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Stephens settling in as new FSA county executive director

By Don Wilkins Messenger-Inquirer
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Jared Stephens, county executive director for the USDA's Farm Service Agency, stands Tuesday outside the Daviess County office at 3100 Alvey Park Drive West. Stephens, who took over the job in May, also oversees the FSA office in Hancock County.

By Don Wilkins/Messenger-Inquirer

Since taking over the position as the new county executive director for the USDA's Farm Service Agency, Jared Stephens has made it his mission to get to know the farmers of Hancock and Daviess counties.

Stephens, who grew up in Pellville, said he's more than familiar with many Hancock County growers there but it's the farmers and landowners in Daviess County with whom he's seeking to form a relationship.

"With me just starting here in May, I know a lot of the Hancock County ones but here in Daviess County, I know some," Stephens said. "We have some who farm in Hancock and Daviess."

Stephens also has a background in farming.

He helped his father raise tobacco and cattle, instilling values that prepared him for his job with the FSA.

"Growing up on a farm, you learn hard work," Stephens said. "Dad's rule was always work on his place first and once we got done, if other neighbors or farmers needed my help or wanted to hire me, I was free to go."

Stephens, 39, majored in agriculture at Western Kentucky University, and, after graduation, was hired in 2005 at Ohio County's FSA office as a program technician.

According to the FSA's website, it "serves all farmers, ranchers and agricultural partners through the delivery of effective, efficient agricultural programs."

In 2014, Hancock County became part of the USDA's shared management initiative and placed under the Daviess County's county executive director purview. And that time, Dan Styke was the CED.

In September 2014, Stephens transferred to the Daviess and Hancock offices where he worked under Styke until he retired in April.

Stephens said the FSA offers multiple programs that aid farmers financially if they lose crops or livestock, which could be devastating to a farm.

"It's probably not going to be 100% (covered)," Stephens said. "But we're here to offer help. ... Depending on the situation, a lot of times we're a lifeline for the farmers."

Along with programs to help farmers recover losses, the FSA also works with both growers and landowners with land conservation programs.

For example, the Conservation Reserve Program provides a yearly rental payment to farmers or landowners who agree to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that will improve environmental health and quality. Contracts for land enrolled in CRP are from 10 to 15 years in length.

"Cropland to us is anything that has clear land," Stephens said. "It can be a pasture field; it can be a field that you bush hog ... and to be eligible for any of our programs, you have to have your whole farm reported."

The FSA also works in tandem with a county committee, which helps in settling complaints and determining program eligibility. The county committee consists of an adviser and three elected members from what's called Local Administrative Areas (LAA).

Currently, LAA 2, which consists of all of Daviess County between Kentucky 54 East and Kentucky 81, is seeking nominations for its seat. The nomination deadline is Aug. 2 and must be postmarked or received by the same date.

If elected, it's a three-year term and it can term out after three separate terms.

Stephens said the FSA sends out the ballots to residents in that LAA 2 boundary area. The ballots are then to be mailed back to the FSA once a selection is made.

"We'd like to have at least two people on the ballot," he said.

The Daviess County FSA office is at 3100 Alvey Park Drive West and the Hancock County FSA office is at 240 Monroe St. in Hawesville.

Stephens said these first initial months as the CED have been productive and that he's looking forward to helping crop growers in any way that he can.

To me, it's a great honor and it's what I love to do," Stephens said. "...I want to be there for our farmers."

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