

California Walnut Board

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CALIFORNIA WALNUT BOARD

RESEARCH COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES August 2, 2011

The CWB Research Committee met on Tuesday, August 2, 2011, at the California Farm Bureau Federation in Sacramento, CA. Chairperson Jerry Moore called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m. Ms. Steindorf called the roll and a quorum was established. The following committee members were present:

Jerry Moore, Chairperson
David Keyawa
Bert Crane
Lynn Morgan
Bill Tos
Pete Turner

Committee vice-chairperson Bob Driver was absent. Also in attendance were David Ramos, CWB Research Director; PRAC Chairpersons Rick Buchner, Joe Grant, Janine Hasey, Dan Kluepfel and Steve Welter; and CWB staff members Dennis Balint and Dana Steindorf.

The first agenda item was the approval of the minutes from the March 1, 2011 meeting. Mr. Keyawa made a motion to approve the minutes, Ms. Morgan seconded and the motion carried unanimously.

Chairperson Moore introduced the next agenda item, PRAC Discussion: Progress, Expectations and Future Direction. He asked Dr. Ramos to give an overview of PRAC and to lead the discussion on the future direction. PRAC was set up in 2005 by the Research Committee as an oversight group to assist with review of priorities and projects for the Committee. The original members of the PRAC were farm advisors Rick Buchner, Joe Grant and Janine Hasey; grower/handlers Bill Carriere and Jim Frazier; grower Brent Barton; Board/Commission members Sam Keiper and Jerry Siebert; and researchers Dan Kluepfel, Jim Thompson and Steve Welter. Jim Thompson was dropped from PRAC because his area of expertise, Post Harvest research, was moved to the Grades & Standards Committee.

The four working groups of PRAC are Genetic Improvement, Plant Pathology, Entomology and Orchard Management. Dr. Ramos believes that the working groups have been very successful in serving as liaisons between the researchers and the Committee and developing goals/priorities.

Dr. Ramos stated that there are questions to be addressed: Has PRAC lived up to the original expectations and if not is there a need to change the structure or direction? Is there need for more common discussion/joint meetings across the working groups? Do we need to look at long-range priorities and coordination across the working groups as well as within the working groups? Do we need formula funding across the working groups? Do we need spending caps? Do we need to focus on the deliverables/outcomes? Do we need to have more balance between short- and long-term research?

Does PRAC need to be more involved in the review process? If we agree that there needs to be a central group (PRAC) that oversees the working groups, who should be on it and how often should they meet?

Chairperson Moore opened up the meeting for discussion on the subject of PRAC. Ms. Morgan asked what kind of discussion takes place between the groups. Dr. Ramos stated that coordination improved recently when Genetic Improvement and Plant Pathology met jointly because of their common issues. Dr. Ramos also commented that he attends all working group meetings and that the Research Committee appointed liaisons to each working group from within the Committee. Ms. Morgan stated that she believes it would be most valuable to the Research Committee to know that there has been coordination in the PRAC working groups, however, there is always a cost of people's time and resources.

Mr. Tos commented that what the Committee should focus on is the quality of the final product that comes out of the working groups. He suggested that the working group chairs tell the Committee if they think they need another layer of peer review to enhance the final product that comes out of the working groups – the recommendations to the Committee. Dr. Welter had two questions about where communication could improve: where are the areas in common that could improve with coordination; and should we be prioritizing across the four groups?

Further discussion ensued about the working groups, research priorities and synergy between the working groups and Research Committee. Dr. Welter stated that he thinks what is missing is accountability – what did the Committee get for the money spent? Dr. Ramos commented that it is tough to weigh accountability of projects that have long-term implications in terms of output, particularly on genetic improvement projects. He also stated that the cost of research is going up across the board, not just for the longer-term, genome projects. The Committee then discussed the flow of proposals through the Committee and how those proposals are selected based on research priorities developed by PRAC.

Ms. Morgan suggested that the chairpersons of the four PRAC working groups get together once per year to discuss priorities within their group. Mr. Tos stated that the Committee has been discussing two separate issues: synergy from a research perspective and input to the Committee to make decisions on projects to support. Dr. Ramos stated that his dilemma as the liaison to the Committee is that there are fairly independent discussions going on within the working groups and the common ideas don't get presented to him. He commented that what Ms. Morgan pointed out is that if the four chairs got together and discussed their priorities relative to their different interests, would that be synergistic and encourage proposals? Dr. Grant suggested that the working group chairs meet together with Dr. Ramos once per year before the Bodega Bay Walnut Conference. Dr. Ramos stated that he would like to have that meeting with the working group chairs to review the proposals and what comes in based on the discussions in the working groups.

