

ACES MAGAZINE

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL, CONSUMER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

VOLUME 15 | FALL 2026

HANDS-ON HELP

Meet the Extension agents who
lift New Mexico communities





WALK THIS WAY

Shellby Yazzie, left, of NMSU's Tribal Extension walks with Rolanda Morris, a teacher at Wingate High School in McKinley County, after a 4-H meeting at the school, which Yazzie once attended. Learn more about Yazzie's work as an Extension agent on Page 24.

FROM THE DEAN

I am thrilled to welcome you to the new edition of *ACES Magazine*. We began the 2026-2027 academic year with some big changes. Most notably, our leader of more than 10 years, Rolando A. Flores Galarza, retired from NMSU, and I started my new role as interim dean of the College of ACES. I am deeply honored to serve in this capacity. I have called NMSU my professional home for 30 years, and I've dedicated that entire time to the College of ACES, working as a professor, Extension specialist and administrator. Since 2008, I have had the distinction of serving as an associate dean and director of NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service. Our college has a long tradition of excellence in teaching, research and public service, and I look forward to working alongside our staff, faculty, students and alumni to uphold and advance our land-grant mission.

This issue highlights that important work. Extension is the backbone of our outreach efforts, and agents like Shellby Yazzie and Will Jaremko-Wright are wonderful examples of how our college helps uplift communities across New Mexico. Learn more about their impact starting on Page 24.

Like many other colleges and universities, we are working more and more with artificial intelligence. In the College of ACES, researchers and staff are using AI to make knowledge more accessible to New Mexico residents and help conserve water in an arid region grappling with severe drought, among many other areas. Read about these cutting-edge projects and much more in this issue. Until next time, please take care and feel free to connect with us.



Jon C. Boren, Ph.D.
Interim Dean



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ON THE COVERS

Front cover: Will Jaremko-Wright, left, of the Taos County Extension Office speaks with Bill Carda about Carda's land in Sunshine Valley, New Mexico. Learn more about Jaremko-Wright's work as an Extension agent on Page 28.

Back cover: NMSU researchers are using artificial intelligence to build resources and tools to help solving pressing issues in New Mexico. Learn more on Page 34.

NMSU photos by Josh Bachman

ROAD *to* SUCCESS

ACES partners with DACC to create pathways to four-year degrees

BY CARLOS ANDRES LÓPEZ

When Kassandra Dominguez enrolled at Doña Ana Community College to study graphic design, she had a more ambitious goal in mind: earn a bachelor's degree in agricultural communications from NMSU. What she didn't expect was how seamless that journey would be.

"It's definitely made college a lot easier for me in the whole transition to the main campus," said Dominguez, who graduated from DACC in May 2026. "It also gave me the option to study online and do my courses at my own pace, which was definitely helpful. It's made the experience a lot less intimidating."

Dominguez is one of the first students to benefit from the DACC-to-ACES Aggie Pathway. The new initiative between DACC and the College of ACES maps clear, coordinated routes from four associate degree programs at DACC to 15 bachelor's degree programs in agricultural fields at NMSU.

The program is an expansion of NMSU's broader Aggie Pathway Program, which makes it possible for students to begin their academic journey at any of NMSU's three community colleges and transfer to the Las Cruces campus without losing time, credits or momentum.



Doña Ana Community College's Culinary Arts Program is one of four programs connected to the College of ACES via the DACC-to-ACES Aggie Pathway.

By aligning coursework, advising and degree requirements across both institutions, NMSU and DACC are giving students a clear road map from the start.

"One of the things we need to do as a university is find the easiest pathway for students to finish their degrees," said Rolando A. Flores Galarza, who retired as dean of

the College of ACES in August 2026. "Our goal is for students to graduate as quickly as possible, ready to enter the workforce. With this program, students at the community college know what they have to do to graduate, starting from Day 1."

That clarity translates to real savings. Because students know which credits transfer

and when, they avoid the costly experience of repeating coursework or delaying graduation. Dominguez said starting at DACC also offered a meaningful financial advantage.

"It's definitely a cheaper option," she said, adding, "It got me used to the pace of everything, and it's helped me feel a lot more confident."

The program offers two flexible models. Under the two-plus-two track, students complete two years at DACC before transitioning fully to NMSU. Meanwhile, students in the co-enrollment model take classes at both institutions during their first two years. Both options give students access to consistent support throughout their academic journey, including regular meetings with peer mentors, faculty advisers and student success staff.

"It's a really exciting program where a student comes to DACC and says, 'I want to be a DACC student, but I'm interested in a major in the College of ACES,'" said Mónica Torres, chancellor of NMSU's community colleges. "They're simultaneously a DACC student while taking ACES classes on NMSU's main campus."

The DACC-to-ACES Pathway didn't happen overnight. Torres and Flores Galarza led more than a year of close collaboration between faculty and staff at both institutions to identify compatible degree programs, align academic requirements and build the infrastructure for a truly coordinated experience. The result is a model that both leaders believe can be replicated across the NMSU system.

"This is nothing but an advantage for the university system," Torres said, "because we are able to introduce a whole new set of students to these four-year majors."

For more information about the DACC-to-ACES Pathway, visit nmsu.news/ACES-DACC.



Kassandra Dominguez was one of the first students to participate in the DACC-to-ACES Aggie Pathway. The initiative maps clear, coordinated routes from four associate degree programs at DACC to 15 bachelor's degree programs in agricultural fields at NMSU.

ACES, NMDA respond to New World screwworm threat

BY TIFFANY ACOSTA

The mission of the Southwest Border Food Protection and Emergency Preparedness Center is to prepare to respond to complex emergencies. The center, which is a collaboration between NMSU's College of ACES and the New Mexico Department of Agriculture, has been a significant resource for New Mexico against the New World screwworm threat.

For more than a year, the center worked to raise awareness, increase observation and prepare for a rapid response before the first confirmed case of New World screwworm occurred in June 2026 in a canine in Lea County. That case is now inactive, but a second case was reported in September in Grant County.

"The center has played a vital role in networking all the agencies and industry partners to have a collective approach to the response. The local connection with Jessie Barber, Lea County Extension agent, was critical in working with local partners and commissioners, and provided the initial contact to help collect needed information for agencies to respond," said Tom Dean, the center's co-director and the Southwest District director for NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service.

To help reduce the threat, investigation and education have been crucial. Extension officials, along with the New Mexico Livestock Board and NMDA, helped to



NMSU's Southwest Border Food Protection and Emergency Preparedness Center has worked for more than a year to educate New Mexico residents on the dangers of the New World screwworm.

distribute New World screwworm sampling kits statewide to strengthen surveillance and early detection efforts. Local Extension offices have been available for sample submission guidance. New World screwworm looks like an ordinary housefly but can seriously harm animals. It is especially dangerous because it feeds on healthy, living tissue and larvae grow inside fresh wounds.

"Effective emergency response begins long before an emergency occurs," Dean said. "The center helped New Mexico build the partnerships, training and awareness needed to respond quickly when the first New World screwworm case was detected. Our success is a testament to the value of preparedness and collaboration."

For more information, visit screwwormnm.org.

NMSU developing disease-resistant green chile peppers

BY ADRIANA M. CHÁVEZ

The College of ACES has always been at the forefront of green chile research and innovation. An NMSU professor and Extension vegetable specialist is continuing that legacy with a grant to develop a disease-resistant variety of green chile.

