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# **New director named to lead Center for Food Animal Well-Being**

By John Lovett

U of A System Division of Agriculture

## Fast facts

* Shawna Weimer earned her doctorate in poultry science from the University of Arkansas
* Applied research aids development of animal welfare best practices
* Consumers increasingly demand growers consider animal welfare

(1,002 words)

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — A University of Arkansas alumna and Iowa native with academic research and animal industry experience is the new director of the Center for Food Animal Well-Being, a part of the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

Shawna Weimer, Ph.D., started Jan. 10 as the new director for the Center that provides applied research results to producers and the public on animal health and well-being. She will also be teaching a graduate-level animal welfare course in the spring.

"Dr. Weimer is a great fit as director of the Center for Food Animal Well-Being," said Jean-François Meullenet, Ph.D., senior associate vice president for agriculture-research and director of the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station. "She has extensive experience in animal well-being research both in the industry and academia and can provide unbiased opinions on research-based information to animal producers. We are fortunate to have Dr. Weimer join our efforts to expand the knowledge and outreach on this important issue."

Consumers have increasingly demanded that growers consider animal welfare. Applied animal welfare research aims to add more science-based criteria to the standards of how animals are raised, Weimer said.

"Dr. Weimer has developed a great plan and vision for the Center for Food Animal Well-Being," said Dave Caldwell, Ph.D., director of the Center of Excellence for Poultry Science. "She is committed to having the Center serve as a relevant resource for science-based information on animal welfare for our commercial stakeholders. I have visited with many of our stakeholders here in Northwest Arkansas, and everyone is very eager to begin working with her as she develops her program."

Two of the industry stakeholders, Tyson Foods and Cargill, shared enthusiasm about collaboration with Weimer and the Center.

"We're looking forward to ongoing collaboration with the Center as academic research efforts that are informed by industry experience will support our efforts to continuously improve animal welfare," said Karen Christensen, Ph.D., senior director of Animal Welfare for Tyson Foods.

"Cargill is excited to see the appointment of Dr. Shawna Weimer to the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture,” said Nick Wolfenden, Sustainable Animal Welfare director-global for Cargill. “This appointment is a great addition to the academic space and a great resource for organizations like Cargill to advance animal welfare. Cargill has a long-standing history of collaboration with Dr. Weimer and we look forward to continuing those efforts as we work to nourish the world in a safe, responsible, and sustainable way.”

The Center's goal is the improvement of animal health, handling, and productivity through husbandry practices that optimize animal welfare. It works closely with three units within the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture: The Department of Poultry Science; the Department of Animal Science; and the National Agricultural Law Center.

## **Applying research**

"It is the dream job," Weimer said. "Transparency and debunking misinformation about animal welfare is a part of it, but we will be taking research a step further to educate people about what's right for the animal, from the animal's perspective. Applied animal welfare research solves problems for the industry today."

The American Veterinary Medical Association also points to scientific evidence necessary to indicate an animal's good welfare state. Factors of animal well-being, according to the AVMA, include the animal's health, comfort, nourishment, safety, ability to express innate behavior, and if it is suffering from pain, fear, or distress.

Weimer said farm animals often do not display obvious signs of pain because they are evolutionarily prey animals. They instinctively hide their pain to protect themselves from predators.

"Animal welfare is, of course, what you can see or how they are behaving, but you don't really know their mental state," Weimer said. "So, we are trying to look at things from the perspective of the animal, or trying to understand what's best for them, not just what looks best to us."

Having always been interested in animal behavior, Weimer double majored in animal science and animal ecology for her bachelor's degrees at Iowa State University. She went on to earn her master's in animal physiology at Iowa State with a specialization in ethology, the scientific study of animal behavior.

Weimer worked in the Minnesota swine industry before pursuing her doctorate in poultry science at the University of Arkansas under Yvonne Vizzier Thaxton, Ph.D., and Karen Christensen. Thaxton was the former director of the Center for Food Animal Well-Being. At the University of Arkansas, Weimer focused on noninvasive measures of lameness and stress in broiler chickens. After earning her Ph.D., Weimer conducted post-doctoral work at Purdue University.

Weimer returns to Arkansas after serving as an assistant professor and poultry welfare extension specialist in the Department of Animal and Avian Science at the University of Maryland. She provided extension, research, and teaching programs with the University of Maryland to interact directly with the Delmarva Peninsula poultry industry.

Her research in poultry well-being includes the effects of enrichment, growth rate, salmonella, and heat stress on immunology, gut histology, skeletal morphology, and welfare in conventional broilers.

According to the USDA and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, a public focus on poultry has become prominent because it is among the most-consumed meats globally, second only to pork. In 2020, the poultry industry in Arkansas provided $3.7 billion (about 50 percent)of the state's total agriculture cash receipts, [according to The Poultry Federation](https://www.thepoultryfederation.com/resources/facts-figures).

As a co-founder of the Poultry Extension Collaborative (PEC), Weimer also offers outreach programs and a monthly newsletter at [www.poultry-welfare-extension.com](http://www.poultry-welfare-extension.com) with poultry researchers from the University of Georgia, Purdue University, and Virginia Tech University.

While poultry will be a significant focus for Weimer at the Center, she will also provide research-based information for other farm animal producers.

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## **About the Division of Agriculture**

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture's mission is to strengthen agriculture, communities, and families by connecting trusted research to adopt best practices. The Division of Agriculture conducts research and extension work within the nation's historic land grant education system through the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service.

The Division of Agriculture is one of 20 entities within the University of Arkansas System. It has offices in all 75 counties in Arkansas and faculty on five system campuses.

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