Around the South
News from the Southern Rural Development Center
November 2026
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Items of Interest

A Thanksgiving Message of Gratitude from our Interim and Associate Director



During this season of gratitude, I want to thank our staff, partners, stakeholders, communities, and our host institution, Mississippi State University, for your continued dedication to advancing the Southern Rural Development Center's mission.

Our collective impact extends far beyond individual projects or programs. It is reflected in the relationships we build, the communities we strengthen, and the opportunities we create together. Your expertise, collaboration, and commitment make this work possible, and I am deeply grateful for all that you contribute.

As we enter the Thanksgiving break, may your inbox remain quiet and your time away provide the rest and renewal you have earned. I also recognize that the holidays can be experienced in many different ways. Whatever this season holds for you, I hope it includes moments of peace, comfort, and meaningful connection.

Thank you for your partnership, your trust, and your commitment to rural communities across the Southern region. It is a privilege to work alongside you.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Dr. R.E. Scammahorn

Dr. Roseanne E. Scammahorn

Preserving Stories, Protecting Land: A Black Belt Region Legacy of Stewardship



Candace Morrow (known professionally as Cowgirl Candace) champions a powerful truth: A family's greatest inheritance extends beyond the land it owns to the stories that give that land meaning. The fourth-generation Georgia farmer and international award-winning journalist advocates for preserving both as essential to sustaining Black Belt Region communities across the American South. Yet, generations of family knowledge and landownership remain vulnerable when families lack the tools to protect them.

She brings that perspective to her 20-year communications career, serving now as an oral historian, National Association for Interpretation Certified Interpretive Guide, and Student Conservation Association (SCA) fellow. Her current assignment demonstrates how community-centered storytelling can strengthen cultural preservation across Deep South communities.

In 2026, the National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund awarded SCA $100,000 through its Preserving Black Churches initiative to document the oral history of Atlanta's Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church (home church of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.). In collaboration with the National Park Service's Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park and Ebenezer Baptist Church, Cowgirl Candace is developing a self-guided multimedia audio tour that elevates the voices of congregants, elders, and families whose contributions travel past the pulpit.



SCA Community Program Manager Jonathan Johnson with Cowgirl Candace.



Dr. Louise Hamilton, Sarah Reed's eldest daughter, hears her mother's story during Historic Ebenezer's community beta testing.

The pioneering project, themed "Beyond a Breeze: Your Church Fan Calls You to Service," weaves animation, recorded interviews, archival materials, interpretive displays, and a traditional Southern church fan into an immersive visitor experience. The fan serves as a familiar cultural touchstone: a symbol of worship, comfort, and collective memory that visitors can carry home. Together, these elements help safeguard firsthand accounts while making the congregation's history accessible to future generations. The audio tour makes its public debut during Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend 2027 in Atlanta, Georgia.

Cowgirl Candace also studies agricultural economics and public policy at Tuskegee University, where her research methodology examines the importance of preserving community stories in the digital age. Drawing on her roots in Georgia's Black Belt Region, she asks whose knowledge enters the historical record, who controls its interpretation, and how oral history can help communities retain their cultural inheritance.

Her recent heirs' property trainer certification, earned in Montgomery, Alabama, through the Southern Rural Development Center in partnership with the Alcorn National Policy Research Center and Southern Extension Risk Management Education, with USDA support, extends that inquiry from historic spaces to family-owned land. Heirs' property — land passed down without clear, consolidated title — can expose families to ownership disputes and involuntary loss.

Cowgirl Candace views storytelling as a complementary tool, not a substitute for legal assistance: family interviews, photographs, land-use memories, and genealogical records can encourage relatives to discuss ownership, document their honest connections, and seek qualified guidance before a crisis. Her approach links two forms of stewardship. Documenting the lives that gave land its meaning and equipping families to protect the property they hope to pass to the next generation. From church pews in Atlanta to family farms across the Black Belt, her scholarship advances one principle: preserving a community's future requires protecting both its place and its people's voices.

Regional Staff Spotlight

Alicya Watson Advances Resilience and Opportunity Across Arkansas



Alicya Danielle Watson serves as a Program Associate in Community, Workforce & Economic Development for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture (UADA) Cooperative Extension Service. Her work is rooted in strengthening communities through collaboration, asset-based approaches, and locally driven solutions that support long-term economic opportunity and resilience.

She has worked alongside Winrock International and the Arkansas Economic Development Institute (AEDI) at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) through the ASPIRE initiative Advancing Sustainability and Preparedness in Rural Economies, supporting four Arkansas Delta communities; Altheimer, Wabbaseka, Humphrey, and Elaine—in Jefferson and Phillips counties. Through community advisory groups and local partnerships, she has supported residents and community leaders in identifying local assets, priorities, and opportunities related to housing and broader community development. This work emphasizes community voice, local leadership, and translating ideas into actionable strategies.

