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UADA to lead statewide effort to reduce food insecurity in Arkansas

With nearly one in five Arkansans unsure of where his or her next meal is coming from, the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture is leading a statewide effort to improve access to food.

"Food insecurity is a major challenge in our state," said Deacue Fields, vice president-agriculture for the University of Arkansas System, and head of the Division of Agriculture. "Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a study showing that Arkansas has the highest rate of food insecurity in the country."

"Because of the sheer breadth and depth of our mission within the food system — everything from helping improve farm productivity, nutrition education, and the building of local food systems and improving the health of those with low resources — the Division of Agriculture is in a strong position to make a difference in food accessibility," Fields said.

The first step toward change is the appointment of Hunter Goodman as an executive fellow, a first-of-its-kind position within the Division of Agriculture. Goodman started in the 18-month position on Aug.15.

Her mission will be to improve collaboration with internal and external partners, make it easier to share data and leverage resources, and find new ways to increase food production and access, Fields said.

Goodman is an assistant professor with the Division of Agriculture's outreach arm, the Cooperative Extension Service. She is also affiliated faculty in the agricultural economics and agribusiness department for the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences. She will continue her other duties in addition to leading this effort.

Fields said Goodman's work within extension's Community, Professional, and Economic Development department has demonstrated her ability to bring together the right people to accomplish a goal.

"This is an opportunity for UADA to drive change through collaboration, which is one of our core values," he said. "Eliminating hunger will require the efforts of our entire organization and all of our partners."


Goodman will be leading a statewide effort to fight food insecurity.

Goodman said her first undertaking is to create a statewide task force to work collectively to improve food security and health. She convened a foundational meeting Sept. 29 at the University of Arkansas System office, with representatives from more than 30 organizations invited. System President Jay Silveria welcomed the participants and Fields talked about UADA's priorities in this effort.

The Division of Agriculture conducts research and outreach into all aspects of the food system from farm to table through its Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service.

"We have so many ways that the division is working to address food insecurity," Goodman said. "When UADA and partners across Arkansas who are also passionate about food insecurity lean into our strengths and combine our efforts, we can create impactful, measurable change. What a beautiful blend, right?"

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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. "Arkansas 4-H youth are the real winners of this event.

"We are especially grateful to Bruce Maloch, whose donation this year completed funding for his $25,000 endowment," Thomas said.

"Bruce gets 4-H!" said Debbie Nistler, who leads the 4-H program for the Cooperative Extension Service. "He truly understands the impact 4-H has on the young people in Arkansas and is committed to helping our program be successful. We are grateful for his continued passion and support."



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, just west of Little Rock. The event featured both live and silent auctions and a garden reception before dinner was served lakeside. Maloch served as auctioneer for the live auction.





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.

View more photos here.

Extension expanding rural mental health training in Arkansas



Brittney Schrick, associate professor and family life specialist, is leading extension's mental health outreach efforts.

It can be tough for anyone to ask for help. Farmers in particular have a reputation for avoiding it, especially when it comes to dealing with mental and emotional stress brought on by a tough year in the field.

Brittney Schrick, associate professor and family life specialist, said producers can sometimes be so reticent to consider any form of mental health counseling that she has often chosen to present the discussion of programs available through the Cooperative Extension Service as "maintaining farm equipment."

"The 'farm equipment,' in this instance, being the farmer him- or herself," Schrick said.

"We've had agents have success with things like doing very short presentations at production meetings, making sure they have materials out at the county fair, and so on," she said. "We find ways to slip this into a program without it having to be the whole program, so people pick up a brochure although they wouldn't necessarily come to a whole mental health training event."

While that approach has opened some eyes and ears that might otherwise be closed to the variety of mental health and wellness programs extension has to offer, Schrick said extension has begun taking a new tack in recent years, focusing on equipping and educating farming communities to face mental health challenges themselves.

"To support farmers who may not feel comfortable or have time to come to a mental health program, I've started doing what I call 'wrap-around community education,'" Schrick said.

"It's the idea that if we can train the people who surround farmers and farming communities — lenders, ag agents, Farm Bureau personnel, people who go on farm visits and talk one-on-one with people —then we're going to have a broader potential impact," she said. "So we're building up the support systems around farmers." Read more here.

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AI in agriculture: Experts say human judgment remains key as technology advances

As artificial intelligence becomes faster and more capable of complex tasks, human critical thinking and the ability to ask the right questions will become even more important.

At the AI in Agriculture Symposium on Sept. 21, panelists in a roundtable discussion noted that many tasks once considered specialized skills — like coding, data analysis and website development — can now be performed more quickly with the help of AI.

The symposium was hosted by the Center for Agricultural Data Analytics, a part of the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture's research arm, the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station.

On the farm, AI is increasingly being adopted in systems that are already in use, said Jason Davis, an assistant professor in the department of crop, soil, and environmental sciences and a remote sensing and pesticide application extension specialist for UADA.

"From my perspective, it has been primarily in row crops, embedded in systems they are already familiar with," Davis said. "It's a dashboard they're already using, or a computer monitor in the cab of their tractor. It's suddenly expanded utility and capability."

For researchers who develop those AI systems, the panelists agreed that understanding the underlying science, recognizing flawed results and determining which problems are worth solving remain uniquely human responsibilities.

Several participants compared today's AI revolution to previous technological shifts that increased the value of higher-order thinking skills.

"AI is amazing. It's a tool that is like a car. It makes you move faster, but we still need to know what is rational and understand what AI is doing," said Arthur F.A. Fernandes, a geneticist for Cobb-Vantress. "We may not be coding as much anymore but we need to know how to read code and assess if that code is doing the right job."



