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## BLUE LETTER

January 2026

No. 3885



John D. Anderson

# From the Director

I am writing this month's article from the basement of my house where I am currently – like many of you, I'm sure – snowed in. Winter weather is no surprise in January. Still, it is an unwelcome interruption in the middle of the busy meeting season.

One of the more important events that we have had going on this January that is not a regular feature of the annual calendar is training CES personnel on our new reporting software: PEARS (Program Evaluation and Reporting System). The AIMS program has been retired after a long and distinguished career, and the rollout of the PEARS program that will replace it is proceeding apace. Stacey McCullough's team in CPED has been working on this transition for a long time. They have invested a great deal of time and energy into setting up the PEARS program for launch and developing a strong set of training tools and user resources to make sure our personnel can hit the ground running with the new program. We started county agent training on the program a couple of weeks ago. That training has been interrupted by the recent inclement weather, but we will be back on track soon enough.

Most people don't get too enthusiastic about a new software rollout. Learning a new program can be a challenge, and unless you happen to be an IT professional, that is probably

not the main focus of your job. Also, software rollouts have a reputation for being more difficult than advertised. (I'm looking at you, Workday.) But sometimes change is necessary. That was certainly the case with respect to our reporting program.

More optimistically, change can also create great new opportunities. In the present case, PEARS provides a couple of key opportunities for us to improve our current reporting. On the front end, PEARS is a more user-friendly system for entering Extension activities and impacts. The program is easy to learn, and once users have learned the basics, I am confident that we'll be able to enter better, more complete data in less time than we could in AIMS. On the back end, PEARS makes summarizing and reporting data much easier than anything we have had before. The program provides data access and built-in data visualization tools that will allow us to show stakeholders and policymakers what we are doing and the impact we are having like never before.

I was able to attend three or four of the PEARS training sessions for county agents before the weather shut us down. Overall, I would say that when people see the program in operation – with respect both to data entry and reporting of results – they like it. I'm sure we'll have some wrinkles to smooth out before we are through, but I'm encouraged by the great start we have had to the rollout so far. ■

## INSIDE SCOOP

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- ...And much more!



# Agriculture Awards Ceremony



Smiles, service, and 4-H spirit showcased by the Arkansas 4-H members meal servers at the Agriculture Awards Ceremony!  
Back (L to R): Maggie H. (Craighead), Everett H. (Craighead), Avery S. (Arkansas), Elizabeth W. (Saline), & Lauren H. (Saline)  
Front (L to R): Miles M. (Saline), Benjamin M. (Saline), Colin S. (Arkansas), Mila M. (Drew), & David C. (Saline).

Putting their “hands” to service, 10 Arkansas 4-H members served up smiles — and a memorable dining experience — at the Agriculture Awards Ceremony in November. From managing drinks and desserts to clearing tables, the youth made every task look effortless and fun.

Before the event, the team learned proper serving etiquette and food-handling safety from 4-H staff and volunteers. Working in pairs, they collaborated seamlessly, earning praise from guests and staff alike for their professionalism, teamwork and cheerful demeanor.

The 4-H members represented a variety of county programs, including Arkansas, Craighead, Drew, and Saline counties. ■



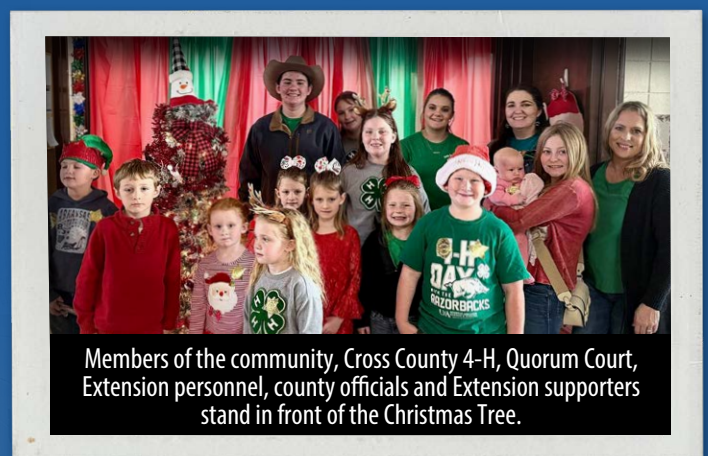
Everett H., Craighead County 4-H member, prepares the tables for the Agriculture Awards Ceremony.

