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BLUE LETTER

June 2026

No. 3890



John D. Anderson

From the Director

Taking time to recognize and celebrate major milestones is important. I should confess here that I am personally notorious for forgetting birthdays and anniversaries. Still, I see the importance of it. Pausing to reflect on where we have been and to take stock of where we are going is a useful discipline that can help keep us on track in life. As a bonus, celebrations are a lot of fun.

By the time most of you read this, we will have had our July 4th blowout in celebration of this nation's semiquincentennial. That's a \$5 word for 250th birthday; I figured I had better use it now because I doubt I'll live long enough to have another opportunity. In a fun little coincidence, with the FIFA World Cup going on this summer, we're able to share our celebration with people from all over the world. I am wholly indifferent to soccer myself (no offense to any true fans out there), but I have had a lot of fun watching the social media posts by World Cup visitors experiencing the many wonders of this great country for the first time. My personal favorites have been the videos of Europeans raving about Waffle House. As my friends and family will readily affirm, I am a huge fan of Waffle House, and I'm happy to see it finally getting the love it deserves.

This nation's birthday is not the only major milestone that we're marking this summer. A couple of weekends ago, I made the annual pilgrimage to Warren for the Pink Tomato Festival – the 70th Annual Pink Tomato Festival. That's quite a milestone for a local event of that sort. The festival likely wouldn't have happened in the first place without the leadership of Cooperative Extension Service personnel in the county, and it certainly wouldn't have been sustained for 70 years without it. It was clear at this year's celebration that Extension is still essential not only to the continued success of that event but also to the greater economic and social life of Bradley County. What is true in Bradley County is true all across the state.

And speaking of the state, this summer we'll mark the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Little Rock State Office. The LRSO has been a huge asset for the Division, not only as a base of operations for our staff but as a wonderful venue for trainings, conferences, and stake-holder-facing events. I am grateful to previous generations of UADA leadership for the hard work that went into building this facility, and I hope that we are worthy stewards of it in our generation. We'll plan to mark the anniversary with at least a small recognition later this summer – nothing too elaborate. Maybe we'll have waffles. ■

INSIDE SCOOP

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- 4. Immunization Excellence Award
- 5. Communications Team Winners
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- 7. REACT Team Receives National Award
- ...And much more!

Sowing Seeds of Excellence

Thirty-eight new employees participated in the *Sowing Seeds of Excellence: Welcome U*, training held May 20 at the Little Rock State office.

The day began with “*Real Colors*” personality type assessments led by Drs. Julie Robinson and Rebecca Simon. Attendees explored different personality traits through interactive activities designed to strengthen collaboration, understanding and teamwork.

After the session, participants separated into groups based on employment categories for peer-to-peer discussions with experienced colleagues in similar roles. These conversations provided an opportunity to discuss expectations, share experiences and encourage open communication among team members.



Rebecca Simon discusses all the moving parts that work together to support Cooperative Extensions statewide impact.

Extension director Dr. John Anderson highlighted the history of Extension and emphasized how the Division of Agriculture’s core values of integrity, collaboration, accountability, relevance, and excellence guide Extension’s mission.



Steve Siegelin speaks with the new employees at the Sowing Seeds of Excellence: Welcome U held at the Little Rock State Office.

In the afternoon, participants toured the LRSO and its programs. Each stop offered insight into the many moving parts that work together to support Cooperative Extension’s statewide impact.

The day ended with spirited rivalry in a team quiz competition hosted by Allison Harman.

The next Welcome U training will be Nov. 12 at the LRSO. ■

APEX Accelerator

“Discouragement tricks you into mentally or emotionally dwelling in the very place you want to leave.”

-Guy Finley

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Counselor Kimberly Randle on a site visit with APEX Client.

Farm Safety Day

During the recent Farm Safety Day in Star City, fourth-grade students at Jimmy Brown Elementary learned safety related to electrical lines, fire, sun, livestock, and safety measures required before digging or cutting on your property.