More recently, Watson partnered with the Arkansas State Broadband Office and the Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association to celebrate Get Connected Arkansas Week, a statewide initiative focused on broadband and digital connectivity, digital skills, community capacity, and opportunity for all Arkansans. She also serves as program leader for UADA's newly launched Disaster Recovery, Preparedness, and Resilience Initiative, in partnership with the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith and AEDI at UALR. Through this initiative, she works with six counties across Arkansas to equip Extension agents with Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) principles, Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) resources, and tools to support locally driven planning for natural and human-caused disasters. Across these initiatives, Watson is passionate about helping communities recognize their strengths, build meaningful partnerships, and develop the capacity to create sustainable, resilient, and thriving futures.

Delta Scholars Program Seeks Applicants for the 2027 Cohort

College students interested in leadership, community development, public service, and research are encouraged to apply for the 2027 cohort of the Delta Scholars Program (DSP), an academic and community engagement initiative hosted by Mississippi State University. The program is designed to help students develop leadership skills while exploring real-world community development challenges and solutions throughout the Mississippi Delta region.

The DSP combines academic learning with hands-on experiences that connect students to communities, policy issues, and regional innovation efforts. Participants complete a capstone project and engage with practitioners, leaders, and organizations working to strengthen communities across the Multi-State Delta Region.

Selected scholars will participate in the Summer Research Institute and Delta Innovation Tour scheduled for June 7-18, 2027. Applicants advancing to the semi-finalist stage will be invited to virtual interviews during the week of March 1-5, 2027. **The application deadline is February 12, 2027, at 11:59 p.m.**

Students currently enrolled full-time at a two- or four-year college or university who are not graduating in spring 2027 and maintain a minimum 3.4 GPA are encouraged to apply. Preference may be given to students who attend school in or are from the Multi-State Delta Region, which includes Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Students from all academic disciplines are eligible. Application materials include an interest essay, a creative essay, official college transcripts, a resume, and two letters of recommendation. Additional information and application details are available through the Delta Scholars Program application portal. Questions may be directed to deltascholars@honors.msstate.edu.

For more information about the Delta Scholars Program, visit the program website or follow the program on Instagram and LinkedIn.

Local Communities in the Age of Data Centers & AI Webinar



Across America, communities are actively debating the opportunities and challenges associated with data centers and artificial intelligence (AI). To gain deeper insight into these important issues, we encourage you to attend the upcoming Community Development Society (CDS) webinar, “Local Communities in the Age of Data Centers and AI.”

Hosted by Dr. Bo Beaulieu, CDS Treasurer and Purdue University Professor Emeritus, this timely webinar will feature Dr. Roberto Gallardo (Purdue University) and Ms. Catharine Montgomery (Better Together Agency), who will share their expertise and perspectives on how these emerging technologies could impact local communities and their residents.

Register today for this informative and thought-provoking discussion. The webinar is scheduled for **Wednesday, December 2nd at 1:00 p.m. ET / 12:00 p.m. CT**.

New Date: AI to Answers Webinar Moves to December 9th

The AI to Answers webinar featured previously has been rescheduled to **Wednesday, December 9, 2026, from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. CT**. Already registered? You'll receive an email with the updated details. Haven't registered yet? There's still time. In one practical hour, you will learn the AI fundamentals plus eight moves you can use the same week to draft reports, plans, and promotional materials faster, and leave AI to Answers Certified. Register for the December 9 webinar.

Job Postings

Associate Dean and Assistant Director, Human Sciences Extension at Auburn University

The College of Human Sciences (CHS) at Auburn University and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) are seeking to fill the position of Associate Dean for Extension and Assistant Director for Human Sciences Extension Programs to begin no later than Fall 2026. This 12-month administrative position will fit within the organizational structures of CHS and ACES.

The Associate Dean/Assistant Director position reports jointly to the CHS Dean and the ACES Director. The position is classified as tenure track faculty with a joint CHS and ACES administrative appointment. The Associate Dean/Assistant Director provides vision and leadership in how Extension, research, academic programs, and other allied programs develop synergy to enhance collaborative research and evidence-based outcomes. The position is responsible for the coordination and integration of Extension programs that engage Alabama citizens in evidence-based programming and research to support the well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

Contact the search committee co-chairs: Drs. Casey Mull and Elaine Moliason for questions.

View more information and apply for the Associate Dean/Assistant Director position at Auburn University

Extension Learning and Development Program Director

Oklahoma State University (OSU) Extension is seeking applicants for a position in program and staff development to oversee a newly established unit of Extension Learning and Development. This position requires a master's degree, PhD preferred, in agricultural and extension education, leadership development, program development or a closely related discipline. This is a 12-month staff position and will be an engaged member of the Extension Leadership Team. Applicants must have 5 or more years of successful county/district/area or state Extension experience or related experience. Applications are being accepted now and will remain open until a candidate is hired. Applications will begin being reviewed mid-September.

View more information and apply for the Extension Learning and Development Program Director position

Request for Proposal: Production Management and Leadership, Journal of Extension

Extension Journal, Inc. invites proposals from individuals or organizations to provide production management and leadership for the *Journal of Extension*. This request for proposal (RFP) emphasizes the accomplishments most critical to journal operations, those that would add value, and opportunities to strengthen the Journal's production capacity and success over time.

