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Weaver appointed director of government affairs and stakeholder engagement

Jeff Weaver joined the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture as its director for government affairs and stakeholder engagement, a new position, Jan. 2.

“Jeff is a perfect fit to fill a critical position on our team,” said Deacue Fields, vice president-agriculture for the University of Arkansas System. “Jeff brings a wealth of experience not only within the U of A System, but also the workings inside the Beltway and its impacts within Arkansas. Jeff also has a solid track record for development, which will be of great benefit to the Division of Agriculture.”

“I am excited to take my experience in government relations and fundraising to support the research and outreach the Division has been conducting for decades,” Weaver said. “I thank Dr. Fields for this opportunity. He has assembled a great team, and I am thrilled to be a part of that group.”

Weaver also expressed thanks to the University of Arkansas at Monticello for the opportunity to work for his alma mater, an institution he says has been “vital to the growth and sustainability of the Arkansas Delta.”

In his new position, Weaver will handle instate government affairs and coordinate fundraising from a base in Little Rock. Chuck Culver, assistant vice president and director of external relations, will continue working with Congress and development efforts.

“I am looking forward to advocating for the research and outreach that supports Arkansas’ largest industry,” Weaver said. “I’m impressed with the diversity of projects and missions of the Division of Agriculture. I want to be able to convey that breadth of work to our elected officials.”

A native of the Arkansas Delta, Weaver said he has a passion for rural development.

“Growing up in Dumas, I see how important it is for our smaller towns that rely on farming to have the support to be sustainable,” he said.

Weaver has served as vice chancellor for advancement at the University of Arkansas at Monticello since 2018. During his tenure,

UAM raised more than \$16 million and created 37 endowments, and gained its two largest private gifts in the school’s history.

Between June 2015 and June 2018, he was vice president for external affairs at National Park College in Hot Springs. His prior posts include campaign manager for U.S. Sen. Mark Pryor, state director for U.S. Rep. Mike Ross, and field director for U.S. Rep. Marion Berry. Prior to that, he was a graduate assistant intern for U.S. Sen. Blanche Lambert Lincoln.



“My interest in public policy and politics started in college,” Weaver said. “I was fortunate to work for a few great public servants and really get a 30,000 feet view of the state by being a congressional staffer.

“Agriculture and education were always important topics because one is the state’s largest industry, and the other, in my opinion, is the most transformative issue for the Arkansas Delta,” he said. “The Division of Agriculture has a great reputation, and the University of Arkansas System is the gold standard when it comes to research and education and getting that research in the hands of the farmers.”

Weaver served on the UAM Alumni Foundation Board and was named among Arkansas Business’ 40 under 40 in 2008. In 2016 and 2017, he earned nine Medallion Awards from the National Council for Marketing and Public Relations with National Park College.

Weaver earned his master’s degree in public administration from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and his bachelor’s in political science from UAM.

Weaver and his wife Aimee have two daughters, Lauren and Ella. Lauren, of Bentonville, is a healthcare marketing consultant. Ella is a sophomore in high school. Aimee is a former small business owner who was director of the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center at UAM. ■

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Jeff Edwards named Bumpers College dean, senior VP for Division of Ag



Jeff Edwards has been named dean of the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences and senior associate vice president for academic programs of the Division of Agriculture, effective Jan. 1, 2024, in a joint appointment by U of A Provost Terry Martin and U of A System Vice President for Agriculture Deacue Fields.

Edwards will succeed interim Dean Jean-Francois Meullenet. In January, Meullenet returned to his role as senior associate vice president for agriculture research and director of the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station for the U of A System Division of Agriculture.

"I am thrilled Dr. Jeff Edwards will serve as the next dean of Bumpers College," Martin said. "Since joining the U of A in 2022, Dr. Edwards has accomplished a great deal in a short amount of time. He has proven himself to be an exceptional leader, and he is known throughout the country for his work in improving agricultural systems and environmental sustainability. In this new role, he will continue to serve the U of A well, and I know he will help elevate the Bumpers College and its programs in the state, region and nation."

"I'm so pleased Dr. Jeff Edwards will lead both Bumpers College

and serve the Division of Agriculture in these new roles," Fields said. "As a former dean of Bumpers College and in my current position, I have a unique perspective on the specific qualities the dean should possess to aid in the college's overall success. Dr. Edwards has demonstrated these qualities, and he has a great vision for integrating functions of the land-grant mission, which will be a tremendous asset to the University of Arkansas and the UA System Division of Agriculture."

As the dean of Bumpers College, Edwards will provide leadership and oversee the college's academic and research enterprises, student recruitment and operations. As senior associate vice president, Edwards will help address the many challenges and opportunities faced by agricultural and rural communities in the state. Edwards will also help connect academic activities between the Fayetteville campus with the Division of Agriculture.

