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Advisory Council, 3/19-20
Awards Banquet, 4/17

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On Campus & Beyond

CFWE celebrates graduates and families

Career Fair provides networking opportunities for students

Scholarship event recognizes philanthropy and student achievement

CFWE welcomes new students to campus

Visit our flickr site to view our photo gallery or cfwe.auburn.edu for more stories.
A message from
THE DEAN

I am pleased to share that the college launched a new degree program at the close of the 2023 semester. The part-time and recreation management degree program will provide outstanding career opportunities while serving the citizens and communities of our state and the country.

In these pages, you’ll also find stories that highlight the incredible work of our faculty, such as the cat predation research by Christopher LePczyk and Jean Fante-LePczyk that has sparked conversation across campus. We also pay tribute to the accomplishments of Daofei Zhang, associate dean of research, whose innovative research led to a new university funding recommendation to the Secretary of Agriculture and related federal agencies.

Established in 1905, the college serves the American people by fostering the growth and management of urban and community forests. Combining professionals, academia, citizens and government volunteers, the group is working to improve local communities’ health and well-being. As part of its responsibilities, the council formulates grant guidelines for the Urban and Community Forestry Grant program, aligning them with the action plan’s seven goals. Additionally, they recommend grant proposals to the Service for funding consideration.

“I have always wanted to be able to share my urban forestry knowledge and perspective to help others on this path who are new to the field. I am so excited that I am on the council now and will be able to make an impact on the urban forestry field that I love so much,” said Cole.

Cole, an alumnus of Alabama A&M University with a background in forest and natural resource management and a graduate of Auburn University with an interest in adult education, brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the council. At the CFWE, she serves as an academic administrator, providing guidance to forestry and natural resource majors. Additionally, Cole assists Alabama residents in Agriculture, Nature Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) chapter.

Cole’s role on the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council highlights the importance of the college’s urban and community forestry initiatives. Cole has also been recognized for her dedication to the advancement of missions and vision in the region and the country.

“Michelle and Beau are both passionate urban forestry stewards and we take great pride in serving the citizens and the country,” said Cole. “Our goal is to continue working towards our mission of making urban and community forestry accessible to everyone.”

Janaki R. R. Alavalapati, Emmett F. Thompson Dean

College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment

CWF NEWS • Fall 2023

Emmett F. Thompson Dean Janaki R. R. Alavalapati
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CFWE News is distributed to alumni and friends of the college. Inquiries and suggestions concerning the newsletter should be directed to the college’s Office of Communications and Marketing at the address below.

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Questions concerning the college’s development program, including annual and corporate giving, planned gifts and estate planning should be directed to the Office of Advancement at 600 Duncan Drive, Auburn, AL 36849. Inquiries may also be made to Healthcare Giving via email at vanessa@auburn.edu or by phone at 334-844-6319.

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Auburn University University
College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment

Leaders from the Alabama Farmers Federation, Auburn University and Alabama Extension convened for a meeting on September 29 at the J. Wayne Reaves Community Center in Montgomery. Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment, was present to represent the college.

During the meeting, Auburn provided updates on the college’s efforts to enhance the Deep River Population Study along with Green, an alumna of CFWE who serves as the commodity director at the Alabama Farmers Federation. The Deep River Population Study Committee, comprising 12 individuals, was established to find practical solutions to address farmers’ deer-related issues and challenges. This effort includes developing programs that target specific uses of venison, as existing regulations currently prohibit the processing of deer obtained under depredation permits.

During the meeting, attendees were encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas on how to better engage the state’s agriculture community. According to Matthew Durbin, Paul Patterson and Alavalapati, the assessment provided insights on the students’ engagement and identified opportunities for future collaboration.

Stakeholder leadership meeting fosters collaboration, enhances the agreement.