Stephanie Walker leads a project working to develop a green chile that is not only mechanically harvestable but also resistant to *Phytophthora capsica* root rot, a disease that significantly impacts chile production. Walker received a \$759,000 grant from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to fund the project through 2030.

Walker is collaborating with Michael Mazourek, an associate professor and vegetable breeder at Cornell University, to combine resources from their respective research programs to incorporate *Phytophthora capsica* resistance into a new green chile type. Their goal is to develop a crop that can be mechanically harvested, which saves on labor costs, and is resistant to the disease, which can wipe out entire fields.

"They've been working on disease resistance in bell peppers, and one thing that we can really use in all of our cultivars was *Phytophthora capsica* resistance," Walker said. "There's been a scourge of the disease in New Mexico dating back to when Fabián García was breeding chile (in the early 1900s)."

Walker is working to apply Mazourek's disease-resistant strategy to the 'NuMex



NMSU's Stephanie Walker is working with Cornell University to develop a disease-resistant green chile pepper that can be harvested mechanically.

Odyssey' green chile, a cultivar she developed for mechanical harvesting. 'NuMex Odyssey' boasts a higher mechanically harvested yield and significantly less field fruit loss than standard commercial green chile varieties. It's also mild and flavorful, which many consumers prefer.

According to the New Mexico Department of Agriculture, New Mexico

produces roughly 77% of the chile peppers in the United States, ranking No. 1 in chile production nationally.

"Not only is green chile economically very important, but it's also our heart and soul and our pride," Walker said. "Chile is just part of who New Mexico is, and we do everything we can to support and strengthen the industry."

CULTIVATING WELLNESS

NMSU works with Navajo communities to increase food sovereignty

BY ADRIANA M. CHÁVEZ

The NMSU Agricultural Science Center at Farmington has received federal funding to continue efforts to provide programs and support to address the area’s Navajo communities’ food sovereignty and related health issues.

In spring 2026, the center received a \$500,000 grant from the National Institute for Food and Agriculture for a project titled “Seeds of change: Training elementary educators to implement the Yéego! Healthy eating and gardening program.”

The three-year program provides an immersive learning experience for 60 elementary school teachers serving Navajo students in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah to increase knowledge and skills in healthy eating and gardening practices in their classrooms using Yéego!, a Diné word that translates to work hard and persevere.

“Navajo communities are working to increase food sovereignty and address related



Staff members at NMSU’s Agricultural Science Center at Farmington instruct the first cohort of elementary school teachers in the Seeds of Change program, funded by \$500,000 grant from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

health disparities such as childhood obesity and diabetes. However, they face unique challenges,” said Kevin Lombard, research director for the NMSU Agricultural Science Center at Farmington. “Fresh fruits and vegetables are difficult for families to access on the Navajo Nation due to their high cost and the need to travel long distances to purchase them.”

Lombard said Navajo families have expressed interest in growing their own fruits and vegetables, but face harsh growing conditions, lack of water and limited knowledge of how to maintain gardens, especially around schools. Elementary schools can play a major role in teaching Navajo children about healthy eating and gardening while sustaining cultural traditions, but teachers often lack the knowledge and skills to incorporate those topics into their curricula, or are unfamiliar with technologies like drip irrigation, greenhouses and hydroponics, which can be found in school campus gardens.

“Our project team and the science center have over 20 years of experience in collaborating with Navajo community partners to address food sovereignty and health inequities,” Lombard said. “We bring expertise in agriculture, gardening, health and education that strives to respect regional cultural values.”

The program emphasizes the importance of cultural traditions in education and promoting health, Lombard said, including traditional growing practices augmented with modern irrigation methods and eating traditional foods.

Lombard expects the program to reach more than 1,500 Navajo youth over three years and lead to increases in gardening and healthy eating behaviors. To do this, the center hosts workshops for educators on how



to deliver the Yéego! Healthy Eating and Gardening curriculum in their classrooms. Teachers are recruited from 86 schools in the Navajo Nation and neighboring towns with significant Navajo student populations to participate and receive travel reimbursement and a stipend to attend the workshops. The first cohort completed the Seeds of Change program during the summer of 2026.

Teacher engagement in program activities will be monitored, and the project will use surveys to evaluate the impact of training on teacher knowledge, skills, implementation of the curriculum, and the impact on student knowledge and skills.

The Yéego program was developed and rigorously tested by a research team from NMSU, Diné College and the Fred Hutch Cancer Center in collaboration with Navajo Nation community leaders. It is a school-based intervention to promote healthy eating behavior among elementary school-children in the Navajo Nation.



Seeds of Change is training 60 elementary school teachers serving Navajo students in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah to increase knowledge and skills in healthy eating and gardening practices in their classrooms.

STEP INTO BETTER HEALTH

Extension programs create healthier communities

BY TATIANA FAVELA

For many New Mexicans, improving their health begins with understanding one important fact: Small changes can make a lasting difference.

Lourdes Olivas helps individuals and families take those first steps through NMSU Cooperative Extension Service programs focused on diabetes prevention, healthy habits and physical activity.

As a diabetes program manager and Extension associate, Olivas leads On the Road to Living Well with Diabetes, or OTR, a program designed for adults with diabetes or those at risk of developing the disease. The program helps participants understand how nutrition, exercise and daily choices can help prevent complications and improve quality of life.

“Many times, diabetes is inevitable,” Olivas said. “If that is the case, remember this is a disease that you can control and manage. It isn’t easy, but it is doable.”

A key component of OTR is helping participants better understand their health



Lourdes Olivas, above and right, leads an Extension Get Fit class, a program for older adults that focuses on improving balance, increasing endurance, building muscles and reducing the risk of falls.

through A1C testing at the beginning of the program and again three months later. For many, seeing those numbers provides motivation to make meaningful changes.

“The tests are a big game changer,” Olivas said. “When participants see their values, they understand they need to make changes to help prevent diabetes or avoid



complications such as kidney failure, amputations or vision loss.”

Olivas said the program also emphasizes meeting participants where they are. By working alongside community healthcare workers, Olivas has expanded OTR outreach to underserved communities throughout New Mexico.

“We deliver the program in a way that is culturally relevant and grounded in cultural humility, which helps individuals feel respected and valued,” she said.

In addition to delivering diabetes education, Olivas also helps New Mexicans stay physically active through Extension Get Fit, an evidence-based exercise program designed for older adults. Developed by the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Research

and Extension, the program focuses on improving balance, increasing endurance and building muscular strength while reducing the risk of falls. Olivas trains Extension agents to deliver the program in their counties.

Olivas said Extension Get Fit fills an important need in New Mexico, where community-based exercise programs for older adults are limited. As Extension agents across the state complete the program training, more older adults will have access to opportunities that support independence and overall wellness – and that’s Olivas’s goal.

“We let them know that it’s OK to take care of yourself first in order to take care of your loved ones,” she said.

New Mexicans interested in participating in health and wellness programs through

NMSU’s Cooperative Extension can find upcoming opportunities at diabetes.nmsu.edu.