# Jingle and Mingle

Cross County hosted a Jingle and Mingle Christmas event Dec. 19 at the county office featuring a few of their office updates, community activities, and area programs and successes to wrap up the 2025 season.



Community members enjoying festive treats before heading down Cross County's Learning Station Hallway.



Members of the community, Cross County 4-H, Quorum Court, Extension personnel, county officials and Extension supporters stand in front of the Christmas Tree.

Members of the community, Cross County 4-H, Quorum Court, extension personnel and supporter and county officials dropped by to connect and enjoy refreshments with the office as well as grabbing a photo opportunity with Santa. ■

# Gresham Farms Named Arkansas Century Farm

Congratulations to retired Dallas County extension agent Keith Gresham and his family, whose farm was inducted into the Arkansas Century Farm Program by Gov. Sarah Sanders.

Gresham Farms includes 451 acres devoted to cattle, hay and timber production in Calhoun County. Gresham Farms was also the 2025 Calhoun County Farm Family of the Year. Keith retired in July 2025 but doesn't seem to be slowing down. ■



Keith Gresham's Family pictured (L to R): Darcey Gresham (granddaughter), Hannah Gresham (daughter), Clay Gresham (son), Betty Joyce Gresham (mother - 91 years old), Suzie Gresham Iveland (sister), Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Scott Iveland (brother-in-law), Keith Gresham, Debbie Gresham (wife), Katie Gresham Gerard (daughter), Trey Gerard (son-in-law), Wes Ward (Secretary of Agriculture).

## Stitching, Spices, and Shared Success



Family and Consumer Science agents in the Ozark District attended the 4th Annual Ozark District FCS Retreat last month and left energized, inspired, and equipped with new ideas to further the Extension mission in their counties.

Carroll County staff chair Torrie Smith and committee members organized the two-day retreat held Dec. 17-18 in Berryville for FCS agents to learn from one another, strengthen their professional skills, and exchange innovative program ideas.

The retreat opened with Marion County agent Billie Collins leading a needle punch art activity, a skill she learned at 4-H Artisan Camp. Benton County agent Trudy McManus followed with "Spice It Up," a hands-on lesson demonstrating how to teach herb and spice usage and create custom spice blends in cooking classes. Sharp County staff chair Chelsea Conway shared a practical tutorial on using a Silhouette machine for Extension programming.

On day two, Torrie Smith presented "Blueprint to Happiness" and facilitated a pasta-making class. Cleburne County agent Lacey Hall presented "Flip It," highlighting



(L to R): Joel Phillips, Billie Collins, Chris Rooft, and Anna Harlan rolling out their pasta dough.

its use in teen programming, while Franklin County staff chair Casey Ford led a sewing lesson where agents, along with District Director Sherry Beaty-Sullivan, created potholders and refined their sewing skills.

The retreat concluded with Benton County agent Jessica Street presenting on the Life Skills Contest, encouraging greater agent participation in this emerging opportunity. ■



# February is Election Education Month

Nearly everything is on the election ballot in Arkansas on March 3. New state laws have consolidated elections – every school district is now on a spring election calendar, and March 3 is one of two dates for special elections (sales tax, property tax, etc.).

These elections are in addition to primaries for county and state offices, and the non-partisan elections for Arkansas Supreme Court.

Help Arkansans learn about these elections and important deadlines by sharing educational posts from the Public Policy Center's social media pages. Or refer to our [Voter Resources website](#).

## Important deadlines

Feb. 2 – deadline to register to vote if not already

Feb. 16 – early voting starts for all elections

## New laws

Be aware of two new election laws.



- People who are registered with their county clerks as Democrats will not be able to vote in the Republican Party primary. Voters can change their political party information at any time by updating their voter registration information.
- Arkansans who are already registered to vote can now update their voter registration information at the polls. Previously, if you moved, you had to update your information at least four days before the election. ■

# County Government Course Available in Learn

Want to know more about the roles and responsibilities of county government officials? The online course, an Introduction to County Government in Arkansas course, is now available to community members and extension professionals via Learn.