College of Forestry, Wildlife 
& Environment

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CFWE appoints timber investment expert Marc Walley as Weaver Professor

by Allison Kilgivsworth

Registered forester and timber investment expert Marc Walley has been named the Earl H. and Sandra H. Weaver Professor in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment. In this role, Walley will advance the college’s forestry teaching, research and scholarship.

Earl H. and Sandra H. Weaver established the professorship to recognize Auburn University’s commitment to academic excellence in forestry programs. The endowed position aids in supporting forestry teaching in the private sector, emphasizing expertise in forestry business and finance.

Walley’s duties will encompass teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, conducting seminars and symposia on diverse forestry-related subjects. After earning a bachelor’s degree in forestry from Auburn University, Walley joined Scott Paper Company in Mobile, Ala., contributing to its timberland management and strategic operations. In 1994, he joined the Paper Company and leadership of its campaign leadership team. In 2001, Walley was nominated and received the college’s Outstanding Alumni Award.

"Marc Walley’s appointment as the Weaver Professor marks a significant milestone for our college. His wealth of experience and leadership in the forestry industry aligns seamlessly with our commitment to academic excellence,” said Dean Jenaki Alavalapati.

“We are confident that his expertise will elevate our programs, providing students with unparalleled insights into the dynamic world of forestry.”

– Dean Alavalapati

CFWE wildlife student awarded Youth Conservationist of the Year by the Alabama Wildlife Federation

by Allison Kilgivsworth

Dawoei Zhang, the Alumni and George W. Peake Jr. Professor and associate dean of research in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment, has been honored as the recipient of Auburn’s 2023 Creative Research & Scholarship Award. Zhang has contributed to the forestry program at Auburn University since 1994, with research in forestry and interacting with graduate courses, coordinating research and teaching in the private sector.

The forestry program at Auburn University integrates cutting-edge theory and hands-on field practice, preparing the next generation of professionals with the knowledge and practical experience necessary for success in various career fields. For more information on Auburn University’s forestry degree program, visit cfwe.auburn.edu/forestry.

Zhang receives Auburn’s highest honor of research excellence

by Allison Kilgivsworth and Jessica Nelson

"What sets Dawoei apart is his unique skill in seamlessly integrating economic theory and methods, addressing crucial issues in forestry.”

– Joseph Godwin

Yenhua Li, an associate professor at the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources at the University of Georgia, appreciates the emphasis on problem-solving she learned from Zhang, but even more, she remembers his encouragement.

"I had received a rejection letter from a journal for my first research manuscript,” she said. “He said, ‘Put it aside for the moment. If the research idea is sound, just keep publishing it.’ His words have been a source of inspiration for me when facing research obstacles, giving me the courage to overcome them.”

As the award recipient, Zhang will represent the CFWE on the Creative Research & Scholarship Award Selection Committee, commencing in the 2024 program year. His portrait will be displayed alongside previous award recipients in Samford Hall. In his 29 years at Auburn, Zhang has received more than 60 awards and recognitions.
Preparing leaders for the growing recreation economy

by Jessica Nelson

The College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment is launching the state’s first parks and recreation management undergraduate degree program to prepare students to lead an industry that is increasingly recognized as vital to well-being, community growth and diversification.

“As access to parks, recreation facilities and programs has become more widely understood, the simple relaxation and de-stressing effects of being active and healthy, being outdoors is a vital component of human health, both mental and physical,” says Morse. “Not only the well-known benefits of being active and healthy, but also the simple relaxation and de-stressing effects. However, some communities have fewer opportunities for outdoor recreation, further widening the health differences between populations. So this was one of the themes we tried to build on, said Morse. “How can our program work to increase access to outdoor recreation?”

With coursework on health and access, students will address these issues specific to Alabama but applicable to many areas nationwide. One of the ways they will answer that question is the addition of a concentration in community park and recreation management, a unique feature among comparable programs.

Recreational opportunities are not only benefit to the individual, there are systemic, ripple effects for local communities, governments and society at large. In protecting a park, you’re protecting the ecosystem services that land provides,” Morse said. He points out that recreation also draws visitors, along with tourism dollars, and helps communities attract more employers and industries.