The mission of the Farm Safety Day program is to provide education, training and resources to make

farming, ranch and rural life safer and healthier for children and their communities. Safety days are designed to be age-appropriate, hands-on, fun and safe for children.

On post-surveys, teachers were asked if they believed this Safety Day was beneficial for their students. All fourth-grade teachers agreed that it was. One teacher stated, "It enhances information that we teach, as well as new information." Student post-surveys showed one student learned "to always wear sunscreen, a hat and drink plenty of water." Another student learned "to never stand behind a cow." On the surveys 95 percent of students stated a safety behavior or skill that they planned to put into use. ■



Fourth grade students at Jimmy Brown Elementary come together for a group photo at the Farm Safety Day in Star City.

Sevier County Hosts

4-H Cloverbud Junior Day Camp



Sevier County hosted a 4-H Cloverbud Junior Day Camp on June 1, providing youth with hands-on learning, exploration and fun. Campers rotated through educational stations led by volunteers and community partners, gaining exposure to new skills, careers and natural resources.

4-H teen leaders opened the day with a communication lesson focused on teamwork, listening and building confidence. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers presented a water safety lesson and life jacket relay that reinforced safe recreation practices. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff engaged youth in a fossil-digging activity and a geology lesson, teaching campers about fossils and natural history.

Arkansas Forestry educators led an interactive leaf identification game that introduced participants to tree

species and the importance of forests. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission brought two animal ambassadors — an owl named Teddy and a snake named Princess — to teach wildlife conservation and animal adaptations. Joni Pearce shared a gardening lesson on marigolds, and campers planted seeds to take home and nurture.

The day provided Cloverbud members with engaging educational experiences while fostering curiosity, leadership and appreciation for Arkansas's natural resources. ■



Youth enjoy Cloverbud Junior Day Camp & learn about teamwork, forests, water safety, and fossils.

Immunization Excellence Award

The University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service was recognized nationally with a 2026 Immunization Excellence Award during the National Adult and Influenza Immunization Summit (NAIIS) annual meeting held May 20 in Atlanta.

The award recognized the organization's EXCITE-supported immunization outreach efforts focused on connecting rural Arkansans to trusted vaccine education and vaccination opportunities through community-based partnerships and Extension programming.

Across four Arkansas counties, Extension integrated the "Learn. Understand. Decide." framework into 15 "How to Talk to Your Doctor" educational sessions, reaching 123 adults. Evaluation data showed promising outcomes, with 72 percent of participants reporting plans to speak with a healthcare provider about recommended vaccines within six months and 62 percent indicating intent to schedule a vaccination.

County extension agents partnered with independent pharmacists, early childhood educators, and community organizations to expand vaccine education and access through QR-coded educational materials, county fair outreach, pharmacy collaborations, and pharmacist-supported vaccination opportunities at Extension-led events.



(From L to R): Michelle Rodgers (Extension Foundation EXCITE Project Director), Heather K. Wingo (UADA Extension Immunization Educator), Jessica Vincent (UADA Assistant Professor / Health Specialist), Laura Downey (Extension Foundation EXCITE Lead Evaluator)

The recognition also highlighted Extension's rapid collaboration with the Best Care early childhood education network during a measles outbreak response, which resulted in the development and dissemination of targeted MMR educational materials.

The award reflects the growing role of Cooperative Extension as a trusted public health partner capable of connecting research-based education, local partnerships, and community-centered outreach to improve health outcomes in rural communities through the EXCITE initiative. ■

4-H Beginner Sewing Workshop



Saline County Extension hosted a beginning sewing workshop June 4 where 4-H members and other youth learned about basic sewing supplies needed to get started.

Youth explored the parts of a sewing machine, and created a 6" x 6" pillow from start to finish. Saline County Extension Homemaker volunteers and extension staff shared their time, talents and expertise with the youth. Parents and guardians also joined in the fun, making it a great learning experience for everyone. ■

Communications Team Wins 6 National Awards



The UADA communications team earned six national awards at the 2026 annual conference of the Association for Communication Excellence, a professional organization of communicators at land-grant universities throughout the United States and similar institutions in other nations.