## The self-guided course includes four sections:

1. An Overview of County Government,
2. Mandated and Non-Mandated Services,
3. Roles and Responsibilities of Elected County Officials, and
4. How Counties are Funded.

The course is ideal for people wanting to learn about the offices on their March 3 ballot or are kicking off the new year with a resolution to be more civically engaged.

Sign up today at [learn.uada.edu](https://learn.uada.edu) or share with your clientele. Contact Kristin Higgins, [khiggins@uada.edu](mailto:khiggins@uada.edu) or 501-671-2160, for more information. ■

# Real ID Needed for Travel Arrangements

Beginning Feb. 1, individuals who do not have a Real ID-compliant driver's license or identification card may incur an additional fee when booking or processing certain travel arrangements, especially airfare travel during flight check-in.

**Please Note.** This fee is NOT a reimbursable cost. To avoid any inconvenience or extra expenses, we strongly encourage all employees to verify whether their current ID is Real ID-compliant and, if not, begin the process of obtaining one as soon as possible.



Real ID for an Arkansas Driver.

## What You Need to Do:

- Check your driver's license or state-issued ID for the Real ID star symbol.
- If you do not have a Real ID, visit your local DMV or state licensing office to apply.
- For more information on Real ID requirements, visit Arkansas Real ID – Arkansas Department of Finance and Administration.

If you have any questions about this policy or need assistance with travel arrangements, please contact [travel@uada.edu](mailto:travel@uada.edu). ■

## 4-H Christmas Cheer



Montgomery County 4-H youth gathered Dec. 22 for a joyful day of hands on learning, holiday cheer, and community spirit. The kids rolled up their sleeves to make Christmas cookies, decorate gingerbread houses, and craft charming s'mores ornaments. They gathered fresh greenery of cedar, pine needles and cones to create beautiful floral arrangements, learning new skills while expressing their own holiday style. Laughter and friendly chatter filled the room as members played games and enjoyed spending time together during the school break.



Montgomery County 4 H youth decorate gingerbread houses.



Christmas cookies made by 4-H youth.

To wrap up the celebration, everyone shared a warm and hearty nacho lunch — the perfect finish to a day centered on friendship, learning, and the spirit of Christmas. Events like this highlight the heart of 4 H: youth coming together to learn, create, and build memories that last well beyond the holiday season. ■

# Teen Cuisine Program

Sebastian County FCS agent Tristin Bolton recently completed the Teen Cuisine program with the sixth-grade health classes at Darby Middle School. Forty-two students completed the six-session program.

Each lesson involved a variety of activities focused on nutrition, food safety, and food preparation.

Teen Cuisine uses approaches and strategies to enhance learning and behavior changes among teenagers. Pre- and post-survey data indicate that 78% of students feel more confident in their food preparation skills after participating in the program. Student input surveys show that 71% of students reported changing



Tristin Bolton

their eating habits because of the Teen Cuisine program.

“Through the Teen Cuisine program, I can teach students how and why we should look at the nutrition facts label,” Bolton said.

“I hope that this program is the foundation of their nutrition knowledge. It always is exciting for me when they come back to class and share that they made one of the recipes for their family.” ■

## Internships

### Experiential Scholars Program (ESP) Applications closed Jan. 31

Applications closed on Jan. 31 for the Experiential Scholars Program, a paid 9-week summer internship program for undergraduate juniors and seniors interested in working in water/soil conservation, food health/nutrition/safety, or community development.



Each scholar will be assigned a focus area mentor. Mentors will train, provide hands-on learning opportunities and will work with interns to develop a special project such as a field demonstration, organizing a public meeting or other related task as part of the internship. More info about the program is [online](#).

### Ag-Tech Career Exploration (ACE)

Interviews wrapped up in December, and invitations were extended to youth (both 4-H and non-4-H) in Arkansas, Conway, Greene, Howard, Independence, Johnson, Logan, Madison, Monroe, Nevada, Pulaski, Saline, Washington and White counties to participate in the Ag-Tech Career Exploration program.

This program gives youth the chance to meet industry professionals, tour labs and farms, job-shadow experts, and explore cutting-edge ag-tech practices. It's more than a glimpse into potential careers; it's a real opportunity to grow skills, build confidence, and see the possibilities for a future in agriculture. ■



# Save the Date!

## Suport Staff Conference

## Thursday, April 23 & Friday, April 24, Vines Center





# AACES Offers Ways to Make Positive Impact

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The Association of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Specialists (AACES) welcomes all non-classified professional personnel, including professors, program associates, program technicians, and instructors, to join. A new membership is \$10.

