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BLUE LETTER

September 2026

No. 3893



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From the Director

A couple of weeks ago, USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) released a report that I think would interest a lot of people reading this column. The report¹, [*Cooperative Extension in Transition: Trends through 2024*](#), documents trends in funding and staffing levels in Cooperative Extension since its founding with the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, with most of the document's focus on the last three or four decades. The short summary is basically that funding peaked in the 1970s, declined slightly to around 2012 and has been pretty much flat since then. The federal share of CES funding is currently about 20% of the total CES budget nationally – down from about 40% in the 1970s. This is not news to anyone who works in Extension, and my purpose here is not to complain about funding. I do that enough plenty of other places. At any rate, you can read the report for yourself if you are interested – which I would encourage; it's a good and useful piece of research.

I do have one quibble with the ERS report, and it relates to the characterization of the CES mission. On the first page of the report, you'll find this quote: Improving farming and agricultural practices was the primary rationale behind the creation of the agricultural Extension system but the program's mission has expanded to include the broader goal of enhancing rural and non-rural living conditions.

I run into this framing of the CES mission fairly often, and I don't care for it, to be honest. This makes it sound like CES had a mission and strayed from it or, at the very least, allowed mission creep to dilute it. If we accept this framing as accurate,

serious questions can – and should – be raised: questions about our stewardship of public resources and about the legitimacy of many of our programs. But I don't object to this characterization of our mission because I want to avoid those questions. I object to it because I think it gets the story backwards.

Extension was created for the purpose of enhancing living conditions by linking the people of each state to the resources of their Land-Grant university. In an era when one-third of the population lived on farms and about half were directly employed in production agriculture, improving farming practices was the best – likely the only feasible – way to meaningfully impact living standards. Even then, Extension programs in home economics and youth development worked hand-in-glove with agriculture programs to effect significant and broad-based improvement in living standards.

It is fair to say that our programming has changed a lot in the last 100 years, both in terms of content and delivery. Why shouldn't it? The economic, social, and cultural landscape is much different today than it was 100 years ago. This is not at all the same thing as saying that our mission has changed. We are pursuing the same mission we were given in 1914 – to improve the lives of people in our state. But we are doing so with the tools and techniques that make sense today. That's not a sign of mission creep but quite the opposite; it is a sign of our firm commitment to accomplishing the same mission we've always had. ■

¹Borisova, T., Fuglie, K.O., Garber, B., & Wang, S.L. (2026). *Cooperative Extension in Transition: Trends through 2024* (Report No. EIB-297). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

INSIDE SCOOP

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Mediterranean Diet Program

After completing the Mediterranean Diet training this summer, Sebastian County FCS agent Tristin Bolton, delivered the program in her county. Six people participated in the half-day program and learned about the history and research behind the Mediterranean Diet. They also learned about the different regions of the Mediterranean and signature cuisines.

The program then moved into the kitchen where participants were assigned a region and two recipes to complete. Lunch was served family-style, a key feature of the dietary pattern.

It was a great program and survey results indicated that all participants increased their knowledge and intend to prepare more Mediterranean dishes. ■



Participants preparing dishes.

4-H Members Tour Fort Smith Air Force Base

Sebastian County 4-H members recently got an up-close look at an F-35 fighter jet while learning about aviation, military careers and the science behind flight during an educational tour of Ebbing Air Force Base in Fort Smith.

The group was welcomed by pilot “Pops,” who led students and adults through the facilities before visiting the hangar to see an F-35. Students learned about pilots’ specialized gear, the technology behind the aircraft, and features that make the F-35 an elite stealth fighter.

“Pops” also explained Ebbing’s international training mission and its partnerships with countries such as Poland and Singapore. For several high school students, the visit offered insight into military careers and opportunities after graduation.

The group continued its aviation adventure with a tour of the air

traffic control tower at Fort Smith Regional Airport. From the tower, participants learned about air traffic control and radar technology while enjoying a bird’s-eye view of the airport.

A highlight came when an F-35 took off while the group watched from the tower. Days later, students were still talking about the aircraft and everything they learned. ■



Pilot “Pops” and Sebastian County 4-H students, parents and staff posing with an F-35.

Midkiff Honored at ACA Convention

Animal Science faculty and students recently attended the 68th annual Arkansas Cattlemen's Association (ACA) Convention & Trade Show in Fort Smith, where Dr. Kirsten Midkiff, extension animal health and wellbeing specialist, received the ACA Producer Education Award.