The Division of Agriculture was recognized for outstanding work in graphic design, marketing, media relations, publishing and writing for newspapers. The awards were presented June 17 in Billings, Montana.

The winners include:

- **Gold, Graphic Design** — “*Be Bear Aware*,” by Oliver Williams, publications specialist.
- **Gold, Writing for Newspapers** — “*Bradley County’s John Gavin celebrates long, fruitful career as tomato expert*,” by Tracy Courage, director of communications-extension.
- **Silver, Publishing** — “*High Tunnel Production Guide for Arkansas and the Southeast*,” by Emily Davis, publications specialist.
- **Silver, Writing for Newspapers** — “*How Do Road Salts Impact Roadside Organisms?*” by John Lovett, science editor.
- **Silver, Marketing** — “*Grow Arkansas Rice: For Arkansas, By Arkansas*,” a video promoting the Arkansas Foundation Seed Program and the Arkansas Crop Variety Improvement Program, by Benjamin Aaron, video production specialist, Paden Johnson, video producer, Ava Lacey, student video producer, and Nick Kordsmeier, chief communications officer.
- **Bronze, Media Relations** — “*Rice Rebels: Research Reveals the Grain’s Brewing Benefits*,” by John Lovett. ■

Dr. Karen DiCicco Inducted into the NETC Hall of Fame

The National Extension Technology Community (NETC) Hall of Fame honors individuals whose influence extends beyond roles and achievements to inspire growth, connection and lasting impact.

At the 2026 NETC gathering, Dr. Karen DiCicco was inducted in recognition of her exceptional contributions. Since joining in 2019, she has quickly emerged as a dynamic leader, uniting members, advancing initiatives and elevating the work of others.

Karen has held key leadership roles, including vice president-elect, vice president, and president from 2023 to 2025, guiding NETC through a period of growth while

strengthening engagement and focus on its mission. She now continues her service as conference consultant.

A standout achievement was her leadership of the 2022 NETC Conference in Little Rock, widely praised for its innovation and strong sense of community.

Beyond her accomplishments, Karen’s greatest legacy lies in her mentorship and support of others. She has recruited members, nurtured leadership, and fostered an inclusive environment where individuals can thrive. ■



Dr. Karen DiCicco

Security Tip: Using Public Wi Fi Safely

Public Wi Fi is convenient, but it can put your information and our organization at risk. Networks in places like coffee shops, airports and hotels are often not secure, making it easier for cybercriminals to intercept data or create fake networks.

Key Risks

- **Eavesdropping:** Hackers may capture your usernames, passwords or emails.
- **Fake networks:** You might connect to a malicious Wi Fi hotspot posing as a legitimate one.
- **Malware threats:** Some networks can expose your device to harmful software.

Stay Safe with These Tips

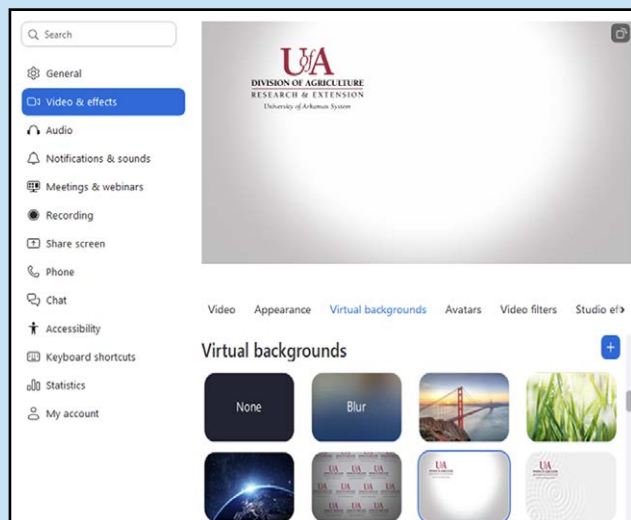
- **Use a VPN:** Always connect to the [UADA VPN](#) when accessing work resources.
- **Confirm the network name:** Verify with staff before connecting.
- **Avoid sensitive activity:** Don't access financial or confidential systems without protection.
- **Turn off auto-connect:** Prevent your device from joining unknown networks automatically.
- **Use secure websites:** Look for "https://" and a padlock icon.
- **Enable MFA:** Adds an extra layer of protection if credentials are compromised.
- **Disable sharing:** Turn off AirDrop/file sharing when in public.
- **Downloading unknown files:** Only download files from trusted sources.