"I'm honored to be named the dean of Bumpers College and appointed as a senior associate vice president with the Division of Agriculture," Edwards said. "Since earning my doctorate at the U of A, I have viewed Arkansas as my home. I'm glad I returned to Bumpers College as a department head about a year ago, and I'm grateful for this new opportunity to serve as the dean. I look forward to leading the college and raising its profile on both the national and international stage."

Read more [here](#). ■

Message from the director

Since I have started the job of Extension Director, my wife and I have relocated back to her home place in Lonoke County about half an hour from the state office. Our part of the county, just a few miles south of US 70, is row crop country. January is definitely the off season here for pretty much everything but duck hunting. But that doesn't mean there is nothing to do. For farmers, this time of year is an important time of preparation. As I write this, equipment is being prepared for the rapidly approaching planting season, necessary supplies are being purchased and received, investments in new equipment and technologies are being carefully evaluated, financing is being arranged. From mundane tasks to monumental decisions, things are being put in order with a view toward ensuring a successful growing season. January is not really down time. January is a critical time to prepare for what is next.

In Extension, I'm not sure we really have an off-season anymore. It certainly isn't January. Meeting season is in full

swing: a part of our contribution to the preparation that our farmers are making for the upcoming year. Across all departments and program areas, our specialists and agents are busy, both with program delivery and with a variety of professional development activities. In the midst of this busy season, we also have to be looking ahead and preparing for what's next.

An important part of that preparation, maybe the most important part, is getting people in place. We have spent these last couple of cold weeks interviewing for multiple new positions, including positions in FCS, Poultry Science, and Animal Science. We will very shortly begin the process of filling the Ozark District director position and doing our best to replace the soon-to-be-happily-retired ANR Program Leader, Vic Ford. Whatever is next, we'll be ready. We are busily preparing now. ■



Hope, Don Bragg remembered for their love of science, learning

Though silent, Don Bragg's office speaks volumes. The awards on the walls attest to his professional excellence as a forester and researcher, but it's the crayon drawings that show where his heart was.

"When you go in his office, the walls are full of awards," said Mike Blazier, dean of the College of Forestry, Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Arkansas at Monticello. "When you walk up to his office door, there are crayon drawings from his children. Right over his desk there's a big yellow construction paper posting that says 'I love you daddy,' which was from his son when he was 4.

"For everything he accomplished, it was his children that were most dear," Blazier said.

Don, his wife, Hope, and their children Kenny, 22, and Elizabeth, 19, of Monticello, Arkansas, are being remembered by their friends and colleagues with great affection and respect. The family was killed in a house explosion on Dec. 30 in Michigan, a blast that also injured their son Stephen, 16, and Hope's father, Richard Pruden. Both remained hospitalized on Wednesday. Investigators are calling the event a "fuel-air explosion."

GoFundMe fundraisers have been set up for Stephen Bragg, 16, <https://gofund.me/d32eff21>, and Richard Pruden, <https://www.gofundme.com/f/richard-pruden-medical-expenses>.

Don was a project leader for the U.S. Forest Service with an office at the University of Arkansas at Monticello. Hope was a STEM instructor for the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service's 4-H program. The two imbued their children with a love of science, technology and history, and the family shared those interests together on hikes, archaeological digs and 4-H youth development activities.

Blazier knew Don Bragg for more than two decades. In forestry, their careers often crossed. He remembered Don as being inquisitive and insightful, an excellent scientist and a bit of a sci-fi movie nerd.

Hope Bragg also loved learning. She had begun to pursue

a Ph.D., and in December had been awarded a scholarship to help accomplish that goal. Her smile and enthusiasm for archeology, astronomy and other realms of science were infectious, friends said.

"Hope Bragg was incredibly passionate about science, about technology, and she loved to get youth excited about that," said Debbie Nistler, assistant vice president for 4-H and youth for the Cooperative Extension Service. "She lit up when she had the opportunity to get youth excited about science."

"Don was her perfect partner," Blazier said.

Nistler said Hope's 4-H colleagues will be working in her memory on the projects she held dear.

"The best way for us to feel like we're doing something in her name is to make sure that SeaPerch and Tech Changemakers, her archeology program and a special program for the eclipse on April 8 carry on her legacy in science education," Nistler said. "We are also planning that [scholarship](#) for the Bragg family since education was a focus for all of them."

Nistler said plans are in the works for a special memorial at the C.A. Vines Arkansas 4-H Center in Ferndale. Each year, thousands of Arkansas youth take to the center's rolling wooded acres to learn about life skills while catching a fish or escaping the summer heat in the pool.

