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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

RTA's Tie Grading Seminar Hits Record Demand, Overselling for 5th Straight Year

VICKSBURG, Miss. — The Railway Tie Association's (RTA) Tie Grading Seminar continues to break records, with the 2025 seminar overselling its capacity once again. To be hosted this year at the Koppers Inc. plant in Somerville, Texas, the seminar has grown steadily since 2021, reflecting its reputation as a cornerstone educational program for the wood crosstie industry.

Since its inception well over 30 years ago and having educated more than 1,200 students, the RTA Tie Grading Seminar has become an essential learning experience for sawmillers, producers, and railroaders, covering everything from wood tie sourcing to engineering. The event's attendance has surged over the years, jumping from 41 participants in 2021 to a consistent 54 registrants in both 2024 and 2025.

"Our Tie Grading Seminar has grown into a must-attend event for our industry," said RTA Executive Director Dr. Nate Irby. "The fact that we've oversold this seminar five years running is a testament to the quality of instruction, the commitment of our members, and the hands-on, real-world skills it offers to participants who then share their positive experience with the workforce."

A standout factor in this year's event is the participation of 10+ railroaders, a record-breaking number, further emphasizing the seminar's relevance to all sectors of the wood tie industry, from tree to track.

What's Driving This Success

The course has traditionally been designed for 40 students, ensuring a manageable group size for classroom learning, plant tours, and tie testing activities throughout the program. However, since 2021, attendance has consistently surpassed this target, driven by several key factors contributing to its success.

- **Rescheduled Timing for Better Access:** In 2023, the seminar moved from its usual early August timeframe to mid-March, a shift that better accommodates participants' schedules encourages broader attendance. "Plus, especially in the U.S. south, March is a much more pleasant time to be outside compared to the heat of early August," Irby added.
- **Student-Driven Content Improvements:** The seminar instructors continuously refine the course based on direct feedback from students. This includes one-on-one interactions during the course and formal evaluations completed at the end. These adjustments ensure the content remains relevant and impactful, empowering students and enhancing their sense of professionalism.
- **Expert Instruction with Real-World Insights:** Two of the instructors are former Class I railroad professionals who added a treated tie inspection component to the course in 2022. "The treated tie inspection segment has been overwhelmingly positively received and helps flush out the full spectrum of a wood tie from tree to track," Irby said. "The seminar instructors are diverse and



knowledgeable, from track-work experience, to academia, to plant operations, and quality assurance/conformance backgrounds.”

- **The Power of Word of Mouth:** Positive experiences from past attendees play a major role in attracting new participants. Many students report attending because coworkers shared glowing reviews about the seminar, describing it as a valuable and rewarding experience.
- **First-Hand Experiences Shared by Instructors:** Instructors recently introduced a tie grading booth presentation by a former professional wood tie grader and certified lumber inspector. This addition provides students with first-hand insights into grading practices in a real-world processing facility.
- **Enhanced Curriculum on Railroad Engineering:** The railroad engineering portion of the course has been revamped for improved flow, helping students better understand the critical role wood tie specifications play in determining tie usage in track and in keeping railroad workers safe and efficient.
- **Simplified Wood Species Identification:** Over the years, student feedback highlighted challenges in identifying 16-20 wood species during the three-day course. Instructors responded by aligning the training with real-world, state-of-the-art practices, categorizing species into three basic groups, improving test scores and student satisfaction and bolstering student confidence.
- **Supportive Learning Environment:** The instructors create a welcoming atmosphere where students feel encouraged to ask questions, seek clarification, and engage in one-on-one interactions. RTA staff also emphasize the rewarding nature of the wood tie industry, inspiring attendees to understand the broader scope of their work and to build on the knowledge and relationships they gain during the course.

A Unique Industry Experience

Beyond the technical training, the seminar fosters relationships and provides a comprehensive view of the wood tie life cycle—from “tree to track.” Participants leave equipped with new skills, practical knowledge, and connections across the industry.

“We couldn’t do this without the incredible support of our members,” Irby said. “Their contributions—whether through hosting seminars, providing lunches, or sending personnel—are what make this program a success. We are deeply grateful for their dedication and reverence for what this seminar means to our industry.”

Looking Ahead

The Tie Grading Seminar remains a shining example of RTA’s commitment to education and workforce development. As the 2025 seminar approaches, attendees can look forward to another exceptional experience that blends industry expertise with practical application.

Planning is already underway for the 2026 Tie Grading Seminar, to be held March 16-18 at Stella-Jones Corp.’s Fulton, Ky., plant.

For more information about RTA and its programs, visit RTA.org.

ABOUT THE RAILWAY TIE ASSOCIATION

The Railway Tie Association is the leading industry organization dedicated exclusively to promoting the research, development, and use of wood crossties and preserving sustainable practices within the railroad industry.