For more information about On the Road to Living Well, or to register for an upcoming class, contact Olivas at loumunoz@nmsu.edu or 575-646-5763, or visit the Diabetes MAPP at diabetes.nmsu.edu. The website is regularly updated with OTR class announcements and information about other nutrition and diabetes education programs such as Kitchen Creations.

Extension Get Fit class dates and locations are determined by participating Extension agents. Trainings and community offerings are shared through Extension outlets as they become available.



OUT IN THE FIELD

CESFAS internships connect students to New Mexico agriculture

BY TATIANA FAVELA

A group of NMSU students spent this summer gaining work experience – and much more – as part of a new internship program offered by NMSU’s Center of Excellence in Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems.

The program places students at value-added agriculture companies across New Mexico, giving them hands-on experience in business operations, logistics, food production and supply chain management, while allowing them to build professional connections, apply classroom knowledge and explore future careers.

This year’s internship partners included Barker Produce, Bueno Foods, Frontier Food Hub, Hatch Chile Store, Mesilla Valley Maze, Olam Food Ingredients, Seco Spice and Stampede Culinary Partners.

“These companies often struggle to find qualified employees for their entry-level positions. With this partnership, they get to assess the student without the long-term commitment of a full-time hire,” said Chadelle Robinson, CESFAS internship program coordinator and associate professor in the



Gamboa worked at the Mesilla Valley Maze as part of a summer internship program offered through NMSU’s Center of Excellence in Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems.



Top left: Santiago Gamboa at the Mesilla Valley Maze. Top right: Kasi Montoya at Barker Produce. Below: Denisse Banuelos, middle, and Jose Aragon, right, at Olam Food Ingredients.



Aragon, top left, and Banuelos, top right, prepare to tour Olam Food Ingredients in Las Cruces. Banuelos and Aragon completed their CESFAS internships at the food-processing facility.

Department of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Business. “If they find the student fits into their operation, they then can plan for additional employment opportunities.”

At its heart, the program connects classroom learning to the needs of New Mexico’s agricultural industry.

“One of the best ways to educate our students is to connect them directly with the people and industries they will one day serve,” CESFAS Director F. Omar Holguin said. “Internships give students the opportunity to apply what they’ve learned in the classroom while gaining practical experience, confidence and professional relationships that are difficult to teach in a classroom.”

Santiago Gamboa, who interned at the Mesilla Valley Maze in Las Cruces, said he jumped at the opportunity to join the program.

“Getting hands-on experience helps you meet the right people in your field and puts you in a better position after college,” he said.

Gamboa added that his internship introduced him to a wide range of farming operations, from installing irrigation systems to digging trenches and maintaining equipment.

“You don’t realize how much work goes into the little things until you’re out here doing it,” he said.

At Olam Food Ingredients, Denisse Banuelos discovered how classroom lessons translated into a global supply chain industry.

“My courses in economics and agriculture helped me understand how the business side of things work,” Banuelos said. “When supervisors explained processes, I understood the assignment and was able to hit the ground running.”

Banuelos said the internship also strengthened her confidence and expanded her professional network.

“I’ve met people who are willing to help me figure out what I want to do,” she said.

“I have connections now from Chicago to Singapore. That’s an invaluable experience.”

Jose Aragon said his time as an intern at Olam Food Ingredients introduced him to the U.S. food industry and allowed him to gain work experience at an international company.

“It’s amazing to work with a global company,” he said. “You start realizing how many everyday products come through Olam, and it gives you a much bigger understanding of the industry.”

As a business operations intern at Barker Produce, Kasi Montoya gained hands-on experience in managing production reports and inventory data.

“I’ve learned a lot about supply chain and logistics in school, but it’s completely different to see it in person,” she said. “Seeing what we learn in class – the economics, business and financials – play out in a real business has been awesome.”

Montoya added, “This has solidified that I want to go into business and the supply chain and logistics side of agriculture. Every day is different.”

Whether maintaining farming systems, analyzing global supply chains or tracking production data, each student gained a deeper understanding of New Mexico agriculture while building skills and relationships that will shape their careers. These experiences also strengthened CESFAS’s ties to New Mexico’s agricultural sector.

“By working alongside our partners,” Holguin said, “we become better educators, better researchers and ultimately better partners for the communities we serve.”

New Mexico companies interested in participating in future CESFAS internship cohorts can contact Robinson at chadelle@nmsu.edu or 575-646-5093.



Montoya leaned on her business skills during her CESFAS internship at Barker Produce, where she helped manage production reports and inventory data.

GOING with the FLOW

NMSU student goes from growing chile in space to maintaining historic acequias

BY CARLOS ANDRES LÓPEZ

NMSU Ph.D. student Jacob Torres walks along an acequia in Española, New Mexico. Torres uses the engineering skills he learned at NMSU to maintain the irrigation system.

Josh Bachman

Jacob Torres stands on the edge of a tree-covered acequia in Española, New Mexico, as water from Santa Cruz Dam fills the earthen canal below. Under an August morning sun, he spends several minutes raking stubborn debris from the centuries-old irrigation system before releasing a precious resource that will soon flow through his hometown.

Torres, a 2014 NMSU graduate and current Ph.D. student in the College of ACES, is no stranger to solving problems.

Before returning to New Mexico, he was a NASA scientist who helped develop the experiment that grew the first fruit – New Mexico chile – in microgravity in 2021. But no matter the issue – whether it’s managing a historic acequia network or growing crops in a controlled environment with or without gravity – Torres relies on his education from NMSU.

“When you get hired to do something, usually it’s in a system that’s already existing, and you don’t get training on how to use

it. You just get thrown in there and have to figure it out,” he said. “The playbook I learned at NMSU is to: One, get the system running; two, make an assessment of that system; and three, drive improvements based on that assessment. My education is key to everything.”

In a similar way, Torres was unexpectedly thrust into his role as a *mayordomo* – a community member elected to keep the acequias in working order. Those entrusted to this role also maintain the *desagüe* – the

acequias’ ability to move flood waters away from homes and properties – and ensure that water-rights holders receive their share of water released from the dam.

Torres said he initially felt ill-prepared to take charge of the acequias, which this small community has depended on since the 17th century. But he did what he was taught to do: He learned the system, assessed it and made improvements – and he quickly grew into the role once held by his great-great-grandfather, Policarpio Valencia, 100 years ago.

Now accustomed to the role and responsibilities, Torres said one of his goals is to modernize the acequia for future generations. He’s working with Atinderpal Singh, an assistant professor and Extension water management specialist at NMSU, on a proposal to get funding to automate the gate at the dam, or *presa*, of the acequia system.

“This will give me more control over the amount of water entering the system, which means I can address excess flooding more quickly,” Torres said. “It can literally save tens of thousands of gallons a year.”

When he is not tending to the acequias, Torres is a saffron farmer and full-time Ph.D. student in NMSU’s Department of Plant and Environmental Sciences. NMSU’s Center of Excellence in Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems is funding his Ph.D., and he works closely with the Sustainable Agriculture Science Center at Alcalde on research related to growing chile in a controlled environment, an area that ties back to his days at NASA.

Indeed, when he applied to the Ph.D. program, he wrote an essay about his long-held dream to return to NMSU to carry on the work of scientists like Roy Nakayama, Frank Mata and Paul Bosland, who led



Above: Torres, a former NASA scientist, planted saffron corms in a family field this summer. Below: Torres discusses the work that goes into maintaining the acequia system with Ann Martinez.

decades of groundbreaking research on chile peppers, some of which factored into the NASA effort to grow chile in space.

