

Water Center Hires New Director with Passion for Growing the Center's Reputation

The Water Center's story has unfolded slowly over the past 35 years in a tale of water-research excellence, befitting its title as a Center of Excellence on campus. Throughout its history, the Center has been dedicated to ensuring that our state's and nation's water resources and aquatic inhabitants are protected and preserved for the future.

Now, the Center looks forward to the direction its new director Jeff Schaeffer, former Branch Chief of the U.S. Geological Survey's Great Lakes Science Center's Coastal Ecosystems in Michigan, will take as he guides the Water Center's initiatives through his easy-going leadership style. Schaeffer was chosen after a yearlong, national search among qualified candidates who were experienced in water research and could envision the Center's future.

From its first director, V. Dean Adams—who led the Center's water quality lab to being recognized as “one of the finest in the country” according to an external review in 1987—to Dennis George—who further expanded the Center's reach and reputation for quality research—the Center has promoted environmental sustainability while continuing to sustain itself in the process. Since George's retirement around five years ago, the Center has been led by interim directors, including biology Associate Professor Justin Murdock, but has continuously grown in its externally funded research.

“I learned about the Water Center while visiting TTU for a seminar, and I was fascinated by the program, the people, and the focus areas,” Schaeffer said. “I saw research being conducted at TTU that was of great interest to me personally and professionally. But, it was meeting the people at TTU during the interview process that made me really want to come to Cookeville.

“In fact, it became more about the people I would be able to work with than the position.”

The Water Center is composed of seven full-time staff, ranging from an office manager to lab technicians, all with many years of experience in their roles.

Schaeffer also realizes the importance of the Center's long-standing history as a resource for quality water research and plans to continue to increase the Center's visibility among funding agencies and the local public.

“I want us to achieve national recognition as one of the best State-focused water centers in the nation,” Schaeffer said. “Having said that, we have an amazing diverse group of faculty who have the expertise and experience to work on water issues of national and international importance.

“The wicked water problems of our time will be solved only through interdisciplinary approaches, and the Water Center is the perfect way to facilitate them.”

Schaeffer was a Federal Biologist, but he says the most rewarding accomplishments came from his collaborations with the University of Michigan's School of Environment and Sustainability as an

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adjunct associate professor. In that role, he was able to work with students daily, and he hopes to continue that here at Tech by providing them with both learning and practical educational experiences.

Besides the Water Center faculty and staff and the opportunities to continue to work with students, Schaeffer was also drawn to the region and its rich culture and his appreciation for the environment in his move to the Water Center and Tennessee.

"I like Cookeville itself," Schaeffer said, "because it has a small-town charm, warmer weather than Michigan, and both barbecue and trout fishing close to campus."

That love for trout fishing has led him to lament over the lack of fishing opportunities he's had since coming to Tennessee.

"The transition from Michigan to Tennessee took a bit longer than I thought," Schaeffer said, "and during that time, certain faculty members tormented me constantly with texted photos of all the fish they were catching after class.

"I am so glad to finally be here so that this can be sorted out."

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