“Water quality, climate, biodiversity and social and cultural attributes are also provided as you visit sites like the Great Smoky Mountains National Park,” said Morse.

EXPANDING RECREATION INDUSTRY DRIVES OPPORTUNITY

Outdoor recreation is big business. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the outdoor recreation economy represented almost 2% of the total U.S. GDP in 2021. Local parks and recreation agencies supported more than 4.3 million jobs in 2018. From 2012 to 2022, the Alabama Department of Labor reported a 13.7% increase in the number of recreational workers’ jobs, which is projected to increase by 10% over the next ten years. With this growth in high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities, the state is anticipated to attract more high-tech and other industries to Alabama.

“We are making significant investments throughout our state parks, including improving campgrounds and adding mountain biking trails, kayaks launches and infrastructure. These enhancements are attracting new visitors and creating an increased need across the state for trained personnel to operate and manage these properties,” said Matthew Capps, deputy director of Alabama State Parks.

In recognition of the role of outdoor recreation in attracting new industries, the Innovative Alabama Commission recently established the Council on Outdoor Recreation to focus on expanding these opportunities statewide.

LIKE OTHER CFWE Majors, the curriculum will feature coursework on health and access. The new major will provide professional and workforce training to capitalize on this emerging field.

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“A list of this hands-on learning will be service based,” said Allie McCreary, assistant professor of parks and recreation. “Our students will be engaging with organisations in the community to create and implement programs that connect people in the region to recreational resources and opportunities.”

Auburn faculty Wayde Morse and Allie McCreary will lead the new parks and recreation management major in the college. Here they are shown at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center, an outreach facility at the college that will be a location for student internships and experiential learning.

“After graduation, students can look forward to plentiful career opportunities with local, state and federal agencies or private industry. Community parks and recreation professionals will manage facilities, run programming in local recreation centers, parks, trails and sports facilities, and plan public events like festivals, parades, farmers markets and races.”

Graduates of the nature-based concentration are prepared to help administer public and private recreation lands like state and national parks, forests, reserves and refuges, manage facilities like trails, campgrounds and visitor centers, and offer interpretation and adventure programs and guiding.

“Like other CFWE Majors, the curriculum will feature an immersive summer practicum experience that may be held at one of the college’s properties, such as the recently gifted Crooked Oaks, the former homestead of Auburn football coach Pat Dye. The practicum will expose students to outdoor skills like recreation activity programming and wilderness exploration, emphasizing program themes of health and accessibility. In addition to regular coursework, students will earn micro-credentials in subjects like wildlife, food, Leave No Trace, adventure guiding, trail building, interpretation and wilderness camping essentials and ropes courses. "These classes teach-hard skills, but they’re also about team-building," Morse said. "They are often the classes that students remember long after graduation.”

ONE DEGREE, TWO CAREER PATHS

Students beginning enrollment in the major for the spring 2023 semester will choose one of two tracks in the major, with a concentration in nature-based recreation or community-based recreation. After graduation, students can look forward to plentiful career opportunities with local, state and federal agencies or private industry. Community parks and recreation professionals will manage facilities, run programming in local recreation centers, parks, trails and sports facilities, and plan public events like festivals, parades, farmers markets and races.

“The college is uniquely prepared to provide students and employers a level of career preparedness unrivaled by other programs in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment, said Dean Alavalapati. “In recognition of the role of outdoor recreation in attracting new industries, the Innovative Alabama Commission recently established the Council on Outdoor Recreation to focus on expanding these opportunities statewide. In addition to regular coursework, students will earn micro-credentials in subjects like wildlife, food, Leave No Trace, adventure guiding, trail building, interpretation and wilderness camping essentials and ropes courses. These classes teach-hard skills, but they’re also about team-building,” Morse said. “They are often the classes that students remember long after graduation."