“I’m living my dream,” Torres said. “I just harvested my first round of ‘Española

Improved’ green chile that I grew in the same field that this cultivar was derived from 40 years ago. That means the world to me. It’s never lost on me how cool it is that I get to do this.”



As a Ph.D. student, Torres aims to find ways of growing chile in a controlled environment.

RESTORING RANGELANDS

NMSU leads study to improve desert's arid ecosystem

BY ADRIANA M. CHÁVEZ

At first glance, the desert expanses in New Mexico may seem dry, barren, harsh and beautiful. But that wasn't always the case.

Over the past 150 years, rangelands in the Southwest have experienced dramatic changes in vegetation. A research project based at NMSU's Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center is exploring ways to restore rangelands to what they once were: expanses of perennial grasslands.

NMSU researchers are collaborating with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to find ways to promote the growth of native perennial grasses in hopes of not only providing more forage for cattle and wildlife, but also keeping soil in place and preventing erosion and dust. Research on rangeland management dates back to 1908, when

E.O. Wooton, who engineered the establishment of the Jornada Experimental Range, published a report known as the "The Range Problem in New Mexico."

"There was an issue with overgrazing even then, along with some changes in climate and the obvious need for management. Research and working with ranchers to figure out how to properly raise and manage cattle in the Southwest became a priority," said Conrad Nelson, research site manager for the Jornada Basin Long Term Ecological Research site. "We're continuing those efforts and trying to refine and answer those questions."

Sheri Spiegel, the rangeland management specialist for the USDA Agricultural Research Service's Jornada Experimental Range, said that the late 1800s to early

NMSU is working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture on a study to find ways to promote the growth of native perennial grasses on rangelands.

Josh Bachman



Josh Bachman



Josh Bachman

Above: From left, Greg Cooper, Conrad Nelson, Sheri Spiegel and Andrew Cox. Below: Nelson points out the perennial grass growing at NMSU's Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center.

1900s saw an influx of cattle, major drought and cold snaps, which created a shift from grass to the shrubbery that now exists, including mesquite and creosote.

"We seek to restore more of the perennial grasses for a range of functions, not just for cattle," Spiegel said. "We're super lucky that we have monitoring plots and data that tell a picture of what this place used to look like, and we've been able to see that change over time."

Spiegel said that since about 40% of the world also consists of arid regions, the research could have a global impact on how findings are applied.

"Rangeland restoration could potentially create more perennial grasses, better overall rangeland health and a more robust ecosystem," said Andrew Cox, research coordinator at the CDRRC. "Ideally, applied rangeland restoration techniques, in conjunction with grazing management, will provide better water efficiency, an increase in forage production and ultimately more food production through an increase in grazeable land."

The project is taking place at the CDRRC's Summerford Sands site, which consists of several plots overseen by Greg Cooper, an NMSU Ph.D. student and research scientist at the Jornada LTER. The researchers are using two techniques, soil imprinting and nutrient input using composted dairy manure collected from dairy producers in Doña Ana County. They applied compost in combination with soil imprinting, and initial findings indicate the most success in grass restoration in the composted treatments versus plots that were seeded without the compost.

"When we implemented this last summer, this landscape looked totally



Josh Bachman

The researchers hope to develop rangeland restoration techniques that will provide better water efficiency and increases in forage and food production.

different," Cooper said. "There was nothing on the ground. The only thing we had were the shrubs. So, when we came out here, we took pieces of the puzzle from previous and ongoing research going on at the CDRRC and the LTER, and we wanted to combine different restoration techniques."

While the perennial grass growth remains limited so far, researchers hope their preliminary findings will lead to more widespread growth in the near future.

"There's a lot of limitations to seeding projects out here in the desert," Cooper said.

"Seeds can be taken away by rodents, ants and wind, so we're really happy that we are seeing a bunch of seedlings come up."

For more information about rangeland restoration research, visit chihuahuansc.nmsu.edu/.



Shellby Yazzie stands along Sundance Coal Mine Road in McKinley County.

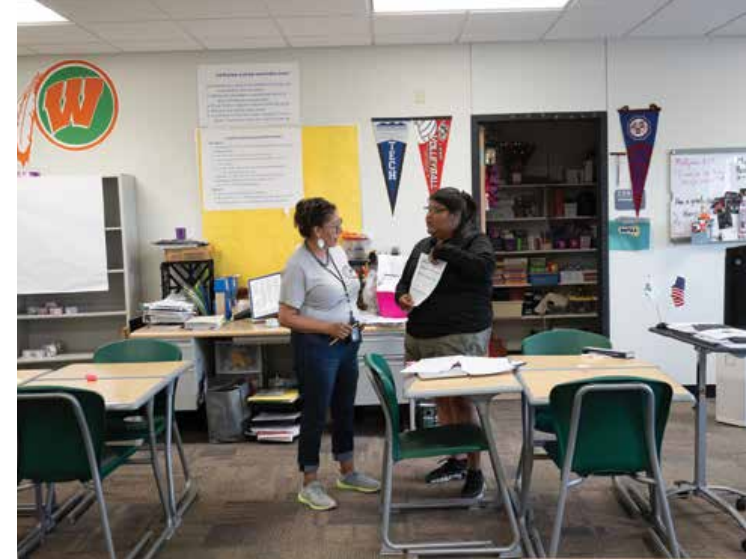
Shellby Yazzie COMMUNITY CHAMPION

PHOTO ESSAY BY JOSH BACHMAN

No two days are alike for the agents and specialists serving New Mexico through NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service. That is especially true for Shellby Yazzie, a 4-H agent for NMSU Tribal Extension. Although based in McKinley County, Tribal Extension delivers educational programs and resources throughout a vast expanse of northwestern New Mexico, covering about a third of the Navajo Nation, or roughly 6,275 square miles.

Those living here face a unique set of challenges that Yazzie experienced firsthand growing up near Gallup. A member of the Navajo Nation, she uses her cultural knowledge and expertise to help strengthen and empower the communities she serves. "You have to build trust with tribal communities, and I use my connections to build that trust," she said. "I know life on the reservation, and see things through a tribal lens."

When she's not working from the McKinley County Extension Office, Yazzie takes Extension programs on the road. She often travels hundreds of miles to visit families, youth and tribal residents, sharing research-backed resources in youth development, agriculture management and other critical areas. Here is a snapshot of a day in Yazzie's work life.



Zazzie's day starts at the McKinley County Extension Office, top left, which houses Tribal Extension. After a few quick calls and emails, Zazzie hits the road. She first stops along Sundance Coal Mine Road before heading to Churchrock, where she participates in a community event sponsored by Gallup Indian Health Service, top right. Later, she drives about an hour to a community called Benciti to meet with Marjorie Lantana, above.

Zazzie visits Wingate High School in Fort Wingate to conduct a 4-H meeting in Rolanda Morris's classroom, above. Zazzie ends her day by attending the 104th Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial parade with her family and Extension colleagues, left.

Will Jaremko-Wright

OUTDOOR ENTHUSIAST

PHOTO ESSAY BY JOSH BACHMAN

As the lone Extension agent in an area known for its dramatic mountain ranges, high plateaus and deep river gorges, Will Jaremko-Wright sees it as his mission to preserve, support and advance the agricultural practices that have shaped Taos County for centuries.

