

INDIANA – ILLINOIS WINTER MEETING, January 31& February 1, 2025

Real Christmas Tree Board Update: 2024 Campaign Snapshot. Marsha Gray

The Real Tree Board is due for a “retain or not?” vote. The vote is taken every 7 years.

In the last 3 years, the Real Tree Board has taken financial hits because the large growers have dealt with droughts and other mishaps.

Most of the resources are spent keeping accurate information about real trees in front of the general public.

Real Trees has primers on dealing with doing interviews/dealing with the press. We can provide info no one else can. We can be the ultimate web resource hub for media and the “why and where” destination for consumers. We can be proactive with priority media and respond to all others.

RCTB.com Newsroom is a to-to source of relevant, credible and useful data. Some of the information was “plug and play” with interviews with actual growers.

There were fewer requests for interviewers in 2024. There were lots of website hits from news sources (broadcasters, podcasters, social media). The biggest story was the loss of trees in North Carolina due to Hurricane Helene.

RCTB showed up where our target audience is, including one incredible podcast

Key performance indicators: target media; there were 20,000 visits to the newsroom; retail locator. When the public hears our message, they are more inclined to buy a real tree—whether they do or not.

Virtual farm tours are presented to students through Virtual Farm Trips. There are zoom webinars for students who cannot go to a real tree farm. 30,000 students watched the recorded “tours.” RCTB is working on “homework” and enhancement resources to go with the virtual tours.

\$2.5 million has gone into research, about \$250,000 per year. RCTB.org has the information on this research. Webinars are recorded and can be viewed after broadcast—even if you can’t ask questions.

The reporting and payment method has been updated. Each grower has a unique number and can create an account. The payment can be electronic or a grower can fill out paperwork and send a check by snail mail.

One goal is to have all retail sources for real trees regardless of who they are—big box, choose and cut, corner lot, charity, or?

Getting Started with Farm Service Agency.

Attendees were briefed on how to register with FSA, the qualifications for receiving loans, what the loans are for, microloans.

Supervised credit. Interest rates were reviewed. There is a guaranteed loan program that deals through banks; youth operation loans. Visit: fsa.usda.gov or: farms.usda.gov

Farm storage facility loan program. Not just for row crops. For us, baling or netting equipment would be eligible for loans. Facilities: pole barns cold storage.

FSFL needs financial analysis, environmental evaluation, current storage capacity, planting history, crop insurance requirement, on non-insurable, all peril insurance listing commodity credit Corp as loss payee

Commodity storage loans likely do not apply to trees.

Conservation: set aside, grassland

FSA does not insure Christmas Trees as a crop. Noninsured crop assistance program covers weather, or adverse natural occurrences, adverse natural occurrences. Very low cost, and bare minimum payment, but you will likely be able to stay in business. Most valuations are at low wholesale, not what the actual retail value might be. The coverage levels were described. There are different premium levels.

Tree assistance program: an after-the-fact program. Application for payment must be within 90 calendar days of the disaster event or when the loss apparent. You will get a % of FSA allowed cost.

The best advice was to contact FSA and get your farm registered. Sign for e-newsletters and text alerts. Keep reliable records. Ask questions!

Make a difference. Be the voice. Get involved.

Ben Shull: Insurance for the Tree Farm—the Core Essentials (Indiana Farm Bureau)|

Risk advisor.

This is a unique industry with unique risks requiring unique risk management methods with unique risk endorsements. There is risk at all stages of tree growth.

Any business needs liability insurance. Just because you have/are starting with bare ground does not mean there is no liability risk. Legal fees! Med Pay insurance. Structure coverage: personal structure, commercial structure, replacement? Repair? Equipment, tools—cash value? Replacement cost? Peril: named, open peril. There is a difference. Insure for both kinds of peril. B.P.P: business personal property (things that are not self-mobile) computers, compressors. Cars/trucks/trailers may need commercial auto policies. Personal policies may not cover enough. Your trailer also needs c.a.p. to cover liability.

Chemical spraying needs liability coverage—an overspray endorsement. A commercial sprayer may have it. Talk to your agent about your own policy.

Workman/s compensation insurance: It is the business owner's responsibility to cover injury to any employee. If that person is being paid, that person is an employee and must be covered. State law in Indiana requires it. Dollar 1. NO deductible. A true subcontractor is responsible for their own insurance—especially one their own schedule and their own equipment. Your schedule and your equipment? You're responsible.

All workman's comp is based on payroll. Policies are for 12 months. The policy is auditable.

As you keep buying equipment, you need to add that equipment to the business's policy. Call even before you buy a piece of equipment. Accessories: things that add to "the experience." The equipment needs to be covered and the liability needs to be covered.

Complementary equipment and activities also need to be covered. Liability needs to be covered. Items need to be covered. More endorsements. School trips and photo shoots also need to be covered by extra liability. An agritourism endorsement need to be added to your farm's policy.

