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Arkansas 4-H robotics team places 12th at international 2025 FIRST Championship

Of the thousands of students from more than 20 countries competing in the 2025 FIRST — [For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology](#) — Championship, the Saline County 4-H SeaCow Robotics Club earned a special recognition from the judges.

The senior Arkansas 4-H team placed 12th among 64 teams in the competition's Tech Challenge Program, held April 16-19 at Houston's George R. Brown Convention Center. FIRST is a nonprofit with team-based robotics programs for ages 4-18.

But the SeaCows also took home a more heartfelt honor — the Judges' Award — which is given to a team that “judges strongly felt should be recognized,” said Stacy Statler, SeaCow Robotics coach.

The FIRST Tech Challenge Program includes students in grades 7-12. In September 2024, FIRST launched INTO THE DEEP, the deep sea exploration themed game for the competition season.

“You have to have done a lot of research about what everybody's robot can do, and how consistent they are,” Statler said.

The SeaCow Juniors team also competed in Houston in the FIRST LEGO League Challenge Program which includes students ages 9-16.

In addition to a team's performance in the game, each team gave a 10-minute presentation to a panel of judges and shared their portfolio.

“We have our motto: Sink, swim, do it again,” Statler said.

“When the judges say, ‘Tell us about something you learned,’ what they're asking you is, ‘Tell us something that went wrong and how you learned from that.’”

The current SeaCow Robotics Club members began working together in September of 2022.

Nicole Nichols, Saline County extension agent, said she has seen impressive growth among the group, with whom she traveled to the world championship.

“A lot of the kiddos, when they first started a couple of years ago, trying to get them to talk about anything was painful,” Nichols said. “And now they're the ones who are answering questions from the judges and doing community outreach.”

“Our model is to make robotics accessible, so we can bring them in with whatever talent they think they bring to the table,” Statler said.

“It's right there in the rule book,” she said. “You need to build a robot, follow the engineering process, create a brand, market the brand, and be able to go out and speak publicly about the robot.” Read more [here](#).



In addition to placing 12th among 64 teams in the Tech Challenge Program at the FIRST Championship, the Saline County 4-H SeaCow Robotics senior team was also selected for the Judges' Award, which recognizes one special team for their efforts.

THE INSIDE STORIES

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Extension researchers studying new disease impacting Arkansas strawberries

Researchers with the Cooperative Extension Service are studying an emerging disease impacting strawberries in an increasing number of locations across Arkansas in recent months.

Aaron Cato, extension horticulture integrated pest management specialist for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, said the disease was initially detected in Arkansas in 2020 but has kept a low profile until this year.

"It's not completely new to Arkansas," Cato said. "We first saw this *neopestalotiopsis* several years ago — it killed a bunch of plants at one farm and in some of our trials. It's not new to specialty crops per se, but this aggressive disease is new to the strawberry landscape in the United States."



Neopestalotiopsis is a genus of plant pathogens belonging to the family *Sporocadaceae*. While the fungus is pathogenic in strawberries, it

does not pose a health risk to humans.

Cato said growers in Florida were first confronted with the disease in large numbers in 2018. In 2020, the fungus "blew up in the nurseries that produce strawberry plant starters, and seemed to be related to excessive rainfall.

"It's new in the sense that we don't fully understand it," he said. "But we've been on the lookout for it for the last five years."

Cato said that depending on the causal pathogen, strawberries may suffer from "crown rot," which will cause the plant to collapse and die in plug trays or when they begin to produce fruit if not sooner, or "fruit rot" and "leaf rot," which tends to attack plant leaves and is more visually identifiable. The crown is where the plant's leaves and roots originate.

"There's just a lot to nail down before we can definitively say, 'yes, this is what you're dealing with, this is what you can expect and here's how to deal with it,'" he said. "We're just not there yet. Growers are really trying to do everything they can with an integrated approach to prevent losses in a high-risk year." Read more [here](#).

Grant County SNAP-Ed: Growing Healthy Habits

The Grant County Senior Center along with Susan Thomason, extension family and consumer sciences agent in Grant County, have launched a SNAP-Ed nutrition and gardening project aimed at improving the health and well-being of local seniors. Thomason provided monthly nutrition lessons throughout the spring and fall seasons. Seniors grew vegetables and herbs and learned how to cultivate, harvest, and use them in healthy recipes. The participants were responsible for maintaining the garden site, which helped them incorporate physical activity into their daily routines. Thomason also provided food demonstrations featuring the seniors' fresh produce.

At the end of the program, participants completed an evaluation to assess its impact. The results were positive: 9% of participants ate more fruit, 62% improved their food safety practices, 54% increased physical activity, 54% read nutrition labels more often, and 46% ate more vegetables. One participant shared, "I learned the benefits of



Susan Thomason teaching the Fresh Conversations Curriculum.

healthy eating and have more energy now." This SNAP-Ed program not only enhanced seniors' knowledge of nutrition and gardening but also encouraged healthier eating habits and a more active lifestyle.

New extension nutrition specialist hopes to connect Arkansans with more educational tools

From the time she was a child in Iran, Lida Rahimi Araghi knew that a healthy diet was at the heart of a healthy life.

“I’ve always believed that food is health,” Araghi said. “It’s central not only to nourishment but also to prevention, healing and resilience.”

As a recently hired extension assistant professor and nutrition and food specialist for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, Araghi said working in the Natural State gives her ample opportunity to do the work for which she has trained.

“My industry experience and academic research made me realize how vital food safety and nutrition education are, especially for vulnerable populations and those who face barriers,” she said. “It breaks my heart to know Arkansas has the worst food insecurity in the nation, and I want to help.”