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“One of the things that distinguishes this program from similar majors at other regional universities is a focus on recreation access and human health, which are critical issues for Alabama and major topics in the field.”

– Wayde Morse

Auburn faculty Wayde Morse and Allie McCreary will lead the new parks and recreation management major in the college. Here they are shown at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center, an outreach facility at the college that will be a location for student internships and experiential learning.

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Forestry, Wildlife and Environment.
by Amy Burtch

Promoting solutions: Belsare's model drives management in deer
by Aniruddha Belsare

Several species going extinct.

population declines and responsible for significant "Cats are generalist predators consume. The research study, ranging house cats (Felis catus) on recently published in Nature predation on global biodiversity. The dietary breadth of free-ranging thus, we wanted to develop a model framework for the state. Belsare went on to develop a controllable and accessible modeling framework, OvCWD, that pro active or county could use to understand CWD threats and predict how the disease would spread in regional populations.

How Does Computer Modeling Work?
Ag Hedberg model is a relatively new approach that can be used for other disease systems, not just those related to CWD work? Belsare developed OvCWD, a mechanistic simulation model that generates a realistic artificial computer population of adult and juvenile free-ranging, white-tailed deer. Agent-based models are formulated using number of individuals, their behavior and their interactions to simulate population dynamics and community interactions. These models facilitate virtual experimentation that is difficult to perform in the real world. Thanks to a USDA grant this year, Belsare now has funding to focus on CWD surveillance in high-fenced breeding facilities in Texas. Hands-on Learning is Best.

This helps wildlife agencies since many will need to manage wildlife diseases even when information about those diseases is limited. Belsare’s Model Facilitates Decision-Making
Builds on early experience using adaptive resource management, meaning they make decisions based on current best available knowledge, and as that knowledge improves, they add it to the decision-making process to make better decisions. This is where Belsare believes he is contributing in. For CWD management, he provides a tool that uses the real-world conditions for regional deer populations to run the risk of disease from the simulations (then inform disease control strategies. Wild cats are stalking the down when the user plays with it, they then ask relevant questions and start thinking about adapting their local policies. "That’s when we get collaborative or participatory modeling," said Belsare. "I need agency personnel with mud on their hands and experience with working with deer populations — to interrogate and use the models."

Preventive Practice
Belsare’s goal is clear: he wants to convince agencies to take a proactive approach to get ahead of CWD. "Do we wait until we first detect CWD in your state — agencies must employ a perspective to prevent the establishment of CWD in their region," Belsare said. "This is where the model comes into play. We can design strategies to prevent or delay the establishment of the disease in regional deer populations."

Aniruddha Belsare

Valente awarded project to assess Alabama’s biodiversity
by Jessica Nelson

The Alabama Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) has awarded a contract to Auburn’s Department of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment for a five -year project to examine the effects of habitat management on wildlife communities using adaptive management models. The project builds on previous work funded by ADCNR for the first Inventory and Conservation Plan (ICP) for CWD on ADCNR lands between 2008 and 2010. The goal of the original project was to examine the habitat characteristics preferred by different species and wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). Most land in Alabama is privately owned and is protected as lands. As ecologists are staking out the ongoing global biodiversity crisis, the state continues taking action to ensure conservation efforts are as effective and efficient as possible. "We have to be fastidious about focusing the attention of the responsible parties in Alabama," said Jonathon Valente, an Auburn assistant research professor in the CFWE and an assistant unit leader for USGS’ Alabama Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, who will lead the multidisciplinary research team conducting the study. valente@auburn.edu

"It will go back to those state lands to evaluate how ecological landscapes have changed as a result of management, assess how wildlife communities are responding and evaluate outcomes." — Jonathon Valente

The research team includes experts from the project on Wildlife and other relevant partnerships, including Professors Michael Lutz, and Ben Via. Monitoring the effects of management activities often isn’t feasible because of the costs in terms of personnel restraints, Valente says. "I applaud ADCNR and their effort to monitor how their actions have played out and how they can better evaluate the impact of their management actions or change course where needed."