Staying cautious on public Wi Fi helps protect both you and UADA.

Zoom Pro Tip

How to Change Your Zoom Background

Want to refresh your Zoom look or hide your surroundings? Here's a quick guide to changing your virtual background—before or during a meeting.



Before a Meeting

1. Open the Zoom desktop app and sign in
2. Select your profile picture in the upper right corner
3. Select Settings
4. Select Video & Effects
5. Select Virtual Backgrounds
6. Choose an option or select + (Add) to upload your own image
 - None – no background
 - Blur – softens your surroundings
 - Default image

During a Zoom meeting, select the up-caret next to Video in the meeting toolbar, then open Video Effects. Select Virtual Background and choose from the available options. For more details about changing your Zoom background, please watch the Zoom video, "[Backgrounds & Video Filters](#)."

Hump Day Hacks

Hump Day Hack resources can be found on the [Hump Day Hacks Resource page](#) in Team Dynamix. May's hacks included cleaning up your Outlook inbox with Search, View Tab options in Excel, how to use the Zoom Workplace Scheduler, PowerPoint Smart Guides, and checking your design accessibility in Canva. See you at the next Hump Day Hacks on the fourth Wednesday of the month! ■

2026 TECH TUESDAYS WEBINARS

Have you missed any past Tech Tuesday webinars or want to join future webinars? Check out the recordings and other resources on the [Tech Tuesday Blog page](#). More Tech Tuesday topics coming soon! Did you miss June's "Design, Engage, Recruit: Using Canva with Extension Programming"? Check out the [recording and resources](#).



REACT Team Receives National Award for Excellence

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The University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture celebrates the REACT for Arkansas (Rural Education for Arkansans by Connecting Technologies) team, which earned the National Extension Technology Community (NETC) Award for Team Excellence. This honor recognizes innovative use of technology, strong collaboration and outstanding service in Extension programming.

Team members Karen DiCicco, Samantha Barker, Andrea Price, Karen Collins, Buff McCree, Jacob Cole, Keith Jones, Stewart Farquhar and Kirby Owens developed a statewide distance learning system through cross-functional teamwork involving IT, communications, leadership, and local offices.

REACT focuses on expanding access to education in rural communities. The team implemented advanced video conferencing and interactive tools across 40 sites in 37 counties, including cellular connectivity at 12 locations to overcome limited broadband access.

This system transformed Extension delivery by enabling hybrid learning environments where local offices act as both teaching and participation hubs. Programs now reach thousands of Arkansans annually in areas such as agriculture, health, financial literacy, youth development and economic growth. ■



Garland County 4-H and Clark County 4-H teamed up and provided a team building activity for thirteen 4-Her's. They spent the morning at the University of Central Arkansas' Challenge Course where they participated in icebreakers, group problem solving activities, and the low and high ropes course. This course was made to teach groups how to work together, communicate, and encourage each other, all while facing some fears. This was a challenge for many as they had to climb and move across various unstable structure surfaces at heights over 30 feet and learn how to rely on their teammates and staff for physical and emotional support.

Throughout the day, the 4-Her's learned and developed effective communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills. Amelia Gauldin, a Garland County 4-H member,

stated "The ropes course was a fun experience to help us learn about teamwork and collaboration. It gave me a chance to lead, where I would not normally have the opportunity. I had a great time." These skills are important for not only completing a challenging ropes course, but also for overcoming challenges in everyday life. ■



Youth working together on the low ropes course.