There may also need to be endorsements in a separate policy on any comestibles, food, candy, drinks—especially hot drinks. Any separate food vendors have to have a liability policy with you as an additional insured. Whether they'll do that or not, have your own.

Photographers also need to have liability policies, and should include you as an additional. Have some coverage anyway.

The speaker was speaking of insurance under Indiana law. Illinois law may very well vary. Talk to your/an agent. Illinois is a litigious state. You may have some protection as an LLC. You may be able to insure separate aspects of your business, or, hopefully you can keep the private areas of your farm separate from the commercial areas. Post the private areas? Fence the private areas?

Experienced growers panel: [4 from Indiana, 1 from Illinois]

What do you do Jan., Feb., and March? 1. Cut stumps, base pruning, rogue branches. 2. Grind down stumps, do the bookkeeping in Feb., and go to the Bahamas in March. 3. Feb. is soil samples-test pH, send off samples; and planting in March [interplanting?]. 4. Root dip in planting? No. Still shearing fir and spruce. Soil samples are sent to Spectrum analytics. 5. Plant as soon as the ground is workable in Southern Indiana.

Is there an advantage to Spring planting over Fall planting? 4. Spring is likely better than fall.

April? May?: 2. Plant in April and May in Northeastern Illinois. No irrigation. 4..Plant in April and weed control in May. Water the newly planted trees. 5. Shear red pine in May. Fertilizing? Z

Fertilize? Soil testing is important to the health and especially the appearance of trees.

Species of trees?: 3. Pines, some Canaan. 4. Soil test can determine fertilizing and also what species will grow. The pH can determine if the tree will thrive. Draining is also very important. 5. If you have the right conditions, some exotic species will grow.

Pests: 5. White pine weevil: "I just let 'em go." 4. Cut down below the browning of the cambium layer. The most annoying pest is Zimmerman moth. 2. Pines have sawflies and Zimmerman moth. Firs have fewer pests. Swiss needlecast attacks Douglas fir. Canaan fir and concolor fir sell well in northeastern Illinois. Questioned the balsam crosses and the Norway spruce because of needle drop. Preferred Korean X Cork Bark hybrid. 4. Deer? 4. Leave the deer-rubbed trees. The deer will likely go back to those trees. 3. Has an open permit for deer control. Ground Squirrels: 2. No problems at the moment, nor are the deer. 4. No ground squirrel problems with trees, but the little rodents like the pumpkin seeds.

Planting prep: 3: no nitrogen on trees the first year. Some trace materials. 1. At least a small area of bare ground. 2. The seedlings go into bare ground. Other weed control happens later. How far do you plant seedlings from the old stump? 1. Try to plant between trees in the row or between the rows in the block. White clove as the ground cover can help. 5. Mulch around the young trees can help because it helps with weed control, cools the ground, and helps retain moisture.

Best advice: 5. Listen to the mistakes I've made. 4. Never plant more trees than your wife can take care of. 3. Your trees are your playground. 2. Yes, you need to enjoy what you do, but be open-minded, and remember it's really OK to make money. 1. Lay out things on your farm for your efficiency and for your customers' efficiency. Learn from other growers.

Managing weeds through Integrated Strategies in Christmas Tree Production Debalina Saha

A Zoom lecture.

There about 350,000 acres in Christmas tree production in the U.S. Weed management helps reduce water competition and optimize growth rate in young trees. Problems involved with weed control include herbicide resistance and damage to the trees themselves.

Studies were done at 4 tree farms each having different "dominant" weed species. She described the various methods used at these farms. Mulched trees were also studied with various combinations of herbicides and application combinations. Control trees had no mulch and no herbicide application.

Studies began in April 2021 and continued through May 2022. In may of 2022 foliar samples from study trees were collected as well as tree height after 4 different intervals. Phytotoxic effects were measured.

There was extensive data analysis for each farm and species. One indication: mulch plus herbicide gave the most effective weed control, in terms of persistence after 90 days.

Each farm had individual results. There was evidence of herbicide resistance, especially in ragweed and horseweed. Combinations of herbicides were the most effective.

White pine showed some phytotoxicity. There was recovery after 90 days. Firs also showed phytotoxicity as did blue spruce and Scotch pine. Difference in soil persistence may lead to different long term phytotoxic effects. Less in Scotch and white pines.

There was growth reduction with herbicide use at one farm. In other farms there was no difference in growth index.

The foliar nitrogen of the farm trees was higher than in forest trees. Later studies were highly recommended.

She recommended more studies of phytotoxic effects, soil residue, effects on foliar nitrogen.

Important factors to consider: weed characteristics, herbicide characteristics and cultural practices.

sanitation scouting cultivation, cover crop help control weeds. Rotate herbicide use, tank mixes; short term soil activity herbicides. Weed control needs to be an integrated program. Don't rely on a single mode of action. Pre-emergent control is recommended.

She gratefully acknowledged her lab members, the MSU collaborator. The growers who participated.

A question about mulch prompted the recommendation do your homework on what mulch you're using. There was hand weeding before application of the mulch.