Dean Alavalapati

Auburn Mass Timber Collaborative to unite interdisciplinary faculty for research, education, outreach
by Kelley Young

The Auburn Mass Timber Collaborative is comprised of faculty from across disciplines in CADC, the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) and the Samuel Ginn College of Engineering. The organization will offer coursework, certificates and research initiatives for undergraduates, with the goal of ensuring all students in related areas of study are introduced to mass timber. Graduate students will have the opportunity to work with faculty to research mass timber production, performance, design and application, aiming to expand and accelerate the adoption of mass timber construction in the Southeast. In terms of outreach, the collaborative plans on offering workshops and conferences both on campus and regionally, as well as online learning resources. "We give the user experience-based knowledge, pertinent to mass timber professionals, taking a Southeastern forest-first approach to aligning the construction industry with local forests," said Jonathon Valente, an Auburn assistant professor in the CFWE and the College of Engineering's assistant unit leader for USGS’ Alabama Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, who will lead the multidisciplinary research team conducting the study. valente@auburn.edu

"I'm looking forward to seeing how my colleagues’ disciplines fit together," said Brian Via. "We start with forestry, where we provide expertise on wood as a material, followed by engineers, who ensure structural safety. Then architecture helps to make these structures more functional and appealing, and the end product is a mass timber material that appears in nonresidential construction in Alabama." — Brian Via

The CBWE study reveals impact of free-ranging cat predation on global diversity
by Albinas Kriukovas

Researchers in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment have conducted a follow-up study about the dietary breadth of free-ranging cats and the impact of their predation on global biodiversity. Recently published in Nature Communications, the study builds on the global mass timber supply chain. As the team members gear up to begin research operations, they have to start with basic research, engaging industry stakeholders and reviewing campus projects that have the potential to advance mass timber supply chain.

Auburn University’s Mass Timber Collaborative is already planning the 2024 CLT conference in Alabama. "I’m looking forward to seeing how my colleagues’ disciplines fit together," said Brian Via. "We start with forestry, where we provide expertise on wood as a material, followed by engineers, who ensure structural safety. Then architecture helps to make these structures more functional and appealing, and the end product is a mass timber material that appears in nonresidential construction in Alabama." — Brian Via

Auburn University’s Mass Timber Collaborative is already planning the 2024 CLT conference in Alabama. "I’m looking forward to seeing how my colleagues’ disciplines fit together," said Brian Via. "We start with forestry, where we provide expertise on wood as a material, followed by engineers, who ensure structural safety. Then architecture helps to make these structures more functional and appealing, and the end product is a mass timber material that appears in nonresidential construction in Alabama." — Brian Via
John Kush wins W. Kelly Mosely award

John Kush, a research fellow in the College of Forestry, Wildlife, and Environment (CFWE) was recently chosen to receive the W. Kelly Mosely Excellence in Forestry Achievement Award for his volunteer efforts to advance responsible natural resource stewardship in Alabama. Kush’s leadership in workshops and training volunteers on the importance and application of prescribed fire in forest management, native plant restoration and wildlife habitat creation have benefited Auburn University and extended to various areas across Alabama. The Mosely Award for achievement in Forestry, Wildlife, and Related Resources recognizes achievements that have resulted in the wider use of Alabama’s renewable natural resources.

Within his role in the CFWE, Kush pursues research related to forest stand dynamics, fire ecology and restoration ecology and teaches undergraduate and graduate classes related to these areas.

Kush was nominated by fellow CFWE employee Kelly Knowles.

“Through his work to enhance, develop and maintain demonstration areas at the Mary Olive Thomas Demonstration Forest and the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center, Kush has significantly bolstered the educational value of these natural properties, visited annually by thousands,” said Knowles.