Mr. Tos, on behalf of the Research Committee, made a formal request that Dr. Ramos get together with the PRAC working group chairpersons to help evaluate projects and to discuss the general coordination and synergies of their discipline. The Committee members supported Mr. Tos' suggestion. Chairperson Moore also suggested that the Committee recommend three growers/industry leaders to be part of PRAC and have a self-appointed chair to bring information back to the Committee. Dr. Welter also suggested that the Committee appoint a sub-group to formally discuss how to have succession and how to lure researchers to this industry.

Chairperson Moore moved on to the next agenda item, Sustainability. Dr. Pickel stated that she was approached by Dr. Ramos and Mr. Balint to research the development of a sustainability strategic plan for the California Walnut Board; it would consist of information to put on the CWB website to show customers our sustainable program. Dr. Pickel asked the Committee to give her some input as to where she should focus to obtain information. She stated that the Almond Board has nine areas in their sustainability program, but she and Dr. Ramos came up with five areas that pertain to the walnut industry: integrated pest management; energy efficiency; water quality; nutrient efficiency; and air quality. They also listed the successes in sustainability that the walnut industry has already achieved, including energy reduction in walnut drying, pheromone mating disruption for codling moth, blight control and reduction in methyl bromide fumigation.

Mr. Balint stated that many customers are asking about sustainability; they want to market sustainability as part of their corporate culture in their retail chain or their packaged goods. If our industry as a whole could show a good track record, as well as progress into the future, it gives us a better shot at sustaining that business.

Ms. Pickel stated that through the PRAC process, the Research Committee has developed a program for sustainable improvement, including the following research projects: Canopy Management; Clonal Rootstocks; and Enhancing Biological Control. She also showed a bar graph of several pesticides used in the walnut industry and it clearly shows a reduction in pesticide use since 1995. She will work with Mr. Balint on how to present this information to the industry. Ms. Pickel recently applied for the California Walnut Board to get the Shining Star Award from the EPA using that data. She also distributed a draft of a sustainability strategic plan for a multi-commodity projects developed by Cliff Ohmart of SureHarvest; however, she is unsure if this is something that would apply to the walnut industry and would like input from the Committee as to the direction she should take.

Mr. Balint commented that we have to show what we have already done, but we also need to have a plan for the future; otherwise, if we stand still we will fall behind the other industries. The next step is to identify voids where we need more information, where we need more progress. Ms. Pickel stated that the pear industry hired SureHarvest to survey all 60 pear growers and the result of the survey indicated the percentage of pear growers that are using each of the nine areas of sustainability on the survey. Dr. Ramos commented that the Almond Board is conducting workshops and grower self-assessments; they identify areas that the almond growers are lacking and then re-check after a period of time to see if the growers have made improvements. Mr. Buchner commented that the walnut industry is already doing a good job of using sustainable practices; he believes we should compile a package and advertise what we are already doing.

The Committee discussed the issue of sustainability and how it will affect the industry in terms of marketing product. Mr. Balint pointed out that, whether we like it or not, sustainability is an issue we will have to address and have a plan for in the future. Several of the sustainable practices fall under the Research Committee (production) and several fall into the Grades & Standards Committee (post-harvest). After further discussion, Ms. Pickel stated that she understood from the Committee that they are not interested in a grower survey, like the pear industry conducted, by SureHarvest. She will make that clear when she meets with SureHarvest.

Chairperson Moore moved up on the agenda to Review of the Endowed Program in Walnut Breeding. Dr. Ramos introduced Tom Gradziel to give the report of the walnut breeding program. Dr. Gradziel stated that the walnut industry has asked that U.C. Davis conduct a review of the program in order to make sure the University is meeting the obligations of the endowment. The walnut breeding program is clearly well-embedded into the industry-funded Walnut Improvement Program; this is a very active program that receives a lot of industry participation in the way of annual funding, grower meetings and crack-outs, so that the industry is aware of what is going on with the program and the funds are being used for the intended purpose of genetic improvement and cultivar development. Dr. Gradziel stated that one of the challenges of breeding programs is to get cultivars out to the growers in a timely manner. In order to reduce the release time, the walnut industry has smaller scale tests with regional growers. These trials help identify early deficiencies in the new varieties.

