K-State moves forward in establishing teaching, research farm near Alton

Projects keep alive the legacy of Lonsinger family

K-State Research and Extension news service

ALTON, Kan. – The legacy of a Kansas farmer who had a passion for raising cattle and crops while preserving the health of the land is being carried forward in an effort to establish a research and teaching farm on his family’s property.

Harold Lonsinger and his wife, Olympia, originally purchased a small farm 30 miles east of Alton, Kansas, eventually expanding it to 2300 acres. In 2017, Harold initiated a process to donate the land to Kansas State University’s College of Agriculture to study ways to raise food in a sustainable manner.

Tragically, Harold Lonsinger died after getting caught in one of the state’s worst wildfires in 2021. Olympia previously had passed in 2009.

“Harold’s death was difficult for me,” said Spencer Casey, assistant director for K-State Research and Extension’s Agricultural Research Center in Hays. “We had spent a lot of time together talking about what he’d like to see done on the farm. I am so grateful I had the chance to work closely with him. It gave me the opportunity to really understand his vision.”

So far, K-State and others have laid the foundation for a teaching and research farm. Some of the work to date includes:

- Creating a new entrance to the headquarters.
- Renovating five buildings, including one that can be used for a large field day, FFA or 4-H presentations.
- Adding electricity, lighting and internet service.
- Replacing fencing.
- Getting permits.
- Preparing the farm for the work of researchers.
Craig Poore, the Osborne County 4-H leader and past chair and former board member of the United Sorghum Checkoff, said he’s excited by opportunities to help children better understand farming practices.

“I would love to see 4-H and FFA groups, ag education and entomology classes come to the farm to dig in the ground and learn more,” he said. “It would be a great opportunity.”

Dan Sullins, an assistant professor in K-State’s Department of Horticulture and Natural Resources, has begun a wildlife survey on the property.

“Wildlife is disappearing around the world as more and more wildlife habitats are turned into cities, towns and farmland,” Sullins said. “Biodiversity is the foundation of life on Earth. Every species plays a critical role. Our ultimate goal is to better understand how we as humans can share the planet with other species who live here.”

Sullins said more than 700 million grassland birds have been lost since the 1970s, and 74% of grassland species has shown a population decline. The Lonsinger farm survey will provide a baseline of wildlife living on the farm, he said.

In another current project, Allison Louthan, a K-State assistant professor of biology, is learning more about interactions between native and non-native plants on the property.

Using shelters to control the moisture levels that plants experience, scientists can determine which native and non-native plants grow best in different climates. Louthan said the project includes adding seeds of native plants to invaded areas to see if native species can grow there again.

“As temperatures become hotter and we struggle with drought, we need to learn more about which plants grow best in those climates,” she said.

There are more projects in the works, and Casey believes Harold Lonsinger would be proud of the progress and direction the farm has taken.

“As we continue to make modifications and improvements to the property, I often think back to conversations with Harold Lonsinger,” he said. “I try and direct our effort around his vision. In my mind, we have a big obligation to Harold and Olympia to do things right, and we’re committed to doing just that.”

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K-State Research and Extension is a short name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, a program designed to generate and distribute useful knowledge for the wellbeing of Kansans. Supported by county, state, federal and private funds, the program has county extension offices, experiment fields, area extension offices and regional research centers statewide. Its headquarters is on the K-State campus in Manhattan. For more information, visit www.ksre.ksu.edu. K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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