For over three decades, the Mosely Environmental Awards Program has recognized “unsung heroes” who have substantially contributed to the responsible stewardship of Alabama’s natural resources, ecosystems and wildlife corridor systems and/or ensure the diversity and abundance of wild populations of animals and plants for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. The gift will support Gulaby’s research initiatives in support of selected wildlife communities within ecosystems in the eastern United States. The Top Family Foundation offers support for selected projects that as Barns and others have observed, is needed to update land management practices for the better management of land use.

Gulaby’s project will study the effects of winter mowing, mechanical soil disturbance, and different herbicides on understory plant communities in loblolly pine plantations throughout the Piedmont and Upper Coastal Plain of east Alabama and west Georgia and compare them to prescribed fire and to an untreated control plot. The researchers will compare results with published information on wildlife habitat preferences to estimate the suitability of each treatment for selected wildlife. For example, wild turkeys and white-tailed deer are economically important game species that drive land management decisions across the Southeastern landscape, whereas Bachman’s sparrow and prairie warblers are songbirds of conservation concern that require grassland communities preferred by a declining number of species.

“My ultimate objective is to get helpful information into the hands of land managers to benefit the landscape.” – Will Gulaby

“This gift from the Top Family Foundation furthers research that is needed to update land management practices for the better management of land use.” – Janaki Alavalapati, EEmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE.

Top Family Foundation gift will support Auburn University efforts to identify alternatives to prescribed fire

by Jessica Nelson

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Constitution recently commenced on a new environmental education building at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center (KPPC). Situated near the North College Street entrance to the nature preserve, the structure is designed to be a focal point for community education, offering a large engaging space for students and visitors to experience the wonder of nature. At the forefront of environmental education in the region, the KPPC annually welcomes tens of thousands of students of all ages to participate in a variety of programs. Featuring state-of-the-art technology resources and educational and interpretive displays, the new building will enable the KPPC to expand its diverse array of educational offerings, which include classes, workshops, events, programs and school field trips.

“We are extremely excited about the addition of the environmental education building to the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center,” said Michael Buckman, managing director of the KPPC.

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“We are extremely excited about the addition of the environmental education building to the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center,” said Michael Buckman, managing director of the KPPC. "For the first time, Kreher will have an interpretive hub for our visitors to explore and learn about the natural world. It will be a meeting place, a learning space and a gateway to the rest of the Kreher forest.”

Additionally, CLT panels exhibit strong thermal performance and fire resistance, enhancing both functionality and aesthetic appeal. “We are thrilled that we’ll have the ability to enhance the KPPC as a community asset,” said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment.

“The building’s integration with nature and enhanced features will undoubtedly contribute to the shared mission of fostering environmental stewardship for those of all ages.” – Dean Alavalapati

The Topp Family Foundation offered $750,000 to establish the Matthew Chadd Blankenship Endowed Scholarship in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE). The gift will support Gulsby’s research initiatives in support of selected wildlife communities within ecosystems in the eastern United States. The Top Family Foundation offers support for selected projects that as Barns and others have observed, is needed to update land management practices for the better management of land use.

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CFWE Alum, Chuck Sykes, elected president of the international Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

Adapted by Jessica Nelson

Chuck Sykes is an advisory council member in the CFWE and has been a public voice for sound wildlife management in Alabama for many years. With this appointment, Sykes will bring his extensive experience and passion for wildlife conservation and management to the national stage.

Chuck Sykes, Director of the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, and an Auburn University alum, was elected president of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, or AFWA, during its 113th Annual Meeting in Calgary, Canada.

At the meeting, Sykes expressed his gratitude and commitment to fish and wildlife conservation.

“His knowledge and experience will make him an excellent leader in the face of today’s challenges.”

– Dean Alavalarapati

Chuck Sykes has been the Director of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries at the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources since December 2012. An avid hunter since age six, Sykes earned a degree in wildlife management from CFWE and began his career as a hunting guide before graduating. Over the years, his career path has included management of commercial hunting lodges, founding a full-service natural resource consulting firm and the creation and hosting of a television show dedicated to wildlife management and habitat restoration.

The Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies represents North America’s fish and wildlife agencies to advance sound, science-based management and conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats in the public interest. In the organization’s 121-year history, Sykes is the fourth president to serve from the state of Alabama.

Sykes is committed to conservation, Alabama’s hunting heritage, and protecting our wildlife and related natural resources. Among his notable achievements has been the inclusion of new participants in hunting and fishing through the creation of Special Opportunity Areas and the Alabama Adult Mentored Hunting Program. He involves young people, non-hunters, men and women in sharing and promoting conservation efforts. Sykes has lived in the Montgomery area for over 20 years, is happily married to his wife Gigi, and is the proud father of Syd, a 12-year-old miniature Australian Shepherd. He also assists his father, Willie Sykes, with their family Charolais farm.

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ASSOCIATION OF FISH & WILDLIFE AGENCIES

Dobson alumni profile: Building a business with the CFWE’s FBI master’s program

by Allison Killingsworth

Meet Bobby Dobson, a 2023 graduate of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment’s Forest Business Investment master’s degree program and the owner of Taproot Investments.

A native of South Carolina, Bobby Dobson grew up on a farm raising thoroughbred horses and went to college intending to continue the family business. However, he found in college that he was more drawn to working with the land than livestock.

With this in mind, Dobson was inspired to earn a real estate license and became a broker, working with ranch real estate properties in Texas. Noticing an opportunity to restore properties his clients were passing over, Dobson formed Taproot Investments to purchase, improve and flip ranches.

Dobson credits his father-in-law, Phillip Hardee, a 1967 Auburn graduate, for his interest in timber. It resonated with his own background as well.

“He doesn’t believe in the stock market as much as he believes in things he can see and touch. And he’s always invested in timberland. I grew up in a family business that sees things through a long lens. Being able to be patient and seize opportunities when they arise spoke to me.”

Dobson and his wife, Caroleene, moved to Alabama to be closer to her family when they learned they were expecting their first child, and Dobson enrolled in an MBA program soon after. He worked on his first timberland deal right before he graduated from that program but had to rely heavily on his partner’s knowledge of timber valuation.

“I intended for Taproot Investments to become a vertically integrated timber company, owning the land, the logging and manufacturing,” said Dobson. “To achieve this vision for the company, I needed a program rooted in both business and the forest industry.”

After graduating, Dobson worked with forest management company Larson and McGowan for a time, and a colleague there showed him an Auburn brochure. Recognizing he had found a program suited to his goals, Dobson first enrolled in the Forest Finance and Investment graduate certificate program and then built upon this course credit to earn the Forest Business Investment (FBI) master’s degree. 

“The flexibility that this program had really made a difference. It’s extremely customizable, and you can adapt it according to your needs. The key is finding the right pace, even though there might be tough times, but if I can get through it, I believe anyone can.”

One of the key aspects of the program for Dobson was the convenience of the online format. He and his family live in a 18th-century farmhouse in Pine Apple, Ala., with their two young daughters. They both work from home offices, so flexibility was imperative.

“For anyone considering the program, I would say to be honest with yourself about the amount of time you have in terms of your course load and pacing. But you can make it into exactly what you want it to be.”

Through specialized programs like the CFWE’s forest business and investment program, forestry professionals can acquire essential business expertise, enhancing their ability to navigate the landscape of the forest industry successfully.

“I got everything I wanted out of it and more,” Dobson said. “The FBI program has accelerated the growth and direction of my business.” His five-to-ten-year plan has become a right-now plan, and the program highlighted growth areas he wouldn’t have known about otherwise.

“By the end, I felt as well-prepared to go out and build my business as anybody else. I learned at least a little about every part of the industry and how it is all interconnected.”

– Bobby Dobson