“My job is to work alongside producers, landowners, community partners and youth to provide research-based education that strengthens agriculture, conserves natural resources, supports healthy communities and preserves the traditions that make Taos County an extraordinary place to live and work,” said Jaremko-Wright, who joined NMSU’s Cooperative Extension Service in 2023.

Jaremko-Wright has since become a go-to resource for most things related to small-scale agriculture and natural resource management. He often fields calls or visits from community members who have questions about soil health, noxious weeds, fruit trees, land stewardship, home gardening, livestock, economic development and many other areas. He regularly conducts site visits across the county to troubleshoot complex issues, and he works closely with youth, tribal communities and the local government. Here’s what a work day looks like for Jaremko-Wright.



When he’s not working in the office, Will Jaremko-Wright visits community members across Taos County to answer their questions on anything related to agriculture.



Jaremko-Wright begins a summer day by driving to Sunshine Valley to meet Bill Carda, left, who wanted advice on clearing his land of vegetation before building a home.



Jaremko-Wright meets Lauren Trujillo, above, on her land in Sunshine Valley before heading back to Taos to check up on his beloved sheep. He then spends his afternoon with Phil Qubain, right, who has grown an outdoor oasis at his home.



Later that evening, Jaremko-Wright attends at 4-H meeting at the Taos County Extension Office. The 4-H students presided over the meeting, but Jaremko-Wright led a few group activities designed to promote teamwork and build communications skills.

The NMSU Cooperative Extension Service is using artificial intelligence to help make knowledge more accessible to New Mexico residents.

FAST FORWARD

Extension uses AI to update 4-H curricula and create chatbots

BY TIFFANY ACOSTA

Sharing expertise with New Mexicans has always been at the heart of the NMSU Cooperative Extension Service mission. And thanks to innovative technology, artificial intelligence is helping an Extension team provide another way to make knowledge accessible.

Through a grant from NMSU's Institute for Applied Practice in AI and Machine Learning, an Extension team has not only updated 4-H curricula for three topics but also developed data for future chatbots.

The project, "Empowering Extension and 4-H Through AI: Curriculum Innovation and Conversational Tools for the Future," brought together a multidisciplinary team that included Jaime Castillo, 4-H Youth Development department head; Matheus Cezarotto, Educational Technology Extension specialist with Innovative Media Research and Extension; Marcus Krohn, ACES Information Technology manager; Carlos Herrera, ACES IT software developer; Emily Harris, ACES IT senior multi-

Marcus Krohn, left, and Matheus Cezarotto were part of an Extension team that used artificial intelligence to update components of NMSU's 4-H curriculum and develop data for Extension chatbots.



Josh Bachman

media specialist; Cathryn Bell, Extension student intern; Tamara Schubert, Chaves County Extension program director; Paige Miles, Santa Fe County Extension associate; and Jamie Fassett, Socorro County Extension 4-H agent.

“As an Extension education technology specialist, I am always trying to be a part of what’s happening in terms of technology,” Cezarotto said. “AI, we cannot deny. It’s here. It’s happening right now, so how can we support Extension agents and specialists using the technology?”

After consulting with county 4-H agents, the team decided to update the 4-H curriculum for braiding, weightlifting and the beef project.

“We don’t want to just create the curriculum with AI, but we want to make sure we have a peer-review process where experts review the content after AI produces the materials,” Cezarotto said. “That’s why we ended up with those specific topics, because the agents that were working with us had the content expertise, and we can have that level of review as we build the modules.”

As a result of the team’s dedication, new curriculum materials were updated to include a textbook and workbook for learners, along with lesson plans and slide-deck presentations for instructors. The new curricula were offered to 4-H clubs over the summer and were used for the first time this fall.

“We got good feedback from the agents, but the youth, the target audience, is going to give us the best feedback,” Krohn said.

In addition to updating 4-H curricula, the Extension team prepared data for two AI tools, the Extension Foundation bot and NMSU Extension’s chatbot.



Josh Bachman

Cathryn Bell, an Extension student intern, worked on the team that updated NMSU’s 4-H curriculum.

“The source of the data is all based on Extension,” Cezarotto said. “It’s research-based and more trustworthy than if you go to other tools that are open in the market where they get information from everywhere.”

Projected to launch later this academic year, NMSU Extension’s chatbot is trained using data from NMSU researchers, faculty, staff and agents. Users will be able to ask the chatbot questions via the Extension homepage, extension.nmsu.edu, and receive answers from Extension experts.

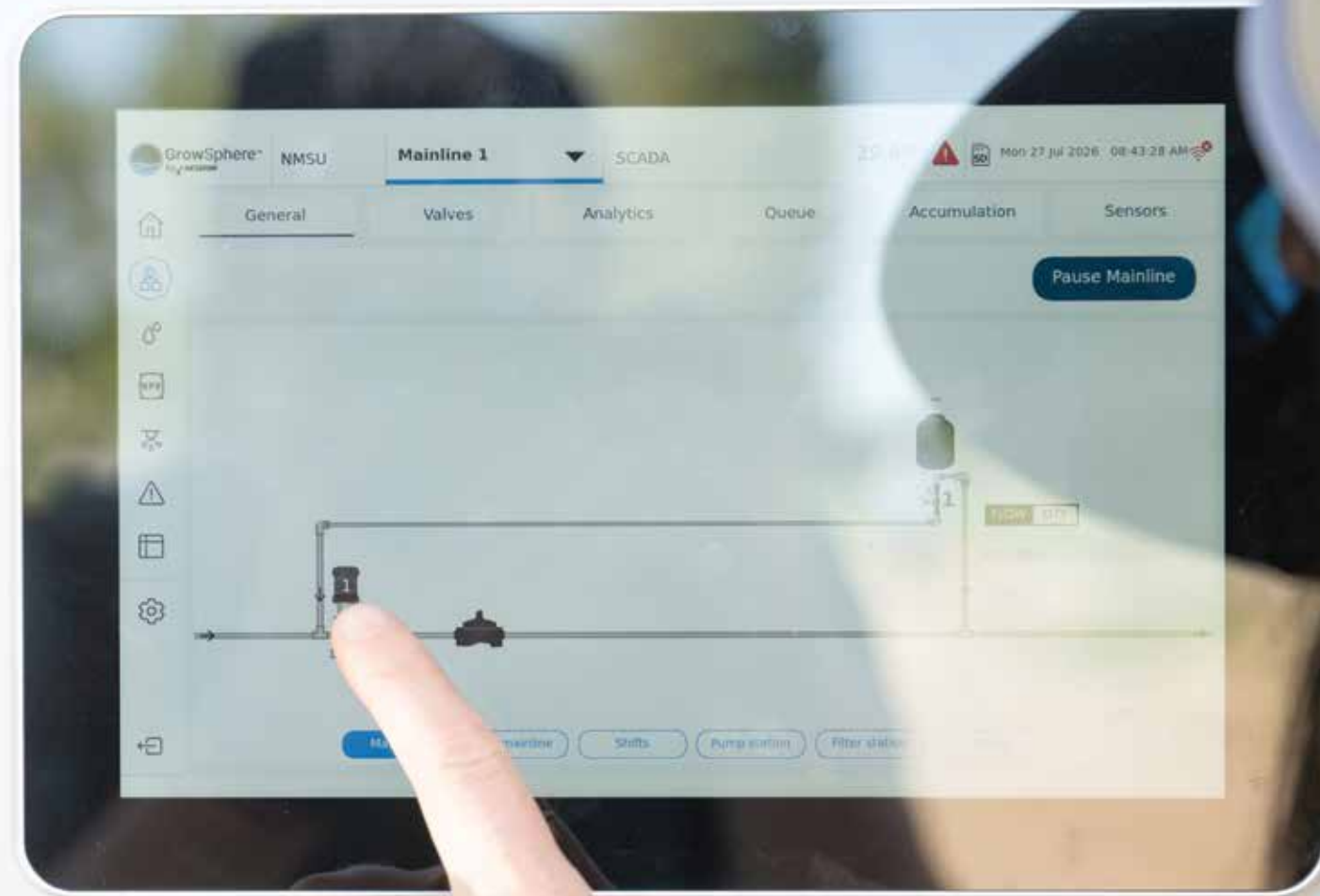
“It’s like a powerful assistant. It can answer some of those low-hanging-fruit questions. But there’s still that personal touch that’s involved,” Krohn said, adding, “If for some reason, they don’t like the response, or didn’t get the information they need, they hit thumbs down, or dislike, and it then routes to the Extension agent to an-