As a member, you will benefit from a variety of opportunities, including:

- **Professional Growth and Networking:** Engage in professional development, network with Extension colleagues, and help foster a warm and fun working environment.
- **Awards and Recognition:** AACES strengthens UADA by recognizing outstanding employees through various awards and helping pass important company resolutions.
- **Community Service:** Collaborate with other UADA groups, such as Chi Epsilon, on community service projects, including Stuff the SUV, the Summer Cereal Drive, Fall Festival, and Spring Fling.
- **Social and Charity Events:** Participate in and help host fun social events, including those benefiting outside charities, such as the Halloween Costume Contest and the Easter Egg Hunt.

To join, [click here](#). ■



(L to R): AACES members Vanessa Lewis and Brittney Schrick network and socialize with other UADA employees to help foster stronger relationships while donating to charities within our community.



Kirby Owens helps collect blankets for the Adopt a Blanket Drive.

## Delivering Blankets to Veterans

The Arkansas Association of Cooperative Extension Specialists (AACES) and Chi Epsilon Sigma collected and donated 174 blankets to the Central Arkansas Veterans Administration for distribution to veteran patients before the holiday break. The two organizations hosted a blanket drive Nov. 24-Dec. 19 at the Little Rock State Office.

## Card Club Lifts Nursing Home Residents' Spirits

The Baxter County 4-H Card Club made Christmas cards for Care Manor Nursing Home and distributed them to the residents on Dec. 22. The residents and their family members greatly appreciated the cards.

“Thank you on behalf of my aunt who is in Care Manor! It means a LOT



(L to R): Annemarie D., Harley H., Holden H., and Charlotte D. at Care Manor Nursing Home to deliver homemade Christmas Cards to residents.

to those residents!”  
- J.A. Knowles.

The Card Club is a community service club. Members make cards during their meeting and then deliver the cards to the designated group later in the month. Previously, they delivered cards to Baxter County veterans on Veterans Day last November. ■

# Pecan Demonstration

Lonoke County Extension Horticulture Agent Kyle Sanders has been working in orchard restoration with local growers in his county for the past several seasons.

The pecan demonstration on Stecks farm in central Lonoke County has proven very successful over the past two years. Restoration of the 10-acre orchard has included orchard cleanup, establishing a viable insect program, and addressing disease and fungicide issues. Particular attention was given to the pecan weevil issue. Because of the eradication program implemented, production has increased exponentially in the orchard, which is 60-70 years old.

This demonstration was part of an effort to determine if reviving older orchards across the county is worth



(L to R): Leigh Quirk and John Bruhl display a portion of Winter Pecan Harvest.

the time, effort, and financial resources involved. This is an ongoing effort to reclaim older orchards across Lonoke County. ■

## Arkansas Vegetable Growers Conference

Extension will host its first Arkansas Vegetable Growers Conference on Feb. 19-20 at the Little Rock State Office.

The event — hosted by UADA, UA Pine Bluff, and the Center for Arkansas Farms and Food (CAFF) — will bring together vegetable growers, researchers, and industry leaders to share the latest insights on vegetable production throughout the state!

**When:** February 19-20, 2026

**Where:** State Extension Office,  
2301 S. University Ave., Little Rock, AR 72004

**Cost:** \$40 for early registration (before Feb. 10), \$50 for late registration and at-the-door registration. Check out the [conference webpage](#) for more information and to register. ■

 A poster for the Arkansas Vegetable Growers Conference 2026. The poster features a green and white color scheme with a central logo that says "ARKANSAS Vegetable Growers CONFERENCE 2026". The logo includes illustrations of various vegetables like pumpkins, green beans, and tomatoes. At the top, there are logos for the University of Arkansas System, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, Center for Arkansas Farms and Food, and the Arkansas Horticulture Society. Below the logo, the dates "February 19-20, 2026" and location "Little Rock, AR" are listed. Registration information is provided: "\$40 early registration (before Feb. 10th)" and "\$50 late or at-the-door registration". A call to action says "Join us for two days of expert-led sessions on sustainable vegetable production for crops such as pumpkins, sweet potatoes, tomatoes & MORE!" and "Register now at: [uaex.uada.edu/2026veg](http://uaex.uada.edu/2026veg)". At the bottom, it mentions support from the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) program.