Dr. Ramos explained that Chairperson Moore had put together a sub-committee working group that met with Dr. Gradziel the previous week to review the walnut breeding program. Dr. Ramos then discussed the Walnut Geneticist/Breeder Position Update (a later agenda item). He indicated that the Committee sent a formal letter to Chris Van Kessel, the Chair of Plant Sciences, making a case for why the position needs to be re-filled. The department is in the midst of developing their academic plan; an academic plan covers the expectations and desires regarding staffing the department in the coming several years. The Plant Sciences Department is now very complex; it used to be simpler under Pomology. In developing the academic plan, they have compartmentalized it so that the genetic/breeder types are coming up with represent one of several groupings of disciplinary interests that have staffing needs. Based on his conversation with Dr. Van Kessel, Dr. Ramos stated that the academic plan will not be available until the fall, but word is the tree nut geneticist/breeder position is high on the list.

A discussion ensued about the funding of the breeding program and whether or not it is time to increase the endowment. Mr. Balint stated that the return on the endowment fluctuates annually and the Committee already funds the difference between the cost of the program and the return on the investment. Dr. Ramos stated that the Committee has the option to add to the original endowment without creating a new endowment. Dr. Gradziel commented that the endowment does not have the limitations (carryover, etc.) that the annual CWB funding of the program does. Mr. Balint stated that using CWB funding allows the Committee to manage the start and finish dates of research.

Chairperson Moore moved on to item VI on the agenda, Commercialization of an RNA_i-based Crown Gall Resistant Paradox Rootstock Update. Dr. Ramos stated that about a year ago the Committee had a discussion about moving forward with commercialization of the transgenic crown gall resistant rootstock. There were some concerns about marketing the product and the acceptability of the nuts produced on transgenic rootstocks. During the last discussion on this issue, Mr. Balint had indicated that the industry could conduct some market research on the acceptability of the product once it is proven that there is no transfer of transgenic material through the graft union. A year ago, the Committee funded Dr. Dandekar's study to further analyze the graft union; he anticipated the project would take two years and is asking the Committee to fund the second year at \$60,404 (contract period 10/1/11 through 9/30/12).

Mr. Balint stated that the California Walnut Board recently conducted elections for the term beginning September 1, 2011 through August 31, 2013. The new Board will be seated at the annual fall meeting on September 16th. Mr. Balint is checking with USDA to see if this Committee (serving under the outgoing Board) can recommend spending funds out of the next crop year's budget. He has not received an answer from USDA/AMS in Fresno yet. Mr. Balint suggested that the Committee discuss and review the project, and then if desired, make a recommendation to the newly seated Board on September 16th to approve the funding of this project.

The Committee discussed the merits and the anticipated results of the project. Mr. Crane made a motion to recommend to the Board at their fall meeting on September 16, 2011, approval of the project from Dr. Dandekar entitled "Crown gall resistant walnut rootstocks: analysis of the graft union for transmission of genetic and biological materials" for \$60,404 to begin on 10/1/11. Ms. Morgan seconded the motion and it carried by majority with one dissenting vote.

Returning to the discussion on agenda item VII, Walnut Geneticist/Breeder Position Update, Dr. Ramos distributed requests from Bill Olson and Wesley Hackett to extend their contracts during the upcoming crop year. He explained that until last year, we had Bill Olson hired as a consultant to do the nut sampling and data collection in the Sacramento Valley for Chuck Leslie for the breeding program. As of March 2011, Mr. Olson's consultancy was terminated; Chuck Leslie has two new individuals assisting him now, however, he would like to hire Mr. Olson back for two months to make data collections at a cost of \$2,877.00.

Ms. Morgan made a motion to recommend to the Board at their meeting on September 16, 2011, approval of Bill Olson's consultant contract for data collection for the breeding program during September and October 2011 in the amount of \$2,877.00 to come from the 2011/2012 budget. Mr. Turner seconded the motion and it carried unanimously.

Dr. Ramos stated that Wes Hackett had been hired as a consultant over the past several years to work with Chuck Leslie on clonal rootstock propagation. Mr. Hackett has indicated his desire to end his consulting career; in the meantime, the process of transferring the responsibility and the plant material to John Preece at UC Davis began with Mr. Hackett's involvement. Dr. Ramos asked the Committee to consider an extension of the consultancy contract for Wes Hackett in the amount of \$5,000 for the period 12/1/11 to 3/1/12 to cover this transition.

Mr. Crane made a motion to recommend to the Board at their meeting on September 16, 2011, approval of Wes Hackett's consultant contract in clonal rootstock propagation for the period of 12/1/11 to 3/31/12 in the amount of \$5,000 to come from the 2011/2012 budget. Mr. Tos seconded the motion and it carried unanimously.

The time and place of the next meeting will be at the discretion of the Chairperson and staff. An executive session was not necessary. Hearing no further business, Chairperson Moore adjourned the meeting at 1:57 p.m.