The center will be home to four more trees, each be planted in memory of Hope, Don, Elizabeth and Kenny Bragg, all of whom spent time at the center, Nistler said. ■



Hope and Don Bragg at the Arkansas Agricultural Hall of Fame lunch in Little Rock.

February Birthdays

Melody Curtis - Feb. 1	Fran Tomerlin - Feb. 5	Steve Rodery - Feb. 11	Gerald Brunt - Feb. 23
Michael McClintock - Feb. 1	Mark Phillips - Feb. 5	Yvonne McCool - Feb. 11	Rebecca Thomas - Feb. 23
Phillip Sims - Feb. 1	Sheila Brandt - Feb. 5	Ann Ward - Feb. 12	Doayne Potts - Feb. 24
Leo Espinoza - Feb. 1	Belinda Miller - Feb. 6	Keith Lusby - Feb. 13	Robert Felsman - Feb. 24
Bobby Huey - Feb. 2	Dora Dinnan - Feb. 7	Sharon Lillard - Feb. 15	Jeri Vangilder - Feb. 24
Booker Clemons Jr. - Feb. 2	Beverly Hines - Feb. 7	Brian Helms - Feb. 16	Charles Johnston - Feb. 26
Charlotte Chitwood - Feb. 2	Wanda House - Feb. 8	Paula Seago - Feb. 18	Clara Garrett - Feb. 26
Brenda Waldrum - Feb. 2	Marie Corbin - Feb. 9	Cheryl Williams - Feb. 18	James Geisler - Feb. 27
Bob Reynolds - Feb. 3	Catherine Koch - Feb. 9	Lynda Lee - Feb. 20	Larry Keaton - Feb. 27
Larry Sandage - Feb. 3	Allan Beuerman - Feb. 9	Delores Sowerbrower - Feb. 21	Linda Simpson - Feb. 27
Carol Patterson - Feb. 4	Ella Geisler - Feb. 10	George Davis Jr. - Feb. 22	Carole Scaramuzza - Feb. 28
Beverly Henderson-Vincent - Feb. 4	Jimmie Gooch - Feb. 10	Denise Murdoch - Feb. 22	
Edward Rhodes Jr. - Feb. 4	Joy Buffalo - Feb. 10	Larry Holeman - Feb. 22	

The future of Arkansas agriculture: High school students hear from Division of Ag specialists

Students from four Delta school districts got to see agriculture in a new way — through the eyes of scientists and educators — at an event hosted by the Arkansas County Extension Office at the Rice Research and Extension Center.

The event gave high school students from Hazen, DeWitt, Clarendon and Stuttgart an opportunity to learn about careers in agriculture and science from University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture extension specialists.

The event kicked off with recruiters from the University of Arkansas Dale Bumpers College for Agriculture, Food and Life Sciences discussing career paths and majors.

“It’s important for us to reach students from the part of Arkansas where our alumni are employed and let them know of all the opportunities available to them,” said Holly Yeatman, recruiting coordinator for Bumpers College.

Students heard from multiple Bumpers College alumni working for the Division of Agriculture in their county. Extension Rice Agronomist Jarrod Hardke gave a “Rice 101” talk, teaching the Arkansas county students all about the crop that dominates their area. Extension Plant Pathologist Terry Spurlock gave a brief introduction to plant pathology and shared his passion for being a field scientist.

“We’re doing a lot of cool stuff,” Spurlock said. “I fly drones, design research trials, collect data, and work to help farmers. I finish a lot of days hot, thirsty and filthy, but it’s worth it.”

Spurlock also touched on the immense opportunities available in the field of plant pathology and entomology but focused on the opportunities for discovery in the field of agricultural science.

“It takes a lot of time, effort and learning to know how little we actually know,” he said. “I just want to impress upon you how much there is to learn.”

This message was shared by Extension Plant Pathologist Camila Nicolli, who was not surprised when she asked, “Who wants to be a plant pathologist?” and no hands went up.

“It’s hard to say we want to be a plant pathologist, when we don’t know what it means to be a plant pathologist,” she said. “But what we do in plant pathology is we observe, we analyze and we try to answer the question of ‘why?’”

Read more [here](#). ■



Extension Plant Pathologist Camila Nicolli tells Arkansas County high school students her path to a career in science wasn't always clear cut.

Dr. Bill Jones passes

Dr. Bill F. Jones, 87, of Fayetteville, passed away Friday, December 15, 2023 in Fayetteville. Dr. Jones was an Extension entomologist who retired in 1997. A Celebration of Life was held Dec. 29, 2023 at Beard’s Funeral Chapel, Fayetteville.

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture offers all its Extension and Research programs and services without regard to race, color, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, age, disability, marital or veteran status, genetic information, or any other legally protected status, and is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer.