

Gibson Shares Insight On RTA Developments & Initiatives For 2022



Following the conference, *Crossties* met with the RTA president to discuss what lies ahead in the coming months for the association and the wood tie industry.

Rick Gibson, president of Appalachian Timber Services (ATS), is in the second year of a two-year term as RTA president. He said he is encouraged by recent developments and innovations in the wood tie industry that were discussed at the conference.

“As seen at the RTA Conference, there are many exciting things coming that will have a positive impact on the tie industry. One development discussed in the research and development session was recycling of used ties by converting them to biochar. Another positive impact was naming Nate Irby as the executive director of the RTA. Nate will bring a freshness to the RTA. And, through his leadership, RTA will continue promoting the wood crosstie through innovation and education.”

Innovation is a familiar concept for the ATS team. Prior to 2018, the company pre-plated ties by hand. In 2018, the company developed a pre-plating machine built to its specifications. Another machine was added last year that is set up for Pandrol plates and screw spikes mainly used in the transit industry. “We still offer plating of regular plates and cut spikes applied by our labor force.”

ATS recently opened a crosstie processing plant in Beverly, W.Va., to air dry and borate treat ties. “We hope this will provide stabilization to our tie treating and pre-

plating business, as the tie markets are continuing to evolve.”

With degrees in business and forestry, Gibson worked his way up the ranks from sales rep to president of Appalachian Timber Services. In his tenure in the industry, he said he still enjoys the people he meets and appreciates the lessons they share. “The loggers, sawmills, tie yards and treating facilities have all been a great influence on me, and I have learned so much from them about the tie business.”

Gibson said the wood market continues to be a challenge but said he is excited about the future of the wood tie industry. “There are so many issues that can affect the availability of wood in a given year. I believe I could work another 28 years in this business and something new will occur.” Below, Gibson offers insight into the future of the industry and of RTA.

The 2021 RTA Conference returned to a face-to-face format, with a virtual option for those unable to attend. From an educational and networking perspective, how do you feel the conference was received by RTA members?

It was great. The RTA Executive Committee, staff and I have all received abundant positive feedback from the attendees. Our awards presentation was a hit, and the Producer Member Forum at the end helped summarize many of the learnings from the event. The economic presentation keynote provided a level of specificity to the status of the industry and economy as a whole, and the presenter was both entertaining and articulate.

What were some of the key takeaways from the conference?

Our members were glad to be back face-to-face! Hardwood lumber pressure has caused some tie inventory levels to not be where many would like them to be. Supply chain/trucking constraints have people on

edge about timing/availability. However, the outlook for each, in its own way, is good and we can only hope for a mild/dry winter to help bolster sawmill throughput.

With several sessions always very enlightening, were there any that were particular noteworthy?

The R&D session this year was robust and diverse, and many have noted the content was particularly timely in addressing current issues such as tie disposal and biochar. While we don’t know all the answers to the questions yet, I feel the ongoing discussion is important for RTA members and our industry. RTA annual meetings, field trips and other educational events/forums are great opportunities to showcase these important bodies of work.

What do you see as some of the greatest opportunities for members of the wood tie industry in 2022?

The Purchasing Forum featuring presentations from numerous railroaders gave us insight into their wood tie programs, and demand looks good. We are so thankful the railroads participate in this session as many of our producers and auxiliary support providers eagerly anticipate those presentations and the insights they offer.

RTA has a new executive director this year, among other exciting new developments for the association. What can RTA members look forward to in the way of updates for 2022?

Nate is eager to learn how the association operates all the while engaging with our members at a granular level. The association is in good hands, and we look forward to what is to come for the future. We can capitalize on our strengths, including *Crossties* magazine, the Tie Grading Seminar and Summer Field Trip, and forge ahead with new educational opportunities and inspection/technical efforts that Nate brings to the table. ►



THE END-OF-THE-LINE IS NOW FURTHER DOWN THE LINE.

WE'RE EXTENDING THE LIFESPAN OF MILLIONS OF CROSSTIES ACROSS NORTH AMERICA.

Eagle Anti-Split Plates meet and/or exceed Class 1 Railroad specifications with superior splitting resistance that yields added value and profitability for our customers.

Learn more about maximizing crosstie life at eaglemetal.com or give us a call at 800.521.3245

Please address RTA's national efforts in DC with all interests RTA serves.

RTA is in a unique position to provide support to many of our membership's interests. We work with the Hardwood Federation on national legislative issues affecting hardwood sawmills. We also work with multiple associations—WWPI, Creosote Council, Treated Wood Council—in the wood preserving industry to further each other's legislative and regulatory goals. We provide support and data for railroad associations such as ASLRRRA and AAR to help railroads stay in the strongest and healthiest position possible. In short, RTA serves multiple industries in their national and regional legislative efforts.

Please discuss any major RTA research initiatives for 2022.

The R&D committee met in St. Louis and discussed many issues from tie disposal to biochar, and it was proposed that we explore generating carbon capture information specific to wood ties. Our ongoing work with the test ties at Mississippi State University is continual and our key partnerships with other association/entities will help solidify our stance on advancing the science and prolonged usage of wood ties in railroad infrastructure.

How can RTA members get more involved with the association and play a greater role in advocating for and supporting the wood tie industry?

RTA committees are an easy and great way to get more involved. Likewise, Nate is actively recruiting new members from several under-served sectors of the wood tie industry, but not just for their membership. He is showcasing how much RTA has to offer in the way of awareness, networking and visibility through their participation in RTA.

Please share any available details about next year's RTA annual conference.

We are planning a Nashville conference next year. Our tentative theme is "Renew – Engage – Build," and we hope to see you there! ■