swer the question. The Extension agent can then reach out to that individual and tailor that response.”

Krohn and Cezarotto said one of the challenges of working with new technology like AI is the need to guarantee safety.

“Public trust is so important,” Krohn said. “If Google makes a mistake with their AI services, it’s over in the next news cycle. We don’t have that. We have to make sure 100% that everything is verified and truthful. One of the bigger things for me was making sure that everything we had was correct, factual and safe for the youth.”

Cezarotto added, “I understand how AI is so popular right now, and people see a lot of advantages to it, but as a researcher and critical thinker, I need to bring questions about what are the concerns that we have or what are the issues related to copyright and how much that impacts us.”



NMSU researchers are testing an irrigation scheduling method powered by artificial intelligence at Leyendecker Plant Science Research Center.

Josh Bachman

SMART WATER

NMSU researchers test AI-powered irrigation method

BY CARLOS ANDRES LÓPEZ

Israel Joukhadar has dedicated much of her career at NMSU to leading research that seeks to answer existential questions like “How do we grow more with less water?” and “How can we adapt to warmer temperatures?”

“The theme of my work is centered on actionable science for growers,” said Joukhadar, an assistant professor in NMSU’s Department of Plant and Environmental Sciences who studies areas like water-smart agriculture, agrivoltaics and greenhouse systems. “By testing solutions through rigorous, logical trials, my goal is to deliver clear, practical results that directly enhance productivity and profitability.”

In one of her latest projects, Joukhadar is working with an interdisciplinary research team to test artificial intelligence in a study of irrigation scheduling methods.

In arid regions like the Southwest, where water supplies are becoming scarce, highly efficient irrigation scheduling strategies can help crop growers optimize



From left, Gaurav Panwar, Christabel Wayllace, Israel Joukhadar and Isaac Medrano. The researchers are in their second year of a project testing irrigation scheduling methods, including one built with artificial intelligence.



From left, Joukhadar, Wayllace and Panwar discuss an artificial intelligence-based smart-irrigation methodology developed by NMSU graduate student Sarah Thomas. They are testing the AI system against three other irrigation scheduling methods.

their water use, Joukhadar said. Moreover, access to research-based irrigation scheduling methods would equip growers with the information they need to make precise decisions, she added.

But could an AI-powered irrigation scheduling method be more efficient than traditional methods? That's the question Joukhadar and her team are trying to answer.

"AI is reshaping agriculture on all fronts," she said, "and in this study, we want

to see if AI has any advantages when it is integrated into irrigation scheduling."

For the project, Computer Science faculty member Christabel Wayllace and her student Sarah Thomas developed an AI agent-based smart-irrigation methodology that uses reinforcement learning within a simulation environment that incorporates real-time volumetric soil moisture and meteorological data. Reinforcement learning is a branch of AI in which an

agent learns to make decisions by taking actions in an environment to maximize cumulative reward. Computer Science faculty member Gaurav Panwar, meanwhile, led the project's privacy and security efforts, focusing on protecting users' data and privacy by incorporating privacy-preserving machine learning frameworks and implementing cybersecurity best practices for data collection and processing systems.

The team is testing the AI system against three other irrigation scheduling methods at NMSU's Leyendecker Plant Science Research Center. The other methods include a soil sensor-based system that uses volumetric soil moisture, soil water potential and meteorological data; a commercial scheduling platform that uses real-time meteorological data; and the feel-and-appearance method, which uses human-based hand soil moisture measurements.

"The goal of this study is to evaluate different irrigation scheduling methodologies," Joukhadar said. "The specific objective is to quantify the impact of these four irrigation scheduling methods on the water use efficiency, physiological and vegetative biomass response of winter wheat cultivated as a cover crop."

Joukhadar and the team conducted the study's first trial with winter wheat over the fall 2025 semester. For each irrigation method, the team measured applied water, water use efficiency, chlorophyll content, stomatal conductance, normalized different vegetation index, plant and root growth, and yield.

Preliminary observational results showed that physiological and growth indicators remained relatively uniform across all methods during the early establishment phase. However, each method applied different total irrigation volumes. The soil sensor-based system was the most water-efficient, while the commercial scheduling platform was the least efficient. The AI system, meanwhile, fell somewhere in between.

"As this research is currently ongoing, yield will be harvested and response variables quantified to identify the method that achieves target biomass with the lowest water input," Joukhadar said. "Results will



The team conducted the study's second trial with winter wheat over the fall 2026 semester and plans to continue collecting data through 2027.

provide essential guidance for regional resource conservation in arid regions."

The researchers attempted a second trial with chile peppers over the spring 2026 semester, but soil conditions and unseasonable weather hampered their efforts. Still, the team began conducting another trial with winter wheat this fall and plans to continue collecting data through 2027.

Although it's too soon to reach a definitive conclusion about AI and irrigation scheduling methods, Joukhadar is all but certain that such systems will play a role in agriculture in the not-too-distant future.

"This technology is here, and it promises a lot of benefits, but we want to make sure it can work for growers," she said.





END *of an* ERA

Rolando A. Flores Galarza bids farewell to NMSU

BY CARLOS ANDRES LÓPEZ

From the moment he stepped into Gerald Thomas Hall on his first day as dean of the College of ACES in 2016, Rolando A. Flores Galarza knew NMSU would capture a special place in his heart and mind.

A decade later, he has greater admiration for NMSU after capping off a career that spanned more than 50 years.

“It’s not easy stepping into these leadership roles,” said Flores Galarza, who retired in August 2026. “But when I arrived, I found a welcoming community of faculty, staff and students willing to help me start a new chapter for the College of ACES. We worked together in classrooms, labs and fields across New Mexico to improve lives through education and outreach; we elevated NMSU through cutting-edge research; and we weathered some challenging times to build a stronger college. I am truly thankful for my time as an Aggie.”

