

Mount Rogers Area Christmas Tree Growers Association

**PO Box 127
Whitetop, Virginia 24292**

Minutes – General Membership Meeting, September 25, 2017, Whitetop Community Hall, Whitetop, VA

The meeting was called to order by President, Jack Davis at 2:00 PM.

Labor Issues

Deborah Johnson, Farm Placement Specialist with the Virginia Employment Commission, led a discussion on recruiting workers for our Christmas tree farms. Everyone agreed it is a hard task to find an adequate number of people willing to do the hard work associated with our industry. Deborah discussed the use of the H2A Guest Worker program and contracting with a Licensed Agricultural Crew Leader for temporary workers. The use of H2A Guest Workers is probably the most expensive alternative with higher wages and government fees making the overhead cost high. It is also a complicated process in meeting all of the government paperwork requirements.

Cindy Carranza, CCR Farming Enterprises, a Farm Labor Contractor from Independence also spoke about her work with local farmers to obtain workers. She is a Licensed Agricultural Crew Leader and has many people placed with various farms in our area. Some are also working with Christmas tree farmers. She indicated that given enough lead time she could find more than enough people to fill the needs of farmers. The question of housing and who would be responsible for providing it did come up and she indicated that this is always a problem. Finding short term housing is difficult but their organization does this. Again, adequate time is needed for them to find proper housing for their workers. They also work with the farmer to pay workers and will work in a variety of ways to make sure the farmer has proper documentation for their employment records.

Gypsy Moth Update

There are reports of major defoliation areas in Bland County with Gypsy Moths being found in the survey traps throughout the region. Grayson has still not been included in the quarantine area, however it is just a matter of time before this occurs. Every grower should try to attend a Gypsy Moth training session and receive their own certification permit/stamp to affix to their trees that are shipped out of the area that assures that the trees are Gypsy Moth free.

Product Liability and Liability Insurance

Matt Rumpfelt with Life Store Insurance Services and Scott DeNoon with Farm Bureau Insurance made presentations on Product Liability and General Liability Insurance for Christmas Tree Growers. Each emphasized that every grower needs a General Liability policy to protect themselves from a variety of ways that they can be held liable for some type of damage - product liability being one of the issues. Matt mentioned insects being carried into homes on Christmas trees and damaging carpet, walls, etc., alleged allergies associated with trees

and a variety of things that lawyers think the grower should be responsible for paying. Your Liability policy provides protection for any claims and legal fees that you may encounter.

Growers may also be required by buyers of their trees to have liability insurance. This is especially true with Big Box stores trying to help deflect their responsibility away from themselves and onto the farmer. Scott emphasized that growers should fully describe their entire operation to their agent to ensure that adequate insurance is obtained. You do not want to hide the fact that you allow hunting on your land or have a Choose and Cut operation or another unique situation that may require more insurance. In this area you should also make sure your insurance covers you in every state where you are growing trees.

Attached to these minutes are Insurance definitions that Matt discussed and every grower should be familiar with.

Christmas Tree Check Off Report

Della Deal, member of the National Check-Off committee, reported on the activities of the Board since we last met in June. Approximately \$1.75 million dollars has been collected to date this year to be used for promotion and research. Any grower that has paid into the checkoff should have received an email newsletter describing what the Board has initiated for this season. \$70,000 has been set aside for research being conducted at 4 different universities across the country. A marketing firm has been hired and Della showed a video that described several ideas that this firm plans to initiate this year. The use of social media, joint marketing with other products and services and some other unique ideas that growers and associations can help with are planned.

Growers that have received multiple request from USDA for payment because they operate in more than one state or county should let the board know that they have paid their assessment in one or the other state. Please do not ignore the letter. You could have the USDA coming to see you for no reason.

Elk Management Plan

President Jack reported on the Elk Management Plan that is being developed at Virginia Tech for the Wildlife Resources Commission. It is incomplete at this time. There have been many concerns expressed so far from several different agricultural organizations concerning the damage Elk can do to crops and facilities. President Jack is serving on the committee that will review the plan and is confident that growers' voices will be heard on any plan for reintroducing Elk into Southwest Virginia.

