck Berry

**USDA Representative in Attendance:** George Webster

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

**Guest in Attendance:** Barry Campbell

**Agenda**

Requested the addition of B, Discussion of Responses Related to the Referendum, under New Business.

It was **MOVED** by Chris Aldrich and **SECONDED** by Jan Hupp to approve the agenda as corrected. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Meeting Minutes:**

It was **MOVED** by Sam Cartner and **SECONDED** by JoLynn Stroda to approve the April 16, 2026, Board meeting minutes as presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Chairman's Report** – Gary Thomas reported.

Thomas shared that the Pennsylvania and Maryland Christmas Tree Associations will be emailing all members, encouraging them to vote yes in the referendum.

**Committee Reports**

**Finance** – JoLynn Stroda reported.

- a. **April 2026 Financials:** Stroda provided a detailed overview of the April 2026 financials.

It was **MOVED** by Jan Hupp and **SECONDED** by Renee Beutell to accept the April 2026 financials as they were presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

- b. **2026-27 Fiscal Year Budget** – Marsha Gray and JoLynn Stroda provided a detailed overview of the 2026-27 budget as proposed by the Finance Committee.
  - Board members discussed the proposed budget, the reserve funds, and the impacts if the referendum fails.

It was **MOVED** by Renee Beutell and **SECONDED** by Sophia Stajduhar to approve the proposed 2026-2027 fiscal year budget as presented. **MOTION APPROVED.**

**Research Committee** – Renee Beutell reported.

- a. **Research Request for Proposals** – Beutell shared that the RFP's were sent out a little over a week ago.
- b. **International Christmas Tree Research Meeting** – The meeting will be held in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, on June 8-11, 2026. Cyndi Knudson will be in attendance. Sam Cartner will also be in attendance, as one of the farm tours will be held on his farm.

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

- Aldrich shared that the Committee will be discussing different approaches as to what producers would like to see going forward, following the referendum, and how the Board will best serve the industry.
- Sam Cartner shared an idea, having a competition for various agricultural schools to develop the best way that a buyer can get a Christmas tree, get it set up in the home, and have it taken down.

**Governance Committee** – Jane Neubauer Reported.

- a. **Board Nominations** – Neubauer shared that there are four open seats: two Eastern, one Western, and one Central. The following nominees have been received: Central: John Krueger and Mike Stoffel; Western: Elaine DeGeorge and JoLynn Stroda; and Eastern: Lindsay Eschelman, Peter Sweet, and Ray Gilbert. Seeking one additional candidate for the Eastern region. All nominations must be submitted by June 1<sup>st</sup>.
- b. **Policy Book and Bylaws** – Neubauer stated that with the Order approved and the name change in effect, the Policy Book and Bylaws will need to be updated to reflect the changes. Board members need 14 days' notice to revise the bylaws. Neubauer will email recommended updated versions to all Board members for their review and present it at the Board meeting in June for approval.

**Compliance Committee** – Jan Hupp and Marsha Gray reported.

Hupp shared that he and Marsha Gray met to discuss a current audit candidate who has been ignoring all forms of communication. The Committee is hiring an attorney to send a letter. Gray has been in communication with the RCTB's attorney, Chris Salisbury, with Watkinson Miller. The attorney is drafting a letter; once it is received, it will be sent to USDA for approval. Gray shared that two of the five audit candidates selected this year have never reported to the RCTB and appear to be harvesting and selling Christmas trees.

**Promotion Committee** – Kari Puffer reported.

- Kari Puffer shared that Sophia Stajduhar joined the Promotion Committee as vice-chairman.
- a. **Planning for 2026 Campaign** – Puffer and the Committee have been working with FleishmanHillard to assemble a campaign for the 2026 season. The Promotion Committee should have a 2026 campaign to present to the Board in late June or early July.
- b. **Virtual Farm Trip** – Marsha Gray shared that the Arbor Day Tour at Northern Pines Nursery/Dutchman Tree Farms was a great success, very educational. Scott Powell shared that the Arbor Day Foundation is interested in co-branding and co-marketing with the RCTB. They are a non-profit and are passing it up through their chain of command.
- c. **Off-Season Social Posts** – Puffer shared that the Committee met to discuss off-season social posts for the Summer and Fall. The Committee is looking for a younger individual interested in helping assemble a few posts using the provided content and images. During the off-season, the Committee doesn't use FleishmanHillard due to cost.