Midkiff and Dr. Janeal Yancey, extension animal science instructor, spoke to attendees during the college sessions.

The group visited with program supporters and made new friends at the trade show booth, where information about Extension and Bumpers College was available. ■



4-H Kids Market

What started as an idea to give 4-H members a new way to showcase their projects grew into a successful hands-on learning opportunity through the Cleburne County 4-H Kids Market. Inspired by a similar event organized by Creenna Bocksnick at the Arkansas 4-H Center, Cleburne County 4-H Program Assistant Tracy Fall saw an opportunity to adapt the idea for local youth.

Fall developed and coordinated the Kids Market from the ground up, creating the vendor application, establishing guidelines, recruiting youth vendors, arranging the location and promoting three markets throughout the community. The goal was simple: give young people an opportunity to experience entrepreneurship while doing what 4-H does best—learning by doing.

Everything sold had to be made, created, baked, raised or grown by the young vendor. Collectively, youth vendors earned more than \$2,500 and kept all of their earnings.

The educational value went far beyond profits. Youth created merchandise, determined prices, prepared inventory, decorated booths, talked with customers, explained products, accepted payments and made change. They learned which products attracted customers, how much inventory they needed, the importance of presentation and advertising, and how to adjust their business ideas based on experience.

One of the most rewarding parts was seeing how much the kids enjoyed the experience. Through the Kids Market, Cleburne County 4-H members weren't just selling products—they were

learning to turn their ideas, creativity, and hard work into something they could be proud of, while building confidence, responsibility, and valuable skills they can carry into the future. ■



Animal Science Writing Workshop

The Department of Animal Science recently hosted Dr. Steve Zinn, former editor-in-chief of the Journal of Animal Science, and Dr. Sarah Reed, current editor-in-chief of Animal Frontiers, both from the University of

Connecticut, for a three-day visit focused on scientific writing, publishing and professional development sponsored by the Carl B. & Florence E. King Visiting Scholars Program.

During their visit, Zinn and Reed engaged with students, faculty and early-career researchers through

workshops, seminars, classroom visits and mentoring sessions. The program began with faculty discussions and networking opportunities and continued with

participation in microbiome, muscle growth/development and reproductive physiology courses, where the visitors shared insights about their careers and research programs at the University of Connecticut.

A highlight of the visit was a three-hour writing workshop and lunch attended by graduate students and researchers from Animal Science and related disciplines across Bumpers College. The workshop covered key components of scientific manuscript preparation, strategies for responding to reviewers, common mistakes in scientific writing and publication, and approaches for improving the likelihood of publication success. Participants also had opportunities to discuss ongoing papers and manuscripts and receive feedback from these two highly experienced scientific editors.

The Carl B. & Florence E. King Visiting Scholars Program series is an active program within the Department of Animal Science that brings nationally and internationally recognized leaders in research, instruction and allied industry to campus for presentations and networking opportunities for students, faculty and stakeholders. ■



Dr. Steve Zinn visits with graduate students during a Writing Workshop and Lunch as part of the Carl B. & Florence E. King Visiting Scholars Program.

Cross County

Mini Field Day



Dr. Terry Spurlock (left) showing signs of stem canker to participants.

Cross County Extension hosted a mini field day on the Moery Farm in Wynne on Aug. 18. University of Arkansas specialists Dr. Terry Spurlock, Dr. Ben Thrash, and Mr. Mike Hamilton provided in-season insights on irrigation, fungicides, and late-season insect control. Industry personnel gave product updates on varieties featured in the XtendFlex Soybean Variety demonstration.

Thanks to Dr. Glenn Studebaker's crew for the sweep nets, to First Financial Bank for the ink pens and notepads, to the companies who contributed to the XtendFlex Soybean Variety demo, and to the Moery family for being hospitable cooperators. ■

GetFit Training Prepares Leaders

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Extension GetFit is helping volunteers build the knowledge and confidence they need to lead others toward healthier, more active lifestyles.

Vanessa Lewis, program associate on the health team with Family and Consumer Sciences, recently demonstrated proper exercise form during an Extension GetFit leader training at the Washington County Extension office in Fayetteville.

