**The Evolution of Tennessee’s Agricultural Crime Unit**

*Information compiled by ACU officers Millie Binkley and Mike Whaley*

The first permanent law enforcement positions of the Tennessee Department of Agriculture were created in 1980 under the State Veterinarian. Called the Livestock Enforcement Section, the original four officers went through the Tennessee Law Enforcement Training Academy and were commissioned in 1981.

In the early days, this group concentrated on animal disease issues including animal importation and brucellosis testing. Before long, the group’s expertise in tracing animals and their knowledge of the livestock industry proved invaluable in the recovery of stolen livestock. Their role eventually expanded to include assisting local law enforcement in investigating theft of livestock and farm equipment.

As this group became known within the Department, other divisions started requesting assistance when a law enforcement presence was needed. This included assisting the Regulatory Services staff with closing grocery stores that were not compliant with food safety requirements and inspecting feed mills and dairy farms.

Separately, when the Tennessee Division of Forestry transferred from the Department of Conservation to the Department of Agriculture in 1991, the Division included a Wildfire Arson Investigative Unit comprised of six investigators.

In 1999, it was decided to consolidate the Livestock Enforcement Section with the Wildfire Arson Investigative Unit and to cross train these officers in all areas of agricultural investigations. This was the start of the Agricultural Crime Unit (ACU). At this point, Tennessee was free of brucellosis and wildland arson was an ongoing issue. So, the Unit was initially under the Division of Forestry and concentrated primarily on wildland arson. In 2000, the ACU transferred to the Administration Division and officers were then able to prioritize cases without bias from any one Division.

In 2012, the ACU made investigative history in disproving a common theory about hay clinkers. A hay clinker is a glassy, irregularly shaped mass that was thought to be formed when hay spontaneously combusts. Unit investigators determined that hay clinkers could, in fact, be caused when hay is set on fire. This new theory was published in the 2013 Kirk’s Fire Investigation Manual and federal publications.

Also of note, 2016 was a particularly devastating year for wildland fires in Tennessee. Ongoing drought conditions statewide led to a spike in wildfires—those occurring accidentally and those that were deliberately set. The ACU investigated the Gatlinburg wildfires and identified suspects believed to have been responsible for starting the fire at Chimney Tops in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The wildfire burned approximately 10,000 acres of the park and 6-8,000 acres of surrounding land. Fourteen lives were lost, and some 2,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed. The ACU worked that case, and others, in partnership with other law enforcement agencies to prosecute those responsible for arson.

Today’s Agricultural Crime Unit is a team of commissioned law enforcement special agents who enforce state laws and regulations related to agriculture, forestry, animal health, and agribusinesses in Tennessee. The ACU is also the primary agency responsible for investigation of suspected wildland arson statewide. To accomplish this important work, the ACU collaborates with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies.

In 2025, the Agricultural Crime Unit celebrates 25 years of service to Tennessee and farmers and forestland owners across the state.