To submit, email the proposal or questions about the RFP process to Steve Siegelin, EJI Treasurer and RFP Chair. Submissions received by September 30, 2026, will receive the highest level of attention. Review will continue until a partnership is developed. For more information, please contact EJI Board Members: Lori Greiner, Asst Director of Publications, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Jenna Anding, JOE Senior Editor, or Theresa Ferrari, EJI President.

View more information for the Production Management and Leadership RFP for the Journal of Extension

Associate Vice President, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

Oklahoma State University's Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (DASNR) invites nominations and applications for Associate Vice President, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES). This position reports to the Vice President, Dean and Director of DASNR and serves as the chief operating officer of OCES. The Associate Vice President will provide transformative statewide, regional, and national leadership to ensure high-quality, relevant Extension programs addressing Oklahoma's needs.

Responsibilities include:

- Lead long-range planning, program implementation, evaluation, and reporting.
- Oversee OCES personnel, programs, fiscal affairs, and daily operations.
- Expand funding through county, state, federal, and private sources.
- Strengthen relationships with legislators, community leaders, agricultural and natural resource organizations, and other stakeholders.
- Coordinate Extension initiatives across OSU colleges and with research and academic programs.
- Engage with USDA, state and federal agencies, and national Extension organizations to advance collaboration and funding opportunities.
- Ensure compliance with affirmative action and equal employment requirements.
- Serve on the DASNR executive team and advance integration of OSU's teaching, research, and Extension missions.

View more information and apply for the Associate Vice President position

District Extension Director - Southwest District, University of Georgia

The District Extension Director (DED) is a member of the Extension Leadership Team in the College of Agricultural & Environmental Sciences (CAES), at the University of Georgia, responsible for administering the Extension program in one of four districts across the state. The Director is responsible for approximately 180 employees and oversees a budget of approximately $7 million. This position will lead the Southwest Extension District staff under the supervision of the Associate Dean for Extension and the Director of County Operations. Candidates are encouraged to submit their materials by November 15, 2026, to ensure review; however, screening will continue until the position is filled. Please direct questions about the position to Ms. Cheryl Poppell, Southeast District Extension Director, at 912-478-8991.

View more information and apply for the Southwest District Extension Director position

District Extension Director - Northwest District, University of Georgia

The District Extension Director (DED) is a member of the Extension Leadership Team (ELT) in the College of Agricultural & Environmental Sciences (CAES) at the University of Georgia, responsible for administering the Extension program in the Northwest District of the state. The Northwest District Extension Director is responsible for approximately 300 employees and oversees a budget of approximately $7 million. The office is located on the UGA Griffin Campus in Griffin, Georgia. The Director will lead the Northwest Extension District staff under the supervision of the Associate Dean for Extension and the Director of County Operations. Candidates are encouraged to submit their materials by November 15, 2026, to ensure review; however, screening will continue until the position is filled. Please direct questions about the position to Denise Everson, Northeast District Extension Director, at 706-542-3179.

View more information and apply for the Northwest District Extension Director position

Conferences, Workshops, Trainings

Local Communities in the Age of Data Centers & AI Webinar

Virtual: December 2, 2026, 1:00 p.m. ET / 12:00 p.m. CT
ACCESS DATA CENTERS WEBINAR INFORMATION

AI to Answers Webinar

Virtual: December 9, 2026, 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. CT
ACCESS AI TO ANSWERS WEBINAR INFORMATION

Excellence in Tourism Leadership Program

In-person and Virtual: January 1, 2027, Various Locations in Mississippi
ACCESS TOURISM LEADERSHIP PROGRAM INFORMATION

Rural Grocery Transition Specialist Program

Virtual: January 18, 2027
ACCESS GROCERY SPECIALIST PROGRAM INFORMATION

2027 Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) Annual Meeting

In-person: February 7-8, 2027, Oklahoma City Omni Hotel in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
ACCESS SRSA MEETING INFORMATION

Extension Leadership Conference

In-person: February 9-10, 2027, Doubletree by Hilton in Orlando, Florida
ACCESS EXTENSION LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE INFORMATION

National 4-H Conference

In-person: April 9-14, 2027, Hyatt Regency Crystal City in Arlington, Virginia
ACCESS 4-H CONFERENCE INFORMATION

Research and Extension Experience for Undergraduates (REEU) Rural Scholars Program

In-person: Summer 2027, Oklahoma State University
ACCESS REEU PROGRAM INFORMATION

Delta Scholars Program

In-person: June 7-18, 2027, Starkville, Mississippi and Mississippi Delta
ACCESS DELTA SCHOLARS PROGRAM INFORMATION

2027 Rural Sociological Society (RSS) Annual Meeting

In-person: July 27-30, 2027, The Westin Kansas City at Crown Center in Kansas City, Missouri
ACCESS RSS MEETING INFORMATION

National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) Trainings

In-person and Virtual: Various Locations in the Southern Region
ACCESS NCDP TRAINING INFORMATION

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