Thank you for your partnership with Kansas State University and the K-State Alumni Association.

Please enjoy this exclusive feature story as it appeared in K-Stater magazine. Members of the Alumni Association receive content like this quarterly. Join today to stay up-to-date on all things K-State.

www.K-State.com/membership
They’re everywhere.
They’re in our fields helping Kansas farmers improve their yields. They’re working with communities to improve our health and quality of life. They bring key players to the table for discussions that impact our livelihoods. They help us continue our education and pursue new interests, as they have since we were children. They give us advice when we need it.

They’re working with farmers, ranchers and policymakers to extend the lifespan of the Ogallala Aquifer. In times of crisis they make sure resources get where they need to go.

They’re K-Staters.

A missionary spirit

K-State has an impact in all 105 Kansas counties

They’re everywhere.
They’re in our fields helping Kansas farmers improve their yields. They’re working with communities to improve our health and quality of life. They bring key players to the table for discussions that impact our livelihoods. They help us continue our education and pursue new interests, as they have since we were children. They give us advice when we need it.

They’re working with farmers, ranchers and policymakers to extend the lifespan of the Ogallala Aquifer. In times of crisis they make sure resources get where they need to go.

They’re K-Staters.

Kansas State University has a presence in all 105 Kansas counties through the university’s Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service. To fulfill its land-grant mission, K-State Research and Extension shares unbiased, practical and research-driven information with the people of Kansas. In doing so, individuals, businesses and communities are able to solve problems, develop skills and build a better future.

There is a heartfelt commitment by the people to the extension mission,” said Ernie Minton, interim dean of the College of Agriculture and interim director of K-State Research and Extension. “These people have a missionary spirit in them that really drives them. It’s not unlike what you see with educators — particularly at the grade school or high school levels where they don’t expect to make an income that will make them a wealthy person. But what makes them a wealthy person is the real uplift they get from helping people.”

WHAT IS RESEARCH AND EXTENSION?

Essentially, K-State Research and Extension is a partnership between the university and the federal, state and county governments. In Kansas, Research and Extension personnel work at the K-State campuses, research sites and in 105 county offices, forming a network of educators to help solve community issues.

“I like to say Extension is here to help people improve their lives, livelihoods and communities and society through education,” said Gregg Hadley, director for Extension. “We’re out there doing this work and that’s the third leg of the three-legged mission of the land-grant university.”

HOW DID RESEARCH AND EXTENSION COME ABOUT?

Here’s a quick history: The Morrill Act of 1862 paved the way for a land-grant university in every state. Established in 1863, K-State was the first of its kind.

In 1887, the Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station was created at Kansas State Agricultural College under the provision of the Hatch Act. In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act created the Cooperative Extension Service.

The County Farm Bureau Law was passed in 1915 providing funds to implement the county extension program. In 1931, the Kansas Legislature revised the law, making county extension programs the cooperative responsibility of each county extension council and K-State.

The Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service were combined in 1996, forming the organization currently known as K-State Research and Extension.

THE GRAND CHALLENGES

Research and Extension is divided up into four programmatic areas: agriculture, family and consumer sciences, community development and 4-H.
Grand Challenges. Among them are adult development across the spectrum of the programmatic areas and research ready to assist Kansans as needed. "Hadley said. "We are really emphasizing a whole needs analysis — getting out and having community conversations so that we are sure that we are addressing the needs of each community, " Hadley said. "Everybody has a stake in those Grand Challenges," Hadley said. "And we're not talking about indirect connections. We're talking about direct connections where people — whether they're in the city of Wichita or Wichita County — can point to things and say 'I'm concerned about this issue.'"

Looking at these challenges and the specific needs of each community, Hadley said Research and Extension provides service-focused and community-based information and services for Kansans relating to a broad range of topics. "We are really emphasizing a whole needs analysis — getting out and having community conversations so that we are sure that we are addressing the needs of the individual communities," Hadley said. "These things aren't done in isolation," he said. "You have to be communicating across all the different agencies and channels." Extension agents often also play a key outreach component to deliver the latest technology. "People say, 'Well, can't you just Google those things and find out what the latest is?'" Minton said. "But the one-on-one interaction that occurs really can't be replaced in that sort of setting," Minton said. "That's where the value of Extension emerges and why we need it now as much as we needed it in the early life of Extension." This plays out over and over, Minton said. "When the sugarcane aphids attacked the grain sorghum industry, Extension mobilized to help solve that problem.

"The producers needed the answer right now," he said. "So Extension organized county and regional meetings, and they talked about solutions to that problem."

"When wildfires emerged in the central and western portions of the state, Extension agents served as points of contact for aid. "Extension gets called on to do an assortment of things," Minton said. "And again, it goes back to the concept that those kinds of things weren't spelled out necessarily, in a firm way, in a position description that those people applied to. But because of the health of communities that Extension takes on, that becomes part of the work they do. And it fits with that missionary kind of attitude."