# 2025 Horticulture Statewide Demonstration

Thirty-three agents investigated three different okra cultivars, including 'Jade', a cultivar released from the University of Arkansas system as part of the statewide horticulture demonstration orchestrated by specialists Aaron Cato and Amanda McWhirt.

'Jade' produces long straight dark green 6 to 9 pointed pods. 'Clemson Spineless' was the second cultivar in the demonstration and is considered by many to be a grower standard in the Southeast with high yields and green 5 to 8 pointed pods. The third cultivar was 'Carmine Splendor', which features stout 5-pointed red burgundy pods.

The main objectives of the demonstration were to familiarize agents with okra cultivars for future recommendations, while evaluating cultivar production and better understanding of common pests. Agents reported their observations on growth and harvest characteristics of the okra cultivars, such as percent germination, days to germination/emergence, and days to first harvest.

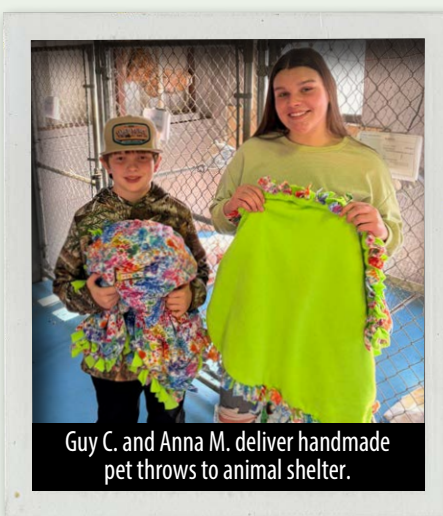
For the harvest metrics, agents recorded the average pod length (inches) of representative pods from each cultivar. Agents rated the attractiveness of the flowers, the overall performance of each cultivar, and conducted a taste test. Agents also scouted and reported incidence of pests and diseases. For more details about the demonstration, visit the Arkansas Fruit, Vegetable, and Nut Update [blog](#). ■



## Delivering Comfort to Local Shelter Pets

Howard County 4-H members Anna Kate M. and Guy Cooper K. demonstrated the spirit of community service by delivering handmade throws to provide warmth and comfort to pets awaiting adoption at a local animal shelter. The throws were made by several of the Howard County 4-H members.

The project is part of Howard County 4-H's commitment to leadership, citizenship, and hands-on learning. By creating and donating pet throws, youth not only help animals in need



but also learn the value of compassion and volunteerism.

"4-H teaches youth to give back to their communities," said Samantha Horn, staff chair. "Anna K. and Guy C. efforts show how small acts of kindness can make a big difference for animals and the people who care for them."

The donated throws will be used by the shelter to keep pets cozy during their stay and will accompany them to their new homes, offering comfort during the transition. ■



# Santa for Seniors

Miller County 4-H members and 4-H agent McKenzie Rigdon delivered holiday cheer — and presents — to 32 residents of a local nursing and care facility before Christmas. The center helped residents complete forms with their “wish lists,” which were used to create ornamental tags that were hung on a Christmas tree donated by a Master Gardener. County residents stopped by the Miller County Extension office to pick a list and then returned the purchased gifts so that our 4-H members could deliver them to the seniors. ■



## New Muscadine Selection Tool

UADA's Fruit and Vegetable Production team and web developers have developed a free resource to help growers select muscadine cultivars for production. The [Muscadine Selection Tool](https://muscadine.uada.edu) helps you find cultivars best suited for your climate and cultivars that fit your production goals.