Jason Davis, an assistant professor in the department of crop, soil, and environmental sciences and a remote sensing and pesticide application extension specialist for UADA, speaks at the AI in Agricultural Symposium, Sept. 21, at the Don Tyson Center for Agricultural Sciences in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Tim Beissinger, co-founder and chief technology officer for Heritable Agriculture, related it to long division.

"When I was in elementary school I learned long division," Beissinger said. "My mom was a math education professor, and she thought it was crazy that some schools weren't even teaching long division anymore … but you really don't need it. When I was a professor, I taught how to code in R, and maybe that's like long division now, but you need to understand long division. You need to understand how to ask a scientific question."

For students preparing to enter the workforce, the panelists encouraged a focus on scientific reasoning, problem solving and learning how to effectively evaluate AI-generated outputs rather than relying on the technology unquestioningly.

Read more here.

UADA hires first extension culinary nutrition, hospitality and tourism instructor



Quadarius Whitson, who joined the Cooperative Extension Service as a culinary nutrition and food safety program associate in 2024, has taken on a new role as extension's first culinary nutrition, hospitality and tourism instructor.

Whitson, who works within extension's department of family and consumer sciences, said the position will take a three-pronged approach to educate and empower Arkansans through "culinary skills, nutrition education and hospitality excellence."

"There's a lot of knowledge that goes into nutrition and cooking," Whitson said, "and it's important to be able to demonstrate what that looks like — how to prepare fruits and vegetables, what does good meal prep look like when you're on limited time — things of that nature."

Whitson said he will also partner with 4-H, extension's youth-development program, to adapt culinary lessons for younger Arkansans where appropriate.

"Our goal is to meet Arkansans wherever they are and teach them the foundation of cooking," he said.

Read more here.

November Birthdays

Max Franks - Nov. 1
Massie Silva - Nov. 3
Eric Grant - Nov. 3
Reba Hawkins - Nov. 3
Frances Story - Nov. 4
Joseph Waldrum - Nov. 7
Sue Palsa - Nov. 9
Ursula Crow - Nov. 9
John Hopkins - Nov. 10
Russell Wilson - Nov. 10
Jerry McIntyre - Nov. 11
Nita Cooper - Nov. 11
Gerald Alexander - Nov. 12
Patsy Keller - Nov. 15
Kay Stokes - Nov. 15
Gloria Eubanks - Nov. 16
Eugenia Hockett - Nov. 18
Luther Roberts - Nov. 20
Anita Clark - Nov. 20
Joe Vestal - Nov. 22
Linda Bates - Nov. 22
John Philpot - Nov. 23
Brenda Hawkins - Nov. 24
Janice Jones - Nov. 24
Kathryn Fowler - Nov. 25
Jane Kriigel - Nov. 26
Rosemary Rodibaugh - Nov. 26
Vatra Hibbs - Nov. 17
Ron Matlock - Nov. 27
Sharon Reynolds - Nov. 27
Louise McPherson - Nov. 28
James Barrentine - Nov. 28
Jim Frala - Nov. 30

Message from the director



Fall is a busy time of year in Extension, and I have spent a fair amount of time on the road in the last few weeks, as have many of you. This is a great time of year to be out and about in the state – as long as you keep an eye out for deer. I've had a couple of close calls lately, but so far, I have avoided filling a tag with my vehicle (knock on wood). I recall seeing a meme once that said "Watch out for deer" means "I love you" in Arkansas. There's a lot of truth to that.

At the various events I have visited lately, I have had several opportunities to talk, in a handful of formal presentations and in many more informal conversations, about what we do in Extension and why it matters. Everyone can see the information landscape changing around us: we see it; our stakeholders see it; and policymakers see it. The proliferation of artificial intelligence tools and their adoption by the public seems to be proceeding at least as fast as the development of online information and tools in the early days of the internet. As it was in those days (which, I feel old saying, I remember like it was yesterday), it is important for us to be ready to articulate the unique and important role of Extension.

There are a lot of different ways to approach this question, but I have found a couple of key points that seem to particularly resonate with people. First, Extension is unbeatable at identifying and rapidly mobilizing to address emerging challenges. When a problem comes up that we haven't seen before – think of new pest or disease challenge – we have the network in place to recognize the problem, research potential solutions, and develop recommendations out of that research to address the problem. The land-grant system was built for that purpose, and Extension is the component that both activates that system and closes the loop between the creation of new knowledge and its practical application. And we can do this across a broad scope of technical, social, and economic challenges. Even the best large language model is useless against a new problem that requires new information and tools to address.

Second, some problems are so large, complex, and multi-faceted that we aren't even sure what questions to ask. Extension is one of the few, if not only, organizations with the breadth and depth to effectively dig into these kinds of problems, identify the right questions, and work to develop solutions. We are facing two problems (at least) just like this right now in our state – food insecurity and rice milling quality. These are obviously very different kinds of problems, but both involve complex systems influenced by important interactive effects that are not adequately understood right now. Both will likely require a variety of strategies to address effectively. Extension is working hard to better understand and address both challenges right now, with a level of hands-on engagement with the affected communities that nobody else can match.

I know that this column is a bit of a departure from the usual program updates and shout-outs, as was last month's contribution. (I'm assuming you all read and remember it.) I also realize that it may seem like I am preaching to the choir with these discussions of mission and message. My intent is rather to make sure that we're looking at the same page in the hymnal. It is increasingly important that we – all of us – are able not only to articulate our mission clearly but also to explain in simple but impactful ways why that mission should matter to people. The more consistent we all are in delivering our message, the more likely it is that the message will be received and have its intended effect.

Thank you for all you do. And watch out for deer.

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