Seed Availability

The Association's seed inventory has been reduced to approximately 250 lbs in our warehouse and 72 lbs at Jim Rockis' processing plant near Morgantown, WV. Several members have expressed concern about the availability of seed for the members of the Association. The poor cone collection quantity for this year and the general decline in the Grayson Orchard has made this more of a problem. A motion was made and was past by the members present to limit sales of seed to 10 pounds per year to dues paying members of the Association.

Warehouse

Rob Richardson reported on the work being done at the warehouse. He has been busy working on the ventilation of the building and removing the sprayed on insulation that is holding moisture around the walls. The electricians plan to install the new exhaust fans some time later this fall after building construction slows down.

Grayson Highlands Orchard

The improvement of the creek crossing going into the orchard was again discussed by the members present. President Jack said he would again get up with the contractor to see when he can begin work.

Earl Deal and Simon Smith reported on the cone collection effort. They reported that the cones began to shatter early and that the birds and squirrels consumed a significant quantity of the available seed before a crew could be organized to collect the cones. The crew only collected 8 to 10 bushels of cones.

The general condition of the orchard was discussed. Several of the orchard trees have died, many have dead tops, vines are growing up into the trees and a lot of trash, debris and weeds have clogged up the orchard where it will be difficult to get spray equipment around and work in the orchard. Simon proposed that we organize a work day in early October to address several of these issues before we get into harvest.

Old Flat Orchard

Della Deal reported on the progress of the work at the Old Flat orchard. 60% of the orchard is now considered established. She is now grafting on to potted root stock with selected families from members' plantations in Smokey Holler's greenhouse. "We have experience varying degrees of success in field grafting because of all the weather factors that can influence success." Della again stated that she needs at least another 50 families to graft into the orchard. Several growers have been very generous in identifying trees and working with her to supply scion material for the project. However, she is looking for more family diversity. Any grower who feels they have an outstanding Mt. Rogers seed source tree would certainly help the orchard by contacting Della at 919.630.7203.

Certification and Branding and Other Items

Kevin Spurlin of the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service in Grayson County reported on his efforts to initiate a Christmas tree Certification program for the Mount Rogers Association. He had hoped to obtain some materials that were being developed by the NC Christmas Tree Association but has been unable to make any progress in obtaining the material to date.

Kevin also discussed Extension's plans to emphasize pollinator protection in the pesticide training programs planned for the coming year. The Emerald Ash Borer has now been found in Grayson County. This pest will eventually kill all Ash trees in the United States even with a significant effort to slow its spread. Ash is a major species used for furniture manufacturing, paneling, etc.

Trees for Troops

President Jack reported that the Mount Rogers Association would be the only organization contributing trees to the TREES FOR TROOPS program in Virginia. The Virginia Christmas Tree Association has declined to participate this year. In addition, there will only be one pick-up site. This will be at our Warehouse in Whitetop. President Jack has received a commitment for 25 trees from one grower and needs another 375 trees from other growers to meet our goal of 400 trees. This project is a great way to show our support for the men and women serving our military.

Budget and Financial Report

Earl Deal reported on our financial status as of September 10. At that time we had \$103,500 in certificates of Deposits and \$95,090 in our checking account. A comparison of the budget with the actual expenditures was presented and a copy is attached. A budget for the 2016/17 fiscal year was proposed and a motion was made to accept it. The motion was passed and a copy is attached to these minutes.

The Association's CPA has suggested that we move an additional \$40,000 from our checking account to the long term certificates of deposit. He feels that we have more than an adequate cushion in the checking account to meet our expenses and continue the upgrade of the warehouse. A motion was made and passed by the members present to move the money as soon as possible. The Secretary/Treasurer was instructed to do so.

Election of Officers for 2016/17

Nominations were made and elections were held for the officers of the Association for the next year. By acclimation the following officers were elected for 2016/17:

President	- Rodney Richardson
Vice President	- Jack Davis
Secretary/Treasurer	- Earl Deal
Director	- Charlie Conner
Director	- Robert Richardson
Director	- Simon Smith

Adjournment

Following the program, Rob Richardson made a motion that the meeting be adjourned and the annual supper was enjoyed by all present.

Submitted by: Earl L. Deal, Jr. Secretary/Treasurer