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# **Environmental sustainability a focus of new University of Arkansas economist**

By John Lovett

U of A System Division of Agriculture

## Fast facts

* Arkansas agricultural economists work to quantify sustainability efforts for decision tool
* Research includes supply chain impact analysis
* New grant supports research on crop insurance rates in southern vs. midwestern states

(590 words)

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — A shift in thinking about environmental sustainability on the farm as a long-term risk mitigation factor is taking place in agricultural economics.

Lawson Connor, assistant professor of agricultural economics and agribusiness with the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences at the University of Arkansas, is working to quantify the economic effects of sustainability practices such as cover crop programs and water conservation tactics. These results could then be translated into economic decision tools for farmers.

“We are focused on isolating the benefits of sustainability so farmers can quantify it for their operation,” Connor said.

John Anderson, head of the Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness, said Connor’s work will help farmers identify practices that provide benefits in terms of both sustainability and profitability. The information is also “critical for policymakers as they try to develop policy tools to effectively satisfy a wide range of stakeholder interests in the agriculture and food sector,” Anderson added.

Connor said federal government incentives for incorporating sustainability practices are “minimal” and many target first-time adoption of practices. Also, many farmers have been hesitant to adopt more environmentally sustainable practices in their operations, if improved yields are the primary benefit, because they already see good yields.

“That is why we are trying to think of it from a risk mitigation perspective,” Connor said. “We must think of agriculture as an entire system, as part of the ecosystem and not an industry unto its own. And we are seeing that more with global warming.”

The other piece of the risk mitigation research looks at the supply chain side of the equation. Connor said they are doing a preliminary analysis to investigate who is creating demand and who will bear the brunt of the cost for any additional expense of adding environmentally sustainable practices.

Connor and economists with the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station, the research arm of the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, are also working on a study supported by a grant from the Arkansas Corn and Grain Sorghum Board to investigate why the cost of crop insurance in the South is higher than in Midwest states.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Risk Management Agency sets the rates for crop insurance based on risks such as natural disasters and crop yield history. Connor said his research has shown that rates for crop insurance in southern states can be more than double the rates in midwestern states, depending on the county. With irrigation and more resilient varieties for row crops developed by university experiment stations in the South, some farmers feel the RMA's methods overemphasize outdated risks, Connor said.

## About the researcher

Connor is a native of Antigua who joined the University of Arkansas in January after serving as an assistant professor with the Louisiana State University Ag Center for over three years. His research focuses on production economics, crop insurance and sustainable agriculture. In addition to work in research, he will also conduct outreach activities with the Cooperative Extension Service and teach a graduate-level agricultural economics course. He earned his doctorate in economics at North Carolina State University in Raleigh in 2017 and conducted post-doctoral research at Ohio State University.

“Dr. Connor’s work is producing valuable information for farmers, landowners, supply chain managers, and policymakers,” Anderson said. “He is providing insight into the practical, relevant, real-world implications of sustainability initiatives that are too often only discussed in broad generalizations. We are fortunate to have Dr. Connor here to help make the University of Arkansas a leader in this important line of work.”

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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 the adoption of best practices. Through the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service, the Division of Agriculture conducts research and extension work within the nation’s historic land grant education system.

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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