4-H Star Camp

Youth from Sevier, Howard, Pike and Montgomery counties attended the three-day annual STAR Camp, a beloved summer tradition held at Timber Lodge in Amity, Arkansas, June 16-18.

The camp brought together 63 4-H members, 11 University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture staff members and five volunteers for three days of learning, recreation and fellowship. The campers designed and created personalized barn quilts, participated in fish identification workshops and crafted custom fishing lures, and learned woodworking skills.

County agents organized and planned the camp and FCS agents prepare and cooked the meals and snacks. Farm Credit sponsored a pizza night, and Keith Smith Farms supplied the hamburgers, hotdogs and the hard-working crew that cooked for everyone.

STAR Camp provides 4-H members with valuable opportunities to develop new skills, build friendships, and reconnect with fellow youth from neighboring counties. In addition to the educational sessions, campers enjoyed swimming, games, and other recreational activities, making the event a highlight of the year for many participants. ■



63 4-H Members take a moment for a group photo at the 2026 STAR Camp.

UADA Hosts First Arkansas Stockmanship Contest

UADA Animal Science faculty partnered with the Arkansas Cattlemen's Association to offer the first Arkansas Youth Stockmanship Contest on May 14 at the Southwest Research and Extension Center.

The contest teaches youth hands-on application of the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program. Youth teams representing 4-H and FFA programs around the state competed in three competition areas: a cattle processing plan, team problem and cattle working. Each team used their knowledge of BQA to give vaccines, deworm, tissue sample and ear tag a group of three heifers.

The winning team was from Perry County 4-H, coached by county agent Blake Erbach. This team will represent Arkansas at the National Youth Cattle Working Contest in September. ■



Champion Team from Perry County 4-H.



Youth prepare to work cattle for the contest.

Grants & Contracts

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PROJECT TITLE	AWARD AMOUNT	PI	GRANTING AGENCY
2027 United Way Hempstead County 4-H Program Support	\$6,000	Terrie James	United Way Hempstead Co.
Bayer Work Order #24, Protocol #ID26USAZ0D	\$6,650	Travis Faske	Bayer CropScience LP
Economic Evaluation of Long Staple Uplands, ELS, and High Performing Upland Varieties Across the Cotton Belt	\$8,000	Zachary Treadway	Cotton Inc.
TOTAL AWARDS FOR MAY 2026: \$20,650			

Benefits Corner

Health and Dental Plan Premium Rates Update

Effective July 1, 2026, there was a UA Systemwide increase in the cost of health and dental insurance premiums. While health and dental care costs have continued to increase over the years, UADA's employer contribution to the cost of health and dental premiums has allowed employee's insurance rates to remain competitive.

Health insurance premiums will increase by approximately 2.5% across all tiers (Classic, Premier and Health Saving Accounts), and dental insurance premiums



will increase by 1%. There are no increases to the deductibles or co-payments and no changes to the plan design. New rate information may be found on the UA System website under the "Benefits" tab for [12-month](#) and [9-month](#) employees.

For any questions you may have, please contact yourbenefits@uada.edu. ■

Personnel Changes



Welcome Aboard:

Jasmin Hoskins – EFNEP Program Assistant - Family & Consumer Science/EFNEP, Phillips County

Jequetta Berry – County Extension Service - Family & Consumer Science, Clark County

RJ Martin – County Extension Agent - Agriculture, Bradley County

Summer Greenwalt – County Extension Agent - Family and Consumer Science, Prairie County

Beth Wren – EFNEP Program Assistant - Family & Consumer Science/EFNEP, Greene County

Lee Anderson – County Extension Agent - Agriculture, Jefferson County

Camelia Eheart – EFNEP Program Assistant - Family and Consumer Science, Washington County

Farewell to:

Jenni Peppas – 4-H Program Assistant, Crawford County

Hannah Boyte – County Extension Agent - Agriculture, Columbia County

Casey Danner White – Program Technician, LRSO

Del Johnson – Benefits Manager, LRSO

Ashley Edgmon – County Extension Agent - Family & Consumer Science, Boone County

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