After earning her bachelor’s degree in Food Science from the University of Tabriz in Iran, Araghi relocated to the United States. She completed a Master of Science and a Ph.D. in food science at the University of Georgia, where she focused on food safety and quality, which she said solidified her commitment to using food science to improve lives.

This lifelong drive made Araghi and the Cooperative Extension Service a good fit for each other, she said.

“Extension’s mission of translating research into hands-on education truly inspired me,” she said. “I love how extension empowers people through education and supports them in meaningful ways. The opportunity to contribute to a healthier Arkansas, especially through a role that blends science, service and out-

reach, aligned perfectly with my values.”

Nina Roofe, head of Family and Consumer Sciences for the Division of Agriculture, said Araghi makes a meaningful addition to the state’s extension team.

“Dr. Araghi brings a strong background in content, research, and experience,”

Roofe said. “She seeks to work with others, not just in FCS, but across the organization to deliver innovative and impactful nutrition and food science programs to improve the lives of all Arkansans.”

Araghi said she hopes to use her position to empower the state’s residents through greater knowledge of food and nutrition.

“Beyond the core responsibilities, I want to be a connector, linking people to tools, resources and one another,” Araghi said. “I’m excited to pursue creative outreach methods like QR-coded resources for food pantry clients and educational support for home-based food entrepreneurs under the Arkansas Food Freedom Act.

“I also hope to secure grant funding to expand food literacy and food safety education in underserved areas,” she said. “For me, it’s all about creating programs that reflect the idea that food is health, and that everyone deserves access to safe, nutritious food and that education can be a powerful tool for equity, empowerment and change.”



Dr. Lida Rahimi Araghi

JUNE-JULY ARKANSAS FAIRS & FESTIVALS

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| June 6-7 | HOT SPRINGS , World Championship Running of the Tubs
LOWELL , 47th Mudtown Days
MENA , Lum & Abner Festival |
| June 13-14 | WARREN , Bradley County Pink Tomato Festival
TYRONZA , Stars and Stripes Festival |
| June 28 | SULPHUR SPRINGS , Sulphur Days, 479-298-3218 |
| July 24-26 | CAVE CITY , Cave City Watermelon Festival |

June Birthdays

Mae Rosby - June 1

Ford Baldwin - June 1

Robin Bridges - June 2

Linda Hon - June 3

Jesse Clark - June 4

Debra Baker - June 5

Mike McCarter - June 5

Jelyne Coldwell - June 6

Brenda Vick - June 7

Vetress Strong - June 8

Lanny Ashlock - June 8

Rex Roberg - June 9

Jo Howard - June 10

Graffie Eldridge - June 11

Martha May - June 11

Tamara Walkingstick - June 13

Michael Hamilton - June 14

Rick Wimberley - June 14

Janet Kuykendall - June 16

Sue Oglesby - June 16

Samuel Boyster - June 16

Sharon Dawson - June 17

Berni Kurz - June 18

Lila Grist - June 20

Bonnie Taylor - June 20

Rin Robertson - June 20

Dennis Bailey - June 21

Rick Cartwright - June 21

Sherry Black - June 23

Clifford Coker - June 24

Carroll Garner - June 25

Linda Outlaw - June 25

Romona Thieme - June 25

Allen Bates - June 25

Iris Phifer - June 27

Pamela Ferrill - June 27

Jim Robbins - June 28

Dorothy Hall - June 29

Message from the director



They say April showers bring May flowers, and we've certainly had our share of rain, storms and even tornados. It has been a challenging year for planting, hay harvest, gardening, and other activities that need favorable weather.

Despite the stormy weather, plenty has happened in May, beginning with the Support Staff Conference at the 4-H Center. Stacey McCullough's CPED team did a characteristically stellar job coordinating a conference that was both fun and informative for UADA staff. That was followed by New Employee Orientation, also at the 4-H Center. One of my favorite things about this job is having the opportunity to welcome our new employees and do my best to contribute to their orientation — both to UADA and to Extension more specifically. Those of us who have been around for a while tend to take for granted the breadth and depth of programming provided through CES. It is gratifying to see our new employees starting to gain that appreciation for the first time.

Summer gives us a great opportunity to highlight our excellent extension programming. We have numerous field days and other events coming up across the state in the next couple of months, not to mention 4-H district and state O-Ramas. I won't mention every summer event we have coming up, but I do want to highlight a couple. In June, Arkansas will host the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities' Mini Land-Grant Conference. This will bring our university colleagues in extension and research from around the country to our state for

the better part of a week. It's a great opportunity for us not only to collaborate with our counterparts on shared issues but also to show off some of the great things going on in our state.

Unfortunately, the Mini Land-Grant Conference overlaps with the annual UADA/Anheuser-Busch field day in Jonesboro. Our FCS educators, Leigh Ann Bullington and Keith Statham-Cleek are always at this event with samples of some kind of Arkansas rice dish. For this year's offering, they have worked with colleagues in Food Science to develop a new rice pudding mix that they will be beta testing with the field day crowd. Not only will that be a lot of fun, but it's a great example of a cross-functional applied research project to add value to one of our most important agricultural products.

Finally, on Aug. 8, our Weed Science team will host the Southern Weed Science Society Contest at the Jackson County Extension Center. We'll be hosting more than 100 weed science students from 13 institutions around the region at our facility for this contest. Again, this is a great example of how CES can cooperate effectively across our other land-grant missions. I'm sure this will be a phenomenal learning experience for these students and likely the first chance some of them will have for a hands-on Extension experience.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to the Boone County CES staff. This month, we produced the Director's Cut webinar from their office in Harrison. Even though we disrupted their office for a pretty good chunk of two days, they were incredibly gracious hosts. If you didn't catch the webinar live, it would be worth checking out the [recording](#) for the brief video tour of their location. It's a beautiful place.