There were phytotoxic effects because the herbicides had been applied "on top" of the mulched trees. Dr Saha did not recommend on top application of the herbicides.

Mulch was not applied against the trunks of the trees.

There was mowing between the rows of trees, but not in the rows between the trees.

Rob Richardson stood in for Dave Hoover, who was unable to attend. He presented a slide show on Richardson Farms. They have Spring, Autumn and Christmas seasons. Spring is tulips, Autumn is the Adventure Farm with the very large corn maze. The Christmas season is short because of the demand of choose and cut and pre-cut trees.

The tulip season is short, usually from the end of April. With excellent weather there will still be some tulips on Mother's Day.

The corn maze is on the glide path into O'Hare Airport and is one of the largest in the world. There are sunflower fields, pumpkin fields, and potted mums. You can rent a site with a fire—tended by a Richardson employee—and have a picnic/schmooze with your friends.

The tree farm opens on black Friday. They plant 12,000 trees per year, "just to keep up." All trees are the same price. The hot cocoa is free. They sell donuts. The hot cocoa is free for 6 oz. The whipped cream, bigger cups, and "additives" are extra. There will be 8 to 10 tractors running to carry people and trees back to the sales areas.

The story of how Richardson Farms came to be was and is as unique as each Christmas Tree farm is, no matter where that farm is. Richardson's is one of the largest agritourism farms in the Midwest. The corn maze is 28 acres with one of the longest maze trails in operation. The entire operation, trees, tulips, and parking is over 200 acres. There are 2 race events—mud races. There are also school cross country runs.

Your farm is a resource that can be used year round in many ways. You will need to learn to

“make things fit.” Long, straight rows may well be the last thing you need. The Richardson Farm is annexed to the village of Spring Grove, Illinois, which has given them some advantages in terms of zoning, etc. The health department is always involved when there is food.

Experienced Growers’ panel, day 2.

Each grower self-introduced.

How do you get people to cut trees that aren’t perfect? 1. A large customer base helps. 2. One person’s perfect tree is another’s choice. 3. “Buy a tree that smiles at you.” 4. “We prune what God gives us.”

How were your tree sales last year? What are the ebbs and flows? 4. Don’t be afraid to trade customers with nearby farms. Some years we sell nearly the same number of trees, but not always the same size trees, since farm 4 trees are priced by the foot. 2. Sometimes pre-cut sales will influence the number of trees sold. Agritourism can enhance business. 5. Sometimes sales go in spurts. Weather influences sales. That farm is 40 minutes from the St. Louis arch. 1. Be prepared for sales to vary.

How do you grow your customer base? 5. Word-of-mouth; social media

a. 1. Influencer nights. Facebook. 2. Social media, and word of mouth. 3. Provide a good customer experience. 4. Some social media. Repeat families. Enjoy what you do. And we take advantage of the I-74 corridor.

What is something you had to “adjust”? 3. Used a chemical too many times in one year and lost seedlings. 2. If you build it, they will come. 5. Tractor rides to and from the field. Rocky roads through the field. 2. Cutting trees for people is a selling point.

How do you price your trees? 5. By the foot. 1. Pre-tag the trees that farm wants to sell. Each tree has a value. Pre-tagging allows “grading” the trees. The “experience” and other features influence price. 2. By the foot. 3. Trees are priced in the field. How they are priced in the field is studied before hand. 4. Trees are priced by the foot. Attempts to tag trees resulted in the tags being moved. Trees are priced by the foot with firs and spruces priced \$1 per foot than pines.

What is your experience with needle retention? 5. Fir trees are good, but Scotch is a “rock star” for needle retention. Tags informing the customer of needle retention help maintain customer relations. 1. Spruce trees do not have the good reputation for needle retention. The farm lost customers because of needle loss on spruce trees. 5. Tag or no tag, people will cut what they want to cut. Early Thanksgiving may or may not influence sales or customer satisfaction. 2. Warn customers that spruce trees lose needles. 3. Customers are informed that Norway spruce can lose needles. The discussion went into the general audience and became almost impossible to follow. 4. Norway is sold as trees. Use for wreaths, etc. is reserved for production later in the season. Korean fir is slow growing, but has excellent color and is an incredible addition to wreaths and other decorations. Conclusion: Firs are best, then pines, then spruce.

What are your farm’s other good sellers? 5. Wreaths, etc. and balled/burlap trees. 1. Pre-cut trees, wreaths, gift shop, “train” rides, and the show of lights. 2. Wreaths, tiny table-top trees. Tree stands. 3. Wreaths, pre-cuts, loose greens, gift shop, tree stands. 4. Grave pillows and grave blankets, wreaths, loose greens a large gift shop. In the spring there are wind break trees and Memorial Day silk flowers for graves.

NCTA and Trees for Troops update:

We were reminded of our contributions to T4T and its meaning to active service families.

NCTA national meeting will be in conjunction with the MCTA Summer Meeting and will include the MACT summer meeting in Michigan.

Roundtable discussions.