

New RTA President Discusses Challenges & Opportunities For 2017 & Beyond

By Kristen McIntosh

Tim Ries, operations manager for Koppers Inc. in Pittsburgh, was installed as the new Railway Tie Association (RTA) president at the recent 98th Annual RTA Symposium and Technical Conference.

Crossties caught up with Tim at the close of the conference to discuss topics addressed during the conference and provide a look ahead for the industry as well as the association.

What is your background in the industry?

I graduated with a forestry degree from the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point in 1988. My first employer was the U.S. Forest Service in Red River, Idaho, where I worked until the snows got too deep and I was laid off. I then took a job with the Forest Service in Mexico, Mo., for a short time. In February 1989, I went to work for Koppers in Superior, Wis., as a tie buyer who was responsible for Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Ontario. I was slowly incorporated into operational positions within the plant, and in 1993, I was hired as the plant manager in Superior. I held that position until 2005, when I transferred to manage the Salem, Va., plant. In October 2014, I moved to Pittsburgh, where I am an operations manager responsible for five wood treating plants and one rail joint facility. Koppers has evolved in a number of ways since I started with the company nearly 30 years ago, but perhaps the most significant change has been our recent strategy reinvention. We've transitioned from being a business built on carbon pitch production to an enterprise focused on wood preservation technologies. Similar to the RTA mission, our vision for the future is to be recognized as the standard bearer for safely delivering customer-focused solutions primarily through the development and application of technologies to enhance wood.

Can you talk a little about the basis for RTA's priorities for 2017?

RTA's priorities are developed in the same manner that any top-of-class organization organizes its programs and services—it's customer driven. In the case of RTA, those "customers" are not only our members but

also the public, legislative and bureaucratic entities and others that have interest in a thriving railroad industry.

Similar to Koppers' vision, RTA's mission is focused on continual improvement and customer-focused solutions. And much of what you'll see in 2017 and 2018 will be focused on the same ideals. As adjuncts to that, we will also see a renewed emphasis on tie disposal issues, industry quality control initiatives, plus corporate tax reform and other initiatives to drive growth for the future.

We heard from railroaders during the conference that they are constantly looking for ways to keep tie costs down, life expectancy up, quality control and meeting wood tie disposal challenges. How is RTA helping achieve these goals?

These issues were very common themes at the RTA conference. It's critical for RTA to continue to challenge the membership to find better ways of accomplishing these goals.

In particular, we are starting to see potential for technology to impact business in new ways that should help avoid rising costs. For example, we're noticing robotics being slowly introduced in the industry. Obviously, dual treatments and highly functional and disciplined quality control programs from the white tie to the treated tie are also critical components to reducing costs and extending the life of a crosstie.

RTA is also working with the biomass industry and our own railroad and wood preserving industries to find a way to improve the Non-Hazardous Secondary Materials (NHSM) rules to make recycling ties for energy recovery the best and most effective way to deal with end-of-life ties.

With respect to improving life expectancies, I think we see an industry-wide review of quality control programs in 2017. Since 2004, we have gone from typical wood treating plants applying a single primary preservative, creosote, to an industry that now has non-traditional companies and wood treaters applying a much broader number of single- and dual-preservative systems in use by railroads. If the wood tie industry is going to meet our customers' expectations, we'll need

to have a conversation on the best way to provide assurances that all the providers are maintaining the highest of standards.

RTA isn't a regulatory or enforcement agency, but I do believe it can and will be the natural forum for developing and disseminating a consistent message in regards to how we provide the best possible products.



TIM RIES, RTA PRESIDENT

We also heard about the difficulties sawmillers are having with labor issues, particularly with Millennials entering the workforce; availability of the resource; and environmental challenges. What will RTA do in the coming months to help this important member group overcome some of these challenges?

We're seeing those challenges in our companies, too. Manual labor challenges are certainly a concern throughout the industry. It is obvious that this is a critical issue for RTA, since the biggest portion of our membership is sawmillers. The challenge is being creative to develop a larger pool of workers for the types of positions sawmillers need. RTA understands and respects the challenges sawmillers have, and we intend to support their workforce initiatives in every way we can.

RTA is also working with the Hardwood Federation to address resource-related issues such as tax reform and improving the U.S. Forest Service's ability to manage national forests to minimize disease and fire threats by selective harvesting of trees that are nearing the end of their lifecycle in the forest. There are many issues we can have an impact on by standing with other groups such as the Hardwood Federation and railroad associations.

What do you see as the greatest opportunities in the industry during the coming year?

We need to see traffic growth return, and some of our highest priorities will be to work with the Association of American Railroads, the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association, the National Railroad Construction and Maintenance Association, and the new incoming administration to deliver legislative ideas to stimulate our economy and drive freight onto rail. The first six months of 2017 will provide a golden opportunity for progress on a lot of these issues. With sufficient economic growth acting as a rising tide to lift all ships, any problem we have to deal with automatically gets a little smaller.

What will be some of the major RTA initiatives over the coming year?

We've just completed the "TieGuide," which is a handbook for commercial timbers used by the crosstie industry, and the new Tie Grading mobile app. Both of these resources were huge accomplishments for RTA's focus on educating membership.

Additionally, we'll be getting the word out about RTA's new website (www.rtastats.org), where users and producers can get real-time information on in-the-field procurement trends in more than 25 different regions and sub-regions.

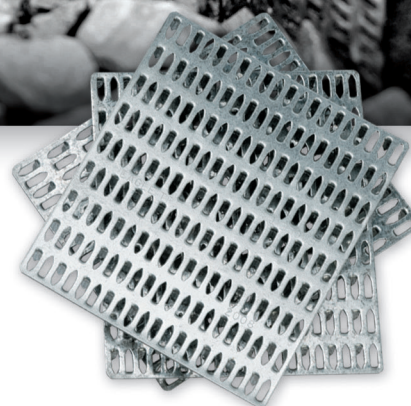
Plus, we hope to have our new SelecTie model unveiled in an easy-to-use online subscription-based delivery system by the end of 2017.

Of course, as always, the Tie Grading Seminar and the Annual Field Trip will be critical educational opportunities for our membership. Consistency is an important message that is constantly being communicated to our membership year after year from our customers. Quality all starts with grading that tie as it is bought in the field and comes into the treating plant. The Annual Field Trip is also another great way to network with our peers and see how operations in the industry can provide a better and safer way to deliver products. It's very helpful for members to see how other companies achieve the same or similar results as they do.

Can you share any details of the 2017 conference?

The 99th Annual RTA Symposium & Technical Conference will be held Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 2017, at the Manchester Grand Hyatt in San Diego. The bar has been set high as with all RTA Conferences. We are all committed to the work that must be done in order to ensure we maintain and even exceed that level of excellence. ■

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