The training was designed for volunteers interested in becoming Extension GetFit class leaders. Participants learned and practiced the correct form for exercises and movements they will use when leading their own classes. Safety is an important part of the program. New volunteers must complete the leader training before conducting their own Extension GetFit classes. Current leaders are required to complete a refresher course every two

years to maintain safety standards and ensure they are prepared to provide participants with safe, effective exercise instruction.

Through trained volunteer leaders, Extension GetFit continues to encourage Arkansans to incorporate physical activity and strength training into their everyday lives while making fitness fun, accessible and achievable. ■



Vanessa Lewis, far right, program associate on the health team with the Family and Consumer Sciences Department, demonstrates proper exercise form.



Dinner at the Vines

Raises Nearly \$90K for 4-H Scholarships, Activities

Arkansas 4-H scholarships and activities have nearly \$90,000 in new funding — including a \$10,000 endowment donation from former state Sen. Bruce Maloch — as part of the annual Dinner at the Vines.

“By every measure, the sixth annual Dinner at the Vines

was our best yet. A full house, record-setting generosity, and a cause worthy of every bit of it,” said John Thomas, managing director of the Arkansas 4-H Foundation. In 2026, Arkansas 4-H provided \$144,000 in scholarships, both for college and to enable members to attend camps and other in- and out-of-state activities, such as 4-H National Congress.

The dinner is hosted at the Arkansas 4-H Center in Ferndale. The event featured live and silent auctions and a garden reception before dinner was served lakeside. The auction item attracting the highest value bid was dinner for 20 with Tom and Judy Riley. The Rileys both worked for the Cooperative Extension Service, which operates the Arkansas 4-H youth development program. Judy Riley serves as treasurer on the Arkansas 4-H Foundation Board. Read the full story [here](#). ■



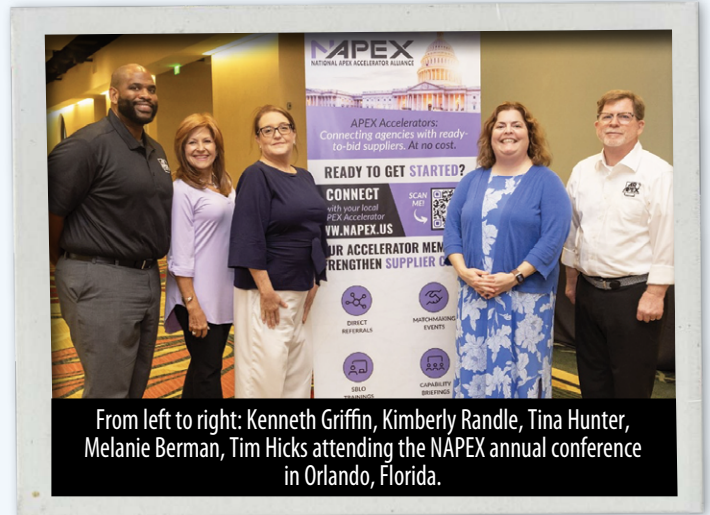
Friends and supporters of Arkansas 4-H gathered for the sixth annual Dinner at the Vines fundraiser on Sept. 29.

APEX Accelerator Team Brings Back Big Ideas

NAPEX Conference

Members of the Arkansas APEX Accelerator team recently packed their bags and headed to sunny Orlando, Florida, for the National APEX Accelerator Alliance (NAPEX) annual conference held Aug. 16–20. Program Director Melanie Berman, Deputy Program Manager Tina Hunter, and Procurement Counselors Kenneth Griffin, Timothy Hicks, and Kimberly Randle spent five days learning, connecting, and developing fresh ideas to bring back to Arkansas.

Conference sessions covered topics including growing the defense industrial base, cybersecurity, innovation in government contracting and more. The team also had a chance to cheer on one of our own: Melanie led a session on Key Performance Indicators for the Modern-Day APEX Accelerator and was re-elected to a two-year term as NAPEX Secretary, where she will continue serving on the executive committee and providing oversight for the Communications and



Bylaws Committees. Congratulations to Melanie and the entire Arkansas APEX Accelerator team for proudly representing UADA and bringing valuable insights back to support businesses across the state. ■

Newer Agent Training

Fifteen county Extension agents met at the White County Extension Office Sept. 2 for *Newer Agent Training: The Ideal Team Player*. This session focused on collaboration and the role of effective teamwork in successful Extension programming.

Rebecca Simon opened the day with an icebreaker that encouraged attendees to share local victories and opportunities for growth. Participants then worked together to develop a question bank addressing topics and challenges that newer Extension agents need to navigate as they develop in their roles.

Doug Whatley led the group in brainstorming positive and negative characteristics of team players. This activity helped participants identify effective teamwork behaviors while clarifying their own expectations and experiences related to collaboration.

Steve Siegelin and Julie Robinson led a discussion of the three characteristics of an Ideal Team Player, as defined by Patrick Lencioni: humble, hungry, and smart. The discussion provided

participants with a framework for understanding the behaviors and attitudes contributing to effective teams.

Katie Cullum, Katie Douglass and Jan Yingling from the White County Extension Office participated in a question-and-answer session, giving newer agents an opportunity to hear firsthand experiences and perspectives from colleagues working outside their home regions.

Julie Robinson then facilitated a group activity demonstrating the challenges teams encounter when individuals view a problem from different perspectives. The activity emphasized the importance of communication, understanding differing viewpoints, and working collaboratively toward a common goal.

The day concluded with Brad McGinley and Rebecca Simon facilitating a workshop in which participants identified potential partners for collaboration within various spheres of influence. The activity encouraged agents to consider how building relationships within and outside Extension can expand their ability to serve their communities effectively. ■

White County

Propagate, Play and Bouquet

White County Extension's cut flower demonstration garden has provided a season-long opportunity for hands-on horticulture education. The garden was funded through a competitive FIELD grant from the state Extension office under the direction of Dr. Shane Gadberry, assistant vice president for Agriculture & Natural Resources, with Randy Forst assisting with plant selection and establishment.

From the beginning, the project emphasized generational gardening, with White County Master Gardeners working alongside Green Thumbs 4-H Club members to plant the demonstration. Later, flowers harvested from the garden were used during a Propagate, Play and Bouquet Workshop for youth and families.

White County Master Gardeners, County Extension Agent Sherri Sanders and summer intern Peyton Ketcher led hands-on plant propagation activities, while Anthony Bowden taught the fundamentals of bouquet making. The project connected planting, propagation and floral design while giving youth and adults opportunities to learn from one another throughout the growing season. ■



White County Master Gardeners work alongside Green Thumbs 4-H Club members to establish the cut flower demonstration garden.

Phillips County FCS

ARHOP Team

Phillips County FCS agent Julie Goings and Darby Waites, regional program associate for the Arkansas High Obesity Program (ArHOP) team, staffed a booth during the Arkansas Food Bank's event to unveil the Community Resource Center in Downtown Helena. During the event, multiple community and state partners offered resources during the food distribution. Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders joined the efforts to celebrate the Community Resource Center and proclaimed Helena as "Capital of the Day" on Sept. 3.

The center is the first of its kind for the Arkansas Food Bank and came about after six years of work through the Community Accelerator program through Feeding America. Darby Waites served on the Food Bank team for six years. The program has impacted policies and systems throughout the Arkansas Food Bank and has brought a new focus on changing physical environments to promote nutrition and on providing wraparound services to reduce barriers.

The ArHOP team is a strategic partner for the new center and is heavily involved with the planning and development. The new center will be operational in Fall 2027. Click to see [posts](#) and [photos](#). ■



Phillips County FCS Agent, Julie Goings and ArHOP Regional Program Associate, Darby Waites set up resource table for UADA at the unveiling event and community food distribution.

A Summer of Hands-On Learning

Drew County 4-H had a packed summer filled with hands-on learning, new skills, and lots of fun! Youth participated in several exciting day camps that allowed them to explore their interests while learning by doing. The summer began with an Outdoor Day Camp at University of Arkansas Monticello, with the help of Jaret Rushing, extension forestry instructor. Youth enjoyed learning new skills and exploring the outdoors.

At Sewing Day Camp, students learned basic sewing skills while creating string quilt squares. They enjoyed being creative while learning a skill they can continue to use. During Farm to Table Camp, youth learned about how vegetables are grown before putting their knowledge to work in the kitchen. They practiced their chopping skills and prepared a delicious vegetable stir-fry for lunch.



Jaret Rushing showing the students how to measure trees at the Outdoor Camp.