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

- a. **Assessment Collection Report** – Gray provided a detailed overview of the report. As of May 19, 2026, we have received 1,177 reports through the lockbox, online portal, and Importer Assessments received via US Customs, totaling \$1,288,374.15.
- Board members discussed the report and the number of trees that are harvested. There was a general sentiment that RCTB harvest reports are significantly below the actual harvest.
- b. **Multi-State Specialty Crop Block Grant** – Gray provided a detailed overview of the Multi-State Specialty Crop Block Grant. The RCTB can qualify for the program; applications are due by August 31, 2026, (multi-state partners to participating states) and by October 16, 2026, (participating states and entities in non-participating states to AMS). RCTB is not located in a participating state and would submit directly to AMS by October 15, 2026. Awarded amounts range from \$250,000 to

one million. The total budget for the grant is 14 million dollars. The grant funds are paid out as reimbursements, with an annual progress report required. A requirement is that you must be proposed by more than one group in more than one state. A cost share is required from non-Federal sources, in the form of cash and/or in-kind contributions, equal to 25% of the amount of Federal funds requested. This cost-share requirement applies to each project, whether funded by a participating State or through direct application to AMS. This grant is a three-year grant. Gray will email the Board Cyndi Knudson's notes. One possible project to submit would be developing better sales and harvest data for real Christmas trees. RCTB and NCTA are in early discussions with Timothy Richards of ASU. If it seems feasible and the Board is interested, Gray will work to assemble a working group and coordinate with Timothy Richards to determine the project's cost.

#### **New Business:**

- a. **Referendum Schedule** – George Webster shared that ballots were mailed on Friday, May 15, 2026. The voting period runs from Friday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, through Tuesday, June 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ballots can be submitted by e-ballot (online) or by mail. USDA allows three weeks for the mail to return before it begins calculating ballots. USDA works with its compliance and auditing team to ensure that all procedures are followed. AMS will issue a Notice to Trade (press release) announcing the referendum outcome. If the referendum should fail, the Order language under sections 1214.82 and 1214.83 outlines the timeline and procedures.
- b. **Discussion of Responses Related to the Referendum** – Board members discussed various letters and social media posts that have been released.

**USDA** – George Webster reported.

- a. **Status – Non-Responding Importer** – Webster stated that they want to wait and see how the process continues with the Domestic non-responder producer, as the Treasury Department is less effective with Foreign Companies.
- b. **Status – Non-Responding Domestic Producer** – Webster shared that the non-responding domestic producer has officially been referred to the Treasury Office. Webster inquired about an update and stated that USDA will only hear updates if the Treasury Office receives payment or the individual disputes the debt.

#### **Executive Session:**

- a. **Management Agreement – Gray Management, LLC.**

Marsha Gray and Jenny Tomaszewski left the meeting before the Executive Session.

Vice-Chairman, Gary Thomas, called the Board into an Executive Session at 12:45 p.m. Eastern Time.

Vice-Chairman, Gary Thomas, adjourned the Executive Session at 12:49 p.m. Eastern Time.

Marsha Gray and Jenny Tomaszewski returned to the meeting.

During the Executive Session, the Board unanimously approved the Gray Management contract as presented.

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

- Scott Powell provided an update from the National Christmas Tree Association.

#### **Meeting Schedule:**

- a. **Next Meeting** - RCTB's next meeting will be held on Thursday, June 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. Board members should plan to arrive on

Wednesday, August 5, in time for a group dinner.

**Adjourn:**

It was **MOVED** by Sam Cartner and **SECONDED** by Scott Powell to adjourn the meeting. **MOTION APPROVED.**

Vice-Chairman Gary Thomas adjourned the meeting at 12:57 p.m. Eastern.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Ryan Tyce  
Secretary