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Erica Fields of the Southern Risk Management Education Center speaks at "Surviving the cost-price squeeze" in Stuttgart in October. (Special to The Commercial/University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture/Ryan McGeehey)

Center assists farmers amid financial burdens

MARY HIGHTOWER
SPECIAL TO THE COMMERCIAL

Farmers "are not just worried about losing the farm; they are afraid of losing an identity, a legacy and a sense of purpose," said Erica Fields, associate director of the Southern Risk Management Education Center.

As a licensed social worker, Fields has a unique skill set for an unprecedented time in the agriculture industry. With rising input costs, low commodity

prices, tariffs, shrinking margins complicated by limited access to loans and severe weather "across the South, producers are under tremendous financial pressure."

In her work with the Southern Risk Management Education Center, she sees the crisis firsthand.

"Many describe feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, out of control, or guilty for not being able to 'push through' like they used

to," she said.

"The red flags often appear in unreturned calls, skipped meetings or delayed harvesting," she said. "These small details tell a deeper story of fatigue and discouragement that often goes unnoticed until it becomes a crisis."

"In the field, I hear stories of families under intense pressure, with relationship strain, exhaust-

See FINANCE, PB3



Lin Burnett was the first angler to work with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission during its trial runs of the Legacy Lunker trophy bass program last year. (Special to The Commercial/Arkansas Game and Fish Commission)

Lonoke hatchery to take bass catches

RANDY ZELLERS
SPECIAL TO THE COMMERCIAL

"This is probably one of the most exciting things I've been a part of in my career."

Arkansas Game and Fish Commission Fisheries Division Chief Tommy Laird could have been speaking for at least a dozen members of the commission's staff when he said those words in mid-July at the unveiling of the Legacy Lunker trophy bass program, which starts Jan. 1.

Arkansas Legacy Lunker combines citizen science with advanced hatchery technology and techniques to reinforce superior genetics in Arkansas' largemouth bass populations. Any angler who catches a largemouth bass weighing 10 pounds or larger from Arkansas' waters from Jan. 1 through March 31 each year can call the Game and Fish Commission's new Lunker Line at (833) 948-2277 any time, day or night. A

representative from the agency will meet them at the lake and take possession of the fish if it is healthy enough, return it to the commission's Joe Hogan State Fish Hatchery in Lonoke and spawn it with genetically superior male bass to create improved fingerlings that will be stocked in the year for a new boat. The "Legacy Lunker" will also go back to the lake where she was caught once the spawning process is complete. In return

for their participation, anglers will receive a free replica mount of their fish, crafted by Harper's Pure Country Taxidermy, and be entered into a drawing held later in the year for a new boat. This sort of legacy hatchery program is new to Arkansas, but not to the bass fishing world. Texas Parks and Wildlife has conducted its Sharelunker program for almost 40 years, and,

See HATCHERY, PB2

See CLASSES, PB2

Union Bank donates to waterfowl research

SPECIAL TO THE COMMERCIAL

Union Bank & Trust Co. gifted \$100,000 in support of the recently created Snowden Waterfowl Center of Excellence, a national research center dedicated to advancing waterfowl and wetlands science based at the University of Arkansas at Monticello in partnership with the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

The funds, presented Dec. 3, will contribute to the center's long-term endowment, a \$5 million fund supporting educational opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as waterfowl and wetlands research, according to a news release.

The Snowden Waterfowl Center was formally announced in October through

a joint event with the UADA. The announcement celebrated the creation of both the center and the Dyke-Snowden Endowed Chair of Waterfowl and Wetlands, made possible by \$7 million in total contributions: \$5 million for the Snowden Waterfowl Center of Excellence and \$2 million for the Dyke-Snowden Endowed Chair of Waterfowl and Wetlands.

The group of donors was led by David Snowden, Arkansas waterfowl conservationist, and Merritt Dyke, chairman of Dyke Industries.

Douglas Osborne, professor of wildlife ecology at UAM, is the inaugural director of the Snowden Waterfowl Center and the Dyke-Snowden Endowed Chair.

See GIFT, PB2



The Snowden Waterfowl Center of Excellence presentation included Joel Stevens (left), Union Bank & Trust Co. board member; Dave Dickson, president and CEO of Union Bank; inaugural Snowden director Doug Osbourne; UAM Chancellor Peggy Doss; Robin McClendon, Union Bank board member; David Snowden, Arkansas waterfowl conservationist; John McClendon, chairman of Union Bank board; and Mike Akin, Union Bank board member. (Special to The Commercial/Union Bank & Trust Co.)