A native of Costa Rica and the first in his family to attend college, Flores Galarza built a career across multiple continents in food science, agricultural engineering and academic leadership. He earned a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering from the Universidad de Costa Rica, a master’s degree in agricultural engineering from Iowa State University, and a Ph.D. in grain science and industry, with an emphasis in international trade, from Kansas State University.

Early in his career, he held several positions with Costa Rica’s National Production Bureau and later worked as a research food technologist and research agricultural engineer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Research Service.

Before arriving at NMSU, he served as a professor and head of the Department of Food Science and Technology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he also directed the university’s Food Processing



Above: Flores Galarza speaks at a 2021 field day event at NMSU's Clayton Livestock Research Center. Below: Flores Galarza drives along University Avenue as part of NMSU's 2024 homecoming parade.

Center, a long-running outreach program supporting value-added food and agricultural industries. He has also held faculty and research positions at Kansas State University and Iowa State University.

Flores Galarza said he was drawn to NMSU because of its prime location in the Southwest. With a sprawling agricultural district on the Las Cruces campus and Extension offices and agricultural science centers across New Mexico, he knew the

College of ACES needed to become a leader in water conservation and sustainability as well as value-added agriculture. He felt certain he was the right leader for the job.

He spent his early days as dean analyzing and finding ways to improve the college's existing operations and systems. Working with a committee, he developed a strategic plan that introduced four focus areas, known as the ACES Pillars. These areas – food and fiber production and mar-

keting, water use and conservation, family development and health of New Mexicans, and environmental stewardship – drive the college's mission to serve as an engine for economic and community development in New Mexico.

"Our strategic plan was a very important document – not only because it was fundamental to our college's success, but because it stood to impact every New Mexico resident," he said.

By 2019, the college had established the Center of Excellence in Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems, an interdisciplinary research institute dedicated to improving New Mexico's agricultural economy through innovative research that supports value-added agriculture – one of Flores Galarza's top priorities. CESFAS faculty have since generated more than \$49 million in competitive proposal activity and secured more than \$7 million in external funding, while providing hands-on training for students and fostering strong partnerships with industry and community stakeholders.

Flores Galarza was well into his tenure at NMSU and making strides in building a more robust college when COVID-19 arrived in 2020. Like other colleges and departments, ACES quickly pivoted to remote learning and work but also established public Wi-Fi connections at every Extension office and agricultural science center in New Mexico's 33 counties, providing free internet access to students and communities during a critical time.

"It was an unpredictable time," Flores Galarza said. "We couldn't have gone through all of that without working as a team. Our mission guided us, and we were able to seamlessly support our students while continuing our service to New Mexico."



Flores Galarza, pictured at NMSU's Fabián García Research Center in Las Cruces, served as the dean of the College of ACES from 2016 to 2026.

A stronger, more resilient ACES emerged after the pandemic. In 2023, Flores Galarza led the opening of new agricultural buildings on the Las Cruces campus, a landscape-altering project that gave faculty and students ample space to conduct high-impact agricultural research.

ACES research expenditures in fiscal year 2025 were associated with direct employment impacts of more than 500 jobs, labor income of more than \$37 million, and value-added (contribution to state gross domestic product) of more than \$45 million. When considering upstream impacts, ACES research supported more than 647 jobs, \$45

million in labor income, and \$61 million in contributions to the state's GDP.

Months before his retirement, Flores Galarza heralded one of his final initiatives – a pathway program connecting students from Doña Ana Community College to the College of ACES. He and Mónica Torres, chancellor of NMSU's community colleges, worked with teams at both institutions for more than a year to develop the program, which makes it easier for students to transition from DACC to ACES to earn four-year degrees in agricultural fields.

In his retirement, Flores Galarza plans to slow down, reinvent himself and spend

time with family – all while maintaining close ties to NMSU. He works as a part-time emeritus dean, lending a hand in areas like CESFAS, leadership programs, borderland and ethnic studies, and select projects in the College of Engineering.

He looks back at the past decade as one of great consequence – not only for him but for ACES and New Mexico.

"I am proud of the work we accomplished together," he said. "I could not have done it alone. I am grateful to everyone – staff, faculty, students, alumni and stakeholders – who helped make ACES the best college at NMSU."

BUILDING *BUZZ*

Entomology student follows childhood curiosity in insects

BY TATIANA FAVELA

Alexis Olmos's fascination with insects didn't begin in a laboratory – it started in a backyard.

“Having hardworking parents meant spending a lot of time in both of my grandmas' backyards,” Olmos said. “Having access to some of the smallest visible creatures on earth, along with hopeful attempts at growing plants in our small yard, made me comfortable in that environment.”

Those outdoor moments sparked a curiosity that led Olmos to NMSU's Department of Entomology, Plant Pathology and Weed Science, where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in agricultural biology with a concentration in entomology.

“I believe my inspiration came from the empathy and curiosity that playing outside as a child sparked within me,” she said. “I love working with new arthropods and people, and through my field, I have met a community of incredibly knowledgeable and kind individuals.”

Olmos's sense of discovery has taken her far beyond her childhood backyards. As an undergraduate student, she has contributed to a wide range of research projects and has gained a wealth of experience in the scientific process. She has maintained field crops,



NMSU student Alexis Olmos has worked on a wide range of research projects while pursuing a bachelor's degree in agricultural biology with a concentration in entomology.

collected mosquitoes that spread arboviruses, worked with invasive fire ants and aphids, and even raised maggots in a laboratory.

She credits the mentors and colleagues she's met at NMSU for fueling her passion and encouraging her to explore the many facets of entomology.

“It feels good to see the hard work in the hot field and the mundane tasks in the lab pay off,” she said. “Knowing that I helped someone enough that they credit me on their work has been incredibly fulfilling.”

These learning experiences have opened unexpected doors. Olmos has

presented her own research at the Livestock Insect Workers Conference, competed in the Entomology Games at the Entomological Society of America's regional conference, was selected as vice chair of the ESA Student Committee and even had her work cited by the Tennessee Cattlemen's Association.

Outside the classroom and laboratory, Olmos found leadership opportunities within the College of ACES. She has served as president of the Entomology Club and vice president of both the Horticulture Forum and Sigma Alpha.

“The one constant I found in being part of each officer board was the joy it can bring to contribute to something bigger than yourself by showing up, putting yourself out there and doing the work,” she said.

Olmos said those leadership experiences helped her discover a passion for community outreach. Whether bringing insects into schools to answer students' questions or educating community members about plants, Olmos said she enjoys making science approachable and engaging.

After graduating from NMSU, Olmos plans to complete a Ph.D. program before pursuing a career as an entomologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture or as an agricultural specialist with U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Ultimately, she hopes to continue her research while advancing outreach programs that support regenerative agriculture and innovative approaches to veterinary entomology.

For Olmos, the smallest creatures have led to some of the biggest opportunities – and a future dedicated to helping agriculture thrive.



Olmos hopes to start a career as an entomologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture or as an agricultural specialist with U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

NMSU alumnus Anthony Bellotti was a celebrated humanitarian and entomologist who dedicated his life to improving nutrition, health and agricultural sustainability across the world.

2010 CIA/T. Neil Palmer

HUMANITARIAN at heart

Acclaimed entomologist dedicated career to improving agriculture around the world

BY JEANNE GLEASON AND AMY SMITH MUISE

Globally acclaimed as a preeminent cassava entomologist and a dedicated humanitarian, Anthony “Tony” Charles Bellotti dedicated his life to improving the nutrition, health and agricultural sustainability of the world’s populace.