HELPING OTHERS

K-State doesn't just help farmers. Each Research and Extension office has someone who can offer tips to help with daily life from lawn care and gardening to family and consumer sciences. Scott Eckert '90, '94, Harvey County Extension horticulture agent, receives questions daily from county residents across a broad range of topics. They might be turf related. Sometimes it's about strange spots on a tree or needing a plant identified. "People recognize that they can contact you," he said. "We're in our local papers so people recognize our faces. They know they can come to us and hopefully get those research-based standard answers. I think the taxpayers can see and appreciate that somebody is there that can help them out." In Harvey County, Eckert runs a community garden called "The Giving Garden," which grows K-State demonstration plants and plenty of vegetables, which are donated to the Salvation Army. Over the past 18 years the garden has donated just under 70,000 pounds of food.

PRACTICAL APPLIED RESEARCH

K-State researchers are tasked with looking into issues affecting Kansans. Out in western Kansas the big challenge is water. The area has a scarcity of water where it receives limited rainfall each year, paired with low levels in its rivers and high demand on the Ogallala Aquifer. Producers are looking for ways to stretch every drop a bit farther. "The concept of cover crops could be adapted to the environment of the region to aide with soil health and water conservation," he said. "Back on the Manhattan campus, KC Olson '98, professor of animal science and industry, is working to combat sericea lespedeza, an invasive weed on the tallgrass prairie. The weed is highly invasive and diminishes forage availability for cattle that rely on the prairie for sustenance. Olson, a former Extension agent for the University of Missouri, uses his Extension background to guide his research, looking for a practical solution that ranchers can easily implement. After examining possible solutions to combat the weed, (including grazing sheep or goats grazing with beef cattle and supplementing beef cattle with toxin-binding feed additives) Olson considered changing the time to perform annual prescribed burns (as these play a critical role in the plants'...
“We encourage them to learn by doing. We strive to have that science-based learning and positive youth development where we bring the whole program together through more than 30 project areas. 4-Hers investigate projects that interest them and enhance their learning outside of school, providing new learning opportunities.”

CORINNE BLENDER PATTERSON ’02, LYON COUNTY EXTENSION AGENT FOR 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

We discover that we can manage some very pernicious invasive species using prescribed fire in a slightly different way than we are used to,” Olson said. “We don’t spend additional money on new equipment or new techniques. We just change how we apply the fire and we can reduce the presence of some economically devastating noxious weeds in the state. That’s been the most rewarding research experience of my career.”

Olson regularly talks with farmers and ranchers about prescribed burning, holding field days on collaborator’s properties to help show results.

“I didn’t leave the service mentality or the Extension mindset behind when I made the move to research because I knew that it was going to pay big dividends to remain connected to the ranching community,” he said. “As a researcher, I have this tremendous network of county agents and regional livestock specialists that I can work with to figure out how best to serve in my role here.”

Olson also has been able to apply some of this research to range management, regarding those devastated by wildfires in south central and western Kansas.

“K-State has this magical, rich relationship with its stakeholders,” Olson said. “Some of them are former students, but not all. Regardless, they have been conditioned, largely through excellent service, to look to K-State for help.”

Nearly six million young people in the U.S. and more than 7,400 in Kansas are involved in 4-H. It’s America’s largest youth development organization. 4-H is delivered in partnership with local volunteers and resources, Research and Extension, K-State and the larger National Cooperative Extension system — a community of more than 100 public universities across the nation that provides experiences where young people learn by doing.

“We encourage them to learn by doing. We strive to have that science-based learning and positive youth development where we bring the whole program together through more than 30 project areas. 4-Hers investigate projects that interest them and enhance their learning outside of school, providing new learning opportunities.”

Much of the learning is done on their own time through projects, but Patterson said there is a community aspect of 4-H as well. “Many times they are looking for something to do, and we want to make sure it’s a positive experience,” she said. “Caring adults and volunteers are the backbone of our program and offer opportunities that keep young people engaged and doing good things in the community.”

4-H projects aren’t solely agriculturally focused, Patterson said. Projects range from creative arts to family and consumer sciences to science and technology in addition to agriculture. In some ways 4-H is a backdoor recruitment tool for K-State as it exposes potential students to the depth and breadth of K-State research.

“Through 4-H they can start exploring their own interests, and that’s really how we develop young learners and the next generation of leaders,” she said.

4-H leaves an impact on those who participated in it. “Of all the benefits of the Cooperative Extension Service, the 4-H program has to be top of my list,” said Jenni Latzke ’00, a 4-H alumna. “It helps parents and children learn skills together as a family through project work. It develops lifelong skill sets that touch on all aspects of a young person’s life — Head for clearer thinking, Heart for greater loyalty, Hands for larger service and Health for better living. It’s not ag-centric today, but its roots began as a way to teach farmers and homemakers skills to improve families and farms. The return on investment is outstanding.”

Photo courtesy of the Kansas 4-H Foundation