

Looking Ahead With RTA President Dave Koch

Dave Koch, general manager for Wheeler Lumber's timber division, was sworn in for a two-year term as the Railway Tie



Association's new president at the recent Annual Symposium & Technical Conference in Orlando, Fla.

Koch began his career with Wheeler Lumber 23 years ago when he was hired by Jeff Parrett, now Wheeler's senior business development

manager, as an inside sales executive. Koch has held a variety of positions within the company including project manager, director of quality control, director of environmental health and safety, sales manager and now general manager.

Koch has been an active RTA member since 2005 and has attended the Tie Grading Seminar, the Annual Conference, and nearly every Field Trip since joining. "Every event I have attended has been a great learning experience," he said. "The networking and relationships I have developed with RTA members and staff have been incredible."

Crossties caught up with Koch after the conference to learn more about RTA's major initiatives for the coming year.

The 2022 RTA Annual Symposium & Technical Conference format appeared updated. What was the impetus for making these updates, and how were they received by attendees?

The conference format is a result of incorporating meaningful RTA member feedback to provide the best experience possible for conference registrants. Our annual conference attendees are now able to

learn, network and engage in an expanded format plus catch up on work during the event at their leisure while still having plenty of time to visit with suppliers and customers in person. We have received nothing but positive feedback on this format change. We will continue to incorporate meaningful feedback in all events we hold and all things we do at RTA to provide the maximum level of service to our constituents.

What were some of the key takeaways from the RTA annual conference?

Witnessing the collaboration between our association and others across the landscape is always refreshing. Furthermore, small things like the schedule being placed on the back of name badges, honoring the annual award winners in a formal setting, and afternoon rather than morning golf all added to the successes of the conference.

The educational sessions at the conference are always very enlightening. What were some you found to be most noteworthy and why?

Informative programming serves a great purpose, and the conference this year reflected the current pulse of the industry and provided great context for potential future direction in certain areas. The addition of a few larger short line and regional railroad purchasers gave color to that segment of the industry beyond the traditional railroad purchasing slate. Additionally, adding presentations from NHLA, NRCMA, NAMRC and others gave attendees a wider view of the industry and showcased RTA's intent to collaborate and build presence in ongoing, contemporary ways to sustain our association for many years to come.

We learned how CRISI grants are assisting some short line and regional railroads to undertake a variety of capital improvements projects. How can RTA members stay tuned into and potentially

benefit from opportunities resulting from the CRISI grants?

Our association is grateful to have positive engagement with all railroads. Beyond the 45G tax credit that brought an additional surge of wood crossties onto the marketplace just a few years ago and now with such large infrastructure funds available to additionally foster more wood tie demand going forward, wood tie producers will see a large demand for the foreseeable future. And with RTA incorporating more members on both ends of that spectrum and all points in between, being a part of the association is of critical importance to stay aware and establish relationships to meet current and future needs.

As tie producers have experienced supply shortages in recent months, are you optimistic members will be able to meet railroads' demand for wood ties in the coming year? What role will RTA play to help ensure railroads' demand for wood ties can be met in 2023 and beyond?

With prevailing supply shortages, labor inconsistencies and production hurdles, it will be challenging for members to meet railroad demand in the short term. But with more collaboration from both the sawmill membership sector and the end-user membership sector, RTA is positioned to be the forum for engagement and appropriate communication to assist all members in understanding those marketplace needs and to work together in outlining paths to achieve those goals.

Dr. Nate Irby has served as RTA executive director for just over a full year now. How has his leadership positively impacted the association's members and operations?

There could not be a better person suited for the RTA executive director position than Dr. Nate Irby. His educational background, work experience with Union Pacific, and his family's history in the hardwood industry make him a perfect fit for this position. He has done an exceptional job of communi-

cating with RTA staff and board members and has been transparent on all facets of the organization. He has listened to the RTA members' suggestions and has implemented changes as deemed appropriate. He has great awareness of maintaining RTA traditions as well as moving the organization into the future.

We heard from Mississippi State University's Dr. Beth Stokes that RTA has challenged the university to consider adding a third phase to the wood tie longevity study that has been underway for many years. What details can you provide about the ongoing study and the potential additional phase?

