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## Suit threat spurs farmers to unite

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Poultry farmers in Arkansas and Oklahoma are joining forces to make sure they are represented in an expected lawsuit with the state of Oklahoma over poultry waste flowing into watersheds in that state.

The farmers have formed a group called Poultry Partners Inc., and while the group is just getting started, it represents the first time that a poultry-farming organization has won the support of the industry, Washington County Judge Jerry Hunton said. Hunton is a poultry grower and serves on the steering committee of the organization.

The farmers planned to meet at a church in Siloam Springs on Thursday evening to discuss their plan, but it was closed to the press, Hunton said. He was not sure how many farmers have joined.

Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson informed seven Arkansas-based poultry companies on March 9 that he planned to sue them over chicken litter being spread in the Illinois River watershed.

Janet Wilkerson, a spokesman for Decatur-based Peterson Farms Inc. who also speaks on behalf of the six other poultry firms on the issue, could not be reached to confirm that the companies support the creation of Poultry Partners.

Hunton said the companies have cooperated by agreeing to mail a letter soliciting new members for the organization to all of the companies' contract farmers.

He couldn't say why poultry companies support the group, other than the fact that the whole industry is under political pressure to deal with the poultry waste issue.

In 2001, the Tulsa Metropolitan Utility Authority sued six poultry companies and Decatur for phosphorus in creeks flowing in the Eucha-Spavinaw watershed, which includes part of western Benton County. Tulsa gets its drinking water from the watershed.

The companies and Decatur settled the lawsuit in 2003 for \$7.5 million. Under the agreement, poultry farmers had to reduce the amount of litter they spread on their land.

Many chicken farmers spread poultry litter from their chicken houses as fertilizer. But litter contains phosphorus, a nutrient that can contribute to algae bloom in rivers. Edmondson blames poultry litter runoff for the degradation of Oklahoma's scenic rivers, including the Illinois.

Edmondson sent a letter to poultry farmers March 3 encouraging them to join the Poultry Partners organization. The letter warned that negotiations with poultry companies could lead to a lawsuit. "It is

very important to us that the effort to make the companies responsible for good environmental practices, such as removing excess litter from the basin, does not impact adversely on individual poultry farmers," he wrote in the letter.

Edmondson's spokesman, Charlie Price, said the letter was not an indication that individual poultry farmers would be defendants in any suit Edmondson files. "Our lawsuit, if it gets that far, will be against companies," he said.

Other livestock and poultry producers in Arkansas have their own trade groups, such as the Arkansas Poultry Federation, which represents poultry companies, and the Arkansas Cattleman's Association.

While the Arkansas Farm Bureau counts poultry growers among its membership, until now the farmers have not had their own trade group.

Hunton said the group could be used in the future to pool resources for collective bargaining agreements for purposes like health insurance or purchasing supplies. He said he does not plan to use the organization "to engage in combat with the integrators [poultry companies]," he said.

The outcome of any future suit could force chicken farmers to again reduce the amount of poultry litter they spread on their land, which will increase their costs, said Susan Watkins, a poultry specialist at the University of Arkansas' agricultural extension.

Farmers will not only have to find a way to get rid of their poultry litter, but they will have to find a new way to fertilize their land, she said. "One thing, if you have always relied on that litter from your poultry operation as a fertilizer for your cattle operation, how will they replace that nutrient for their cattle operation?" she said.

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