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Maximizing County Dollars: The Multiplier Effect of the Cooperative Extension Service

In times of tightening local government budgets, county quorum courts face difficult choices regarding where to allocate taxpayer dollars. However, few county appropriations deliver a financial return as strong and direct as the Cooperative Extension Service (Extension). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture (University) economic reports show agricultural research and extension programs deliver benefit-to-cost ratios ranging from $13-$69 returned for every $1 invested. Local Extension offices' payroll, operations and procurement expenditures stimulate county businesses and local tax revenues, while expert guidance helps producers maximize yields, mitigate emerging biological threats and manage financial risk.

Across Arkansas, Extension operates as an indispensable economic infrastructure. In fiscal year 2026, agents conducted over 12,000 farm and homeowner site visits, logged more than 175,000 direct producer contacts, ran 751 on-farm demonstrations and delivered more than 3,800 educational activities across all 75 counties. County agents also handled diagnostic activities, serving an average of 173 clients per agent, with soil samples making up over 85% of submissions to optimize nutrient utilization while minimizing input costs.

At the same time, real-dollar federal support for Extension has dropped by nearly 60% since the 1970s, contributing to a 26% decline in national full-time Extension staff. Increasing local county support helps bridge the growing salary gap with private industry, where entry-level agent positions in the mid-$40,000s compete with private roles offering $60,000-$85,000, allowing quorum courts to attract and retain top-tier agricultural, diagnostic and community experts who live, work and spend within the county.

How Local Investment Unlocks Capital

Under Arkansas state law dating back over a century, county quorum courts have authority to appropriate funds annually to support local Extension work. This cooperative framework combines federal USDA resources, state investment through the University and local county dollars. By funding local office space, utilities and agent operational backing, the county acts as an essential local partner. In return, the University provides specialized agent salaries, diagnostic lab access and administrative leadership, effectively multiplying the impact of every local tax dollar spent.

Because county funds act as matching capital, local tax dollars do not stay isolated; they unlock broader state and federal resources the county couldn't access on its own. Guided by local community advisory boards, county leaders and residents retain direct control over programming priorities, ensuring local dollars address local needs.

Frontline Defense Against Emerging Biological and Agricultural Threats

Agriculture is the top driver of economic output in the state of Arkansas. According to data compiled by the USDA, Economic Research Service and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, agriculture accounts for nearly one-tenth of economic

output, measured by Gross Deomestic Product (GDP), in Arkansas. When compared to the U.S., Arkansas ranks eighth in this category while ranking first across the southern region from Oklahoma and Texas to North Carolina and Virginia.

While agriculture is the top driver of economic output in Arkansas, it does not come without risks. Producers face constant threats to production from extreme weather (e.g. drought and flood), invasive pests, plant diseases and livestock illness. Extension agents serve as embedded frontline surveillance, identifying emerging issues before they become widespread economic disasters.

Agents actively track and combat critical threats across row crops, livestock and specialty crops. Recent efforts include monitoring cotton jassid, rice delphacid and tar spot on corn products, while supporting growers with weed management research to tackle complex resistance challenges in pigweed, ryegrass and barnyardgrass. In livestock and specialty agriculture, Extension provides guidance on Asian longhorned tick-associated theileriosis in cattle, New World screwworm surveillance, highly pathogenic avian influenza biosecurity, feral hog control through trap deployment and Neopestalotiopsis fruit and crown rot in strawberries. Catching or mitigating a single pest outbreak or veterinary threat early saves local producers tens of thousands of dollars, preserving the county tax base and protecting rural jobs.

Improving Farm Productivity, Risk Management and Farm Profitability

In challenging economic climates where crop prices fluctuate and input costs for fuel, seed and fertilizer remain high, Extension agents act as frontline business and agronomic advisors. Specialists conduct applied research that directly improves producer margins, evaluating rice quality management, soybean flood and drought tolerance, green stem syndrome mitigation and livestock forage management.

Extension personnel also provide essential irrigation support through field mapping services and computer-based polypipe planning, along with annual distribution of over 14,000 weed, insect and plant disease management guides. On the business side, agents equip producers with crop insurance decision support, USDA (e.g. Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage) farm program evaluations, production budgets and disaster impact assessments following floods, droughts or severe storms.

Agriculture drives local economies (USDA, Economic Research Service, 2024). When local producers remain profitable using these tools, they spend their earnings within the county on machinery, seed, fuel and supplies. Broad economic studies evaluate this impact by measuring how rapidly public dollars compound each year and what they deliver over time: the 16% to over 100% internal rate of return demonstrates how fast an investment in Extension grows annually, outperforming standard market benchmarks year-after-year, while the $13-$69 benefit-cost ratio reflects the total cumulative lifetime payout returned to the economy for every dollar invested in joint research and extension networks.

Local Retail Impacts

Producers and homeowners rely heavily on Extension's state-of-the-art diagnostic and laboratory infrastructure to make timely financial decisions. County agents collect and process samples for soil testing, plant disease diagnostics, nematode testing, water quality analysis and forage nutrition testing.

Beyond commercial agriculture, Extension drives a substantial consumer retail ripple effect. Agents train local home gardeners, lawn care operators and Master Gardeners. Diagnostic advice on plant health and soil conditions ensures homeowners make informed purchases at local farm supply stores, nurseries and lawn care centers. Furthermore, Extension support for direct-to-consumer sales, food safety regulations and farmers' markets keeps local food dollars circulating entirely within the county economy.

Indirect Economic Savings

Extension's impact reaches far beyond farms and gardens through community health, nutrition and 4-H youth development programs. By equipping families with financial management tools and chronic disease prevention strategies while teaching workforce readiness to local youth, Extension reduces the long-term burden on county healthcare, judicial and social service budgets.

At the same time, 4-H programs empower local youth by instilling STEM skills, leadership, workforce readiness and financial literacy. By investing in young people today, Extension helps guide the next generation toward rewarding careers, strong citizenship and active contributions to the county's future growth.

Addressing the Staffing Squeeze: Why Local Funding Matters Now

While the economic demand for local Extension expertise continues to grow, funding mechanisms have struggled to keep pace with inflation and market wages. Nationally, real-dollar federal support for Extension has dropped by roughly 60% since the 1970s. This decline has resulted in a 26% reduction in national full-time Extension staff, placing a much heavier burden on state and county partnerships to maintain basic services.

Base entry-level salaries for county extension agents, which require a bachelor's or master's degree, frequently lag behind competing positions in private agronomy, seed sales, environmental consulting and secondary agriculture education. Salary disparities make recruiting and retaining top agents increasingly difficult. Frequent agent turnover or prolonged vacancies mean lost institutional knowledge, delayed diagnostic assistance and interrupted local programming, directly impacting local farmers, businesses and youth.

Conclusion: Increasing Investment for a Stronger Future

Funding the Cooperative Extension Service is not an expense; it is a high-return local investment in county economic resilience. By providing local Extension offices with stronger operational support and competitive resources, quorum courts can directly address historical funding shortfalls, retain first-rate talent, and keep specialized agents living, working, and spending in the county. Expanding county funding for Extension services delivers a proven, dollar-for-dollar return that directly enriches the local economy.



Analysis by Tyler Oxner

For more information, contact:

Tyler at (501) 228-1311, tyler.oxner@arfb.com