The study is progressing nicely, with the control groups now gone and the experimental groups subject to true performance parameters, which will be telling and valuable to our industry. The program participants will be invited to see the study in person in spring 2023. Plus, there is an open invitation to potential new study contributors that could facilitate an additional phase.

How can RTA members play a greater role in the association to advocate for and support the wood tie industry?

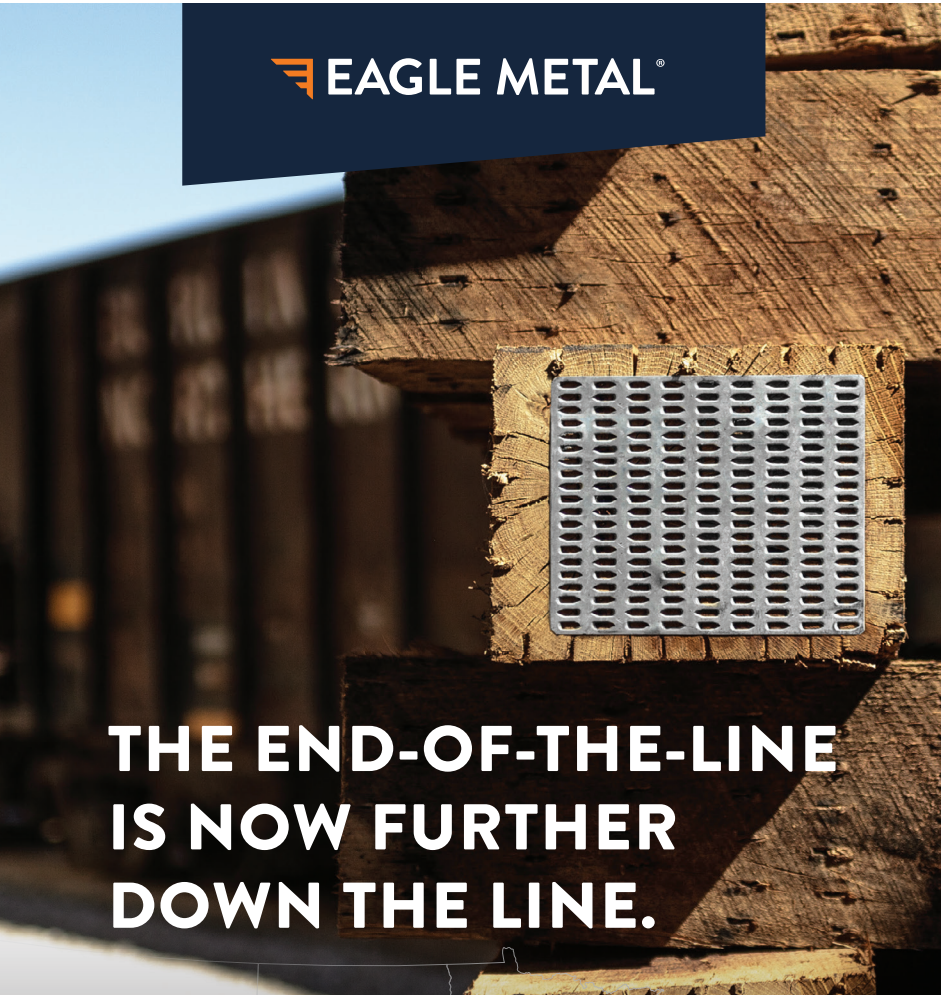
Participation is key, and it starts with the RTA presenting itself as a valuable endeavor. For those members already in the fold, we ask them to provide their testimony to others who may be unaware of all the great things RTA does for the wood tie industry. That is the most powerful means by which we can thrive and grow.

Planning has already begun for the 2023 RTA Annual Symposium and Technical Conference. Could you share any available details about the location and programming?

We are pleased to announce the 2023 RTA Annual Symposium and Technical Conference will be held Oct. 16-19 at the Westin Buckhead in Atlanta. We hope to provide a similarly great experience to attendees next year with some of the great attributes from the 2022 conference plus fresh and impactful programming. ■



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