Summer programming ended with Photography Day Camp. Students learned about manual camera settings and practiced taking and editing photographs. It was a wonderful summer of learning, creativity and hands-on experiences. We are proud of all our 4-H youth and excited to see what they will learn and accomplish next. ■

TransformAR Mobile Lab Available for Support

State specialists and county extension agents can now count on a state-of-the-art mobile lab to support their technical assistance work and educational programs. The lab is part of a multidepartment project called *TransformAR: Innovative Technical Assistance & Transformative Education for Farmers and Ranchers in Arkansas*, a collaboration of UADA Animal Science, Horticulture, Family & Consumer Sciences, Poultry Science, Ag Economics & Ag Business, and Crop, Soil & Environmental Science departments and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. It is funded by USDA's Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement.

According to Dr. Dan Quadros, TransformAR director, "the lab is equipped to deliver on-farm, real-time, or quick turnaround analyses, generating indicators for key parameters that improve the accuracy of recommendations and the excellence of our services." In addition to farm visits, the mobile lab will be used extensively for hands-on demonstrations at educational events, such as workshops, field days, and farm trials, as well as general public interactions in county fairs, expos and festivals.



New mobile lab for technical assistance and educational use available.

In cases where samples need to be sent to brick-and-mortar labs, the lab can be used to properly collect and prepare samples for shipment. Lab capabilities are very broad, including analysis related to soil, water, seeds, crops, livestock and food safety. For more information, please visit: www.uaex.uada.edu/TransformAR. ■

Sebastian County Ribbon Cutting

The Sebastian County Cooperative Extension Office celebrated recently with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and open house in partnership with the Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Community members toured the office and met Extension staff. Sebastian County Extension Agent Tristin Bolton gave welcoming remarks, highlighting Extension's commitment to serving residents through education and outreach. After the ribbon cutting, guests visited tables showcasing the work being done in agriculture, horticulture, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H youth development. Attendees learned more about available programs, resources, and services while engaging with the staff.

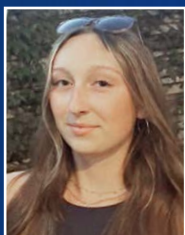
The event highlighted the mission of Extension as well as the commitment to serving Sebastian County through education, outreach and community partnerships. ■



4-H promotion table (left to right): Allisyn Stratton, 4-H program assistant, Carley Jones 4-H state president, Megan Adkins, 4-H agent.

Animal Science

Students Complete Summer Internships



Emily Leitner

Emily Leitner from Imperial, Missouri, spent the summer at the St. Louis Zoo's Jungle of the Apes, caring for gorillas, orangutans and chimpanzees while creating enrichment, preparing diets and educating guests.

The experience deepened her appreciation for great apes and reinforced her goal of becoming a zookeeper or conservation professional.



Natalie Miller

Natalie Miller from Scranton, Arkansas, gained hands-on experience at Mathias Ranch, working with a 1,500-head cattle operation. From cattle care and herd management to record keeping, marketing and community outreach, she experienced many facets of the beef industry.

The internship strengthened her passion for agricultural advocacy, policy and protecting American agriculture. ■

Grants & Contracts

PROJECT TITLE	AWARD AMOUNT	PI	GRANTING AGENCY
Control of Diamondback Moths	13,500	Aaron Joseph Cato	The Regents of the University of California
Southern Region Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network	50,000	Brittney Schrick	North Carolina State University
Upland Oak Sustainability & Management In The Central Hardwoods Region	40,000	Jacob Hackman	US Forest Service
Arkansas High Obesity Project	780,000	Jessica Vincent	Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
Apex Accelerator	693,326	Melanie Berman	US Department of Defense
TOTAL NEW AWARDS FOR AUGUST: \$1,576,826			

Personnel Changes



Welcome Aboard:

Jeff Pratt – Associate Director for Development and Stakeholder Engagement -
Development & Government Relations, Washington County

Alivia Gregory – EFNEP Program Assistant - Family & Consumer Science, Phillips County

Asia Moore – Program Technician - 4-H & Youth Development, LRSO

Alex Fountain – Human Resources Partner - Human Resources, LRSO

Farewell to:

Reese Davidson – Business Office - Fiscal Support Specialist, LRSO

Daniel Livingston – County Extension Agent - Agriculture, Desha County

Hallie Caldwell – Pike County – Administrative Specialist III, Pike County