Knowing that many in the developing world rely on the cassava root as a major source of nutrition, Bellotti worked tirelessly to develop inexpensive, non-chemical biological control methods for pests of cassava to help protect people from food shortages.

After earning an associate degree from Long Island Agricultural and Technical Institute State University of New York, Bellotti worked three years as a bacteriology technician for Baxter Labs. But his lifelong passion was service to humanity. Soon after the U.S. Peace Corps was established, he was among its first volunteers. He served in El Salvador for two years, teaching farmers how to control diseases and boost productivity of their crops.

Bellotti returned to the United States to study agricultural biology at NMSU, then rejoined the Peace Corps as assistant director for Paraguay, supervising about 150 volunteers. At the same time, he served as the technical backstop for Paraguay’s Agricultural Extension Service.

With support from the Rockefeller Foundation, he initiated an in-depth investigation of the pests ravaging the cassava root, also called manioc or yucca. Cassava had been called an “orphan crop” because of how few in the research community paid attention to it.

In 1970, Bellotti and a research team at Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical discovered that by spraying a purée of virus-infected hornworms, they could drastically reduce the damage to cassava from hornworm larvae and similar agri-



Bellotti, left, worked to develop inexpensive, non-chemical biological control methods for pests of cassava to help protect people from food shortages.

cultural pests. The treatment proved both inexpensive and highly effective.

Later, Bellotti worked on projects to control the cassava green mite, *Mononychellus tanajoa*, and the cassava mealybug, *Phenacoccus manihoti*, using natural predators. Mealybugs attack both leaves and roots of cassava, infesting and stunting entire fields of cassava. Despite intensive efforts, entomologist Hans Herren had been unable to locate their natural enemy, *Apoanagyrus lopezi*. So, he asked Bellotti, a friend, to keep a lookout.

While visiting Paraguay, Bellotti found a specimen infested with the parasitic wasp Herren had been searching for. Nine countries in Sub-Saharan Africa introduced it, and the wasps proved to be highly effective at finding and killing cassava mealybugs.

Bellotti was soon known around the world as a revered advocate of cassava production and a leading authority for con-

trolling insects on this crop that sustained millions of the world’s poorest populations.

Bellotti worked at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture near Cali, Colombia, for more than 40 years, serving as the director of the Cassava Entomology Research Program and the coordinator of major international projects. He mentored scientists and consulted on projects in South America, China, Vietnam and 30 African countries. NMSU named him an Outstanding Alumnus in 1988.

Bellotti’s work has resulted in more than 300 scientific publications, book chapters and proceedings of symposia and workshops. His legacy lives on in the hundreds of Peace Corps volunteers he trained and in the millions of people around the world growing healthy cassava.

For more ACES Hero stories, visit aces-heroes.nmsu.edu.

Ivan Saenz

Food truck owner gives back to NMSU and Las Cruces

BY CARLOS ANDRES LÓPEZ

You can't miss Ivan Saenz's food truck. The refurbished 1963 Ford catering van sports a technicolor exterior painted with two massive luchadores who stare down customers queuing for Saenz's signature tacos, burgers, and sandwiches inspired by his Mexican roots.

Saenz, a 2008 graduate of NMSU's School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management, has operated Luchador in Las Cruces with his family since 2013. He was one of the first restaurateurs in the city to embrace the food-truck boom that took off during the 2010s.

"Thirteen years ago, food trucks here in Las Cruces were not really a thing," he said.

Following his instincts, Saenz put everything he had in starting a food truck that specialized in the unfussy, authentic foods he'd enjoyed on his visits to Mexico, the kind of mouth-watering fare (think tacos and tortas) prepared in front of crowds on every street corner. He was confident his background working in restaurants and hotels in Las Cruces and El Paso would

help him navigate the world as a small business owner, as would the skills he picked up as an NMSU student. Still, running his own food truck came with a steep learning curve, he said.

"Some of the best meals that I've ever had were in a taco stand or a burger stand somewhere in Mexico," he said. "We wanted to bring that experience to Las Cruces through Luchador. It took us some time to really find our groove, but we eventually got there."

Luchador has since gained a loyal customer base that follows whenever it goes, whether that's the twice weekly Las Cruces Farmers and Crafts Market or pop-up events throughout the community. Saenz also caters special events of all sizes and regularly provides free meals for unhoused individuals at Community of Hope.

Even amid his busy work life, Saenz still finds the time to keep close ties to HRTM and NMSU. In 2025, he participated in HRTM's 575 Food Fights, a culinary battle that brings together professional and



amateur chefs who try to out-cook one another using secret ingredients. Saenz won the competition but admits it was much more challenging than he anticipated. Each spring and fall, he supports the pledge drives hosted by KRWG Public Media, appearing as an on-air special guest who encourages listeners to donate funds to the station. He is also a regular guest at HRTM's International Dinner series.

"I'm really grateful for NMSU and all the things that it has done for us," he said, adding, "My community is the reason why we got to where we are, so it just makes sense for me to give back as much as possible."

Sunshine Tso

ACES alumna works to engage Native youth in agriculture

BY CARLOS ANDRES LÓPEZ

Sunshine Tso comes from a long lineage of Navajo ranchers and farmers. Some of her fondest memories include watching her grandparents grow and harvest fresh produce and herding sheep with her cousins. She also formed lasting friendships through 4-H and FFA. Those early connections to land and community have since shaped almost every aspect of Tso's life.

Tso knew she wanted to pursue a college education that tied agriculture to community development, and that led her to NMSU. As a student, Tso immersed herself in campus life and student organizations like Collegiate 4-H, Native American Business Student Association, United Native American Organization and Kappa Delta Chi, NMSU's only multicultural sorority.

But Tso's involvement in Indian Resources Development, known as IRD, was the most pivotal part of her time at NMSU. As a summer camp counselor, student assistant and graduate assistant, Tso helped drive IRD's mission to provide educational

and professional development opportunities to Native American students in high school and college. This allowed her to see how agriculture, education and service could come together in a future career. She said her mentors, Claudia Trueblood and Cherilyn Atcitty, the former and current directors of IRD, as well as Shannon Norris-Parish were especially supportive throughout her college years.

"NMSU invested in me through their faculty and programs, and now that I have the opportunity to invest in the next generation of Native students by helping them discover their careers in agriculture and higher education," Tso said. "It's honestly one of the most rewarding parts of my career. It's a full-circle moment – because I was once that little girl who loved agriculture so much that I pursued it as a career."

Tso earned a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics and agricultural business in 2022 and later completed a master's degree in agricultural and extension education in 2025. She currently works as a youth program specialist at the Intertribal



Agriculture Council, where she coordinates national youth programming and connects Native youth with internships, higher education and agricultural careers.

Since moving back to Farmington to be closer to her family and tribe, Tso has started working closely with tribal leaders and partner organizations to help Native youth navigate the challenges of pursuing higher education and agricultural careers while maintaining their cultural identity. She also plans to pursue a Ph.D. in the future.

"It's really an honor to do what I do now," Tso said, "and I hope that in the future, I can be a mentor to anyone else and any Native youth who come to NMSU."

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