You can search cultivars based on fruit color, harvest season, market type, flower type, or a combination of all of these characteristics at [muscadine.uada.edu](https://muscadine.uada.edu). ■

### New Muscadine Selection Tool



[muscadine.uada.edu](https://muscadine.uada.edu)



Fruit Color

Harvest Season



Market Type

Flower Type



## Grants & Contracts

PROJECT TITLE	AWARD AMOUNT	PI	GRANTING AGENCY
Determining Economic Threshold for Tarnished Plant Bug	\$35,000.00	Ben Thrash	Cotton Inc.
Foods for Healthy Heroes: A Culinary Adventure for Kids	\$300.00	Quad Whitson	American Culinary Federation Education Foundation
Arkansas Master Gardener Program: 2026 Arkansas Master Gardener Conference	\$5,000.00	Randy Forst	Conway A&P Commission
Sponsorship for the Arkansas Vegetable Growers Conference	\$2,850.00	Taunya Ernst	University of Georgia
Comparing Cumulative Plant Response to Herbicide Programs and Thrips Feeding in ThryvOn™ and Non-ThryvOn™ Cotton Technologies	\$43,350.00	Thomas Barber	Cotton Inc.
Evaluation of Axant Flex Cotton for Tolerance and Improved Weed Control	\$38,577.00	Thomas Barber	Cotton Inc.
Arkansas Cotton Verification Program	\$42,000.00	Zachary Treadway	Cotton Inc.
<b>TOTAL AWARDS FOR DECEMBER 2025: \$167,077</b>			



# Benefits Corner

## Do you have questions regarding your University Benefits?

Please utilize the [yourbenefits@uada.edu](mailto:yourbenefits@uada.edu) email address. The email is monitored and allows your benefits team to respond in a timely manner.

## Are you contributing enough to your University Retirement Plan?

All participants can increase or decrease voluntary contributions (within limits) and change vendors or investment fund selections at any time. This means that increasing your voluntary contribution percentage does not lock you in at that rate for the entire year.

Even if you participate in APERS or ARTRS or otherwise are not eligible for the university matching contributions, you can take advantage of the university retirement plan's investment fund lineup and convenient payroll deductions by making unmatched voluntary employee contributions.

Fidelity and TIAA representatives are available by phone to assist you with your retirement related questions.

- Fidelity - 800-343-0860
- TIAA - 800-842-2776

You can make a change to your voluntary contributions through Workday. If you make a change to your voluntary retirement contribution, your change will take effect the first of the following month after you make the change.

Workday: Employee Profile, Benefits and Pay, Change Retirement Savings, Continue, Manage.

It's also important that you log into your retirement vendor website(s) to review and/or make changes to your retirement beneficiaries.

- TIAA – [www.tiaa.org/public/tcm/uasys](http://www.tiaa.org/public/tcm/uasys)
- Fidelity – [nb.fidelity.com/public/nb/uark/home](http://nb.fidelity.com/public/nb/uark/home)
- APERS – [apers.org](http://apers.org) / 501-682-7800
- ARTRS - [artrs.gov](http://artrs.gov) / 501-682-1517

If you have any questions, reach out to [yourbenefits@uada.edu](mailto:yourbenefits@uada.edu). ■

# Personnel Changes



## Welcome Aboard:

**Katie Huff** – County Extension Agent - Agriculture, Lee County

**Connie Caplinger** – Administrative Specialist III, Poinsett County

**Lynhe Demesyieux** – Extension Nematology Educator - Ento & Plant Pathology, Southwest Research & Extension Center

**Christina Pumphrey** – EFNEP Program Assistant - Family & Consumer Science, LRSO

**Julie Tharp** – Program Technician - 4-H Events & Activities - 4H & Youth Development, LRSO

**Tajuana McCray** – Executive Assistant - Family & Consumer Science, LRSO

**Tessie Coble-Mix** – 4-H Program Assistant, Perry County

**Andrea Davis** – Learning & Development Manager - Human Resources, LRSO

**Keith Jones** – Computer Support Technician - Information Technology, LRSO

## Farewell to:

**Sherry Sanchez** – Finance & Administration - AR Manager, LRSO

**Craig Allen** – County Extension Agent - Agriculture - Poinsett County

**Yi Liang** – Associate Professor - Air Quality - Biological and Agricultural Engineering Hall

**Sharon Treat** – Administrative Specialist III - Phillips County

**Mary Jane Cody** – County Extension Agent - Family & Consumer Science, Perry County

**Emilee Gwynn Moody** – County Extension Agent - Family & Consumer Science, Prairie County

**Cody Lynn Stroud** – County Extension Agent - Agriculture, Sharp County

**Marley Shaddox** – County Extension Agent - 4-H, Pulaski County