

# College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment



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CFWE NEWS • Summer 2024

## Working with Nature for Society's Well-Being

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- Dean's Receptions**
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  - Birmingham 1/21
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- Weaver Lecture 2/18

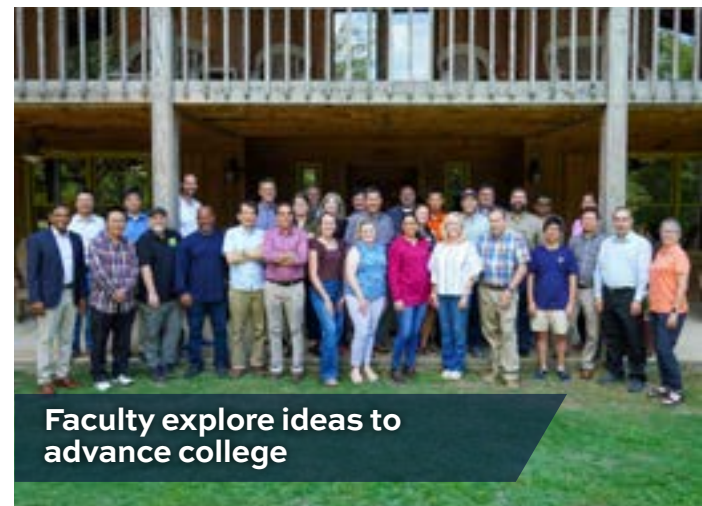
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Welcoming new students to campus



Faculty explore ideas to advance college

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Training the next generation



Taking Auburn's wildlife program to South Africa

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## THE DEAN



Though the campus is undoubtedly quieter during the summer semester, much is still being done within the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment to advance research, enhance student learning and deliver science-based solutions and opportunities through the college's Extension and outreach programs.

Within our feature titled "Experiential learning, the key to CFWE student success," we showcase the valuable hands-on learning taking place at the forestry and wildlife summer practicum held at the Solon and Martha Dixon Forestry Education Center, and within the college's Forest, Environment and Wildlife Leadership (FEWL) Academy.

In this issue, we'll also share details about a newly launched forest carbon sequestration project made possible with a grant from the U.S. Forest Service and the results of a human-wildlife interaction study conducted in partnership with the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center that reveals how citizens can play an important role in scientific research. We will also proudly share that our brown spot needle blight research took the international stage of the IUFRO World Congress in Sweden this summer, one of only twenty projects chosen to spotlight.

As you'll learn, many of our faculty and staff have been recognized this summer for their outstanding service and dedication on behalf of Auburn students, the community and CFWE's diverse stakeholders. Finally, we will celebrate our alumni's vital role in advancing their respective natural resource fields within the state and region.

I sincerely appreciate your support, which makes all these achievements possible.

War Eagle!

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

## Administration

### CFWE faculty member and former associate dean of research retires

By Jamie Anderson

Auburn University has announced the retirement of former Clinton-McClure Professor B. Graeme Lockaby, who served as the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) associate dean of research from 2003 to 2020 and interim dean from 2014 to 2015.

Lockaby is an expert in floodplain biogeochemistry and ecology, water quality and environmental health. While a faculty member, he taught graduate research methods and forest biogeochemistry.

During his 37-year service to Auburn University, Lockaby was recognized for several notable appointments, accomplishments and awards, including the EPA Gulf Guardian Science Award and the National Wetlands Science and Research Award from the Environmental Law Institute in Washington, D.C., in 2003. He was also honored with the W.H. Patrick Lectureship in Wetland Soils from the Soil Science Society of America in 2011.

As an administrator, Lockaby was recognized as the recipient of the President's Collaboration Award for his work related to the establishment of the Center for Forest Sustainability through Auburn's Peaks of Excellence Program, which later became known as the Center for Environmental Studies at the Urban-Rural Interface, of which he served as director until his retirement. Funds received by the center through the Peaks of Excellence program were leveraged to hire five new faculty members, which enabled what was then the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences to permanently expand and diversify within non-traditional disciplines such as geospatial sciences, watershed sciences and natural resources management.

Lockaby was also recognized in 2006 as an Outstanding Graduate Faculty Member by Auburn, having served as a major professor to 30 graduate students during his tenure,



Lockaby is shown at a recent competition with one of his prize-winning beagles.

including 12 doctoral students. As a researcher and scholar, Lockaby authored 121 refereed journal articles and eight book chapters and was awarded \$10.7 million in extramural funding.

He received his bachelor's and master's degrees in forestry from Clemson University and a doctorate in forest soils from Mississippi State University in 1981.

Awarded Professor Emeritus status by the university, Lockaby will retire to his home state of South Carolina.

*"We applaud Dr. Lockaby for his many years of service and contributions to Auburn University and the CFWE."*  
— Dean Alavalapati



Visit our website to view this story online.

## Academics & Learning

### Award-winning CFWE advisor making impact on campus, in community

By Kaitlin Stabler



Michelle Cole, an academic administrator for the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE), wasn't sure how long her career at Auburn University would last when she first started in 2005.

Growing up in Tallassee, Alabama, merely 40 minutes away from campus, she believes fate brought and kept her in Auburn after marrying and settling back in her hometown in 1997. Initially, she struggled to find her place here as one of the few minority academic professionals in the school.

"When I began working at Auburn, there was only one other Black woman here in the urban forestry field, Brenda Allen, who would eventually become my mentor, and I remember how she'd tell me she wasn't going to be here much longer — she was going to retire soon," Cole said.

"And though she stayed longer than either of us thought she would — retiring in 2018 — I would always say to her 'Don't leave yet, don't go,' because I didn't think I could do [the job] without her."

Nineteen years later, Cole remains in CFWE with a long list of achievements, various job descriptions tacked to her title and enough experience to jam-pack her LinkedIn profile. Along with academic advising, she also manages the Auburn chapter of Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS), is on the college's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee and was the outreach director for the Center for Environmental Studies at the Urban-Rural Interface (CESURI) throughout its duration.

Cole's reason to persevere when her many responsibilities threaten to overwhelm her is her students — those within her care relying heavily on her expertise and guidance. The work she does, she does it all for them.

*"The students keep me motivated, I love them, and I love my job. I love guiding them and helping each student find their way. That's the best part — getting students to where they want to go, the next level of their careers — that's what I love most about my job."*  
— Michelle Cole

"And yes, sometimes it's hard to keep going, but you have to push through. You have to continue to write those grants, to do those programs. Do it for the students. They need us. Sometimes we're the only voice they hear, the only influence they have. So, we have to stay strong for them, so they know they can depend on us."

#### MANRRS ADVISOR OF THE YEAR

When Allen retired in 2018, Cole worked with alumnus Ken Day and CFWE's Office of Advancement to establish the MANRRS Endowed Fund for Excellence in honor of Allen. This fund provides sustaining support for the core missions of Auburn's MANRRS chapter.

"The MANRRS Endowed Fund for Excellence, the 2015 African American Alumni Endowed Scholarship and the 2022 Hispanic Alumni Endowed Scholarship collectively support increasing the level of diversity in natural resources and related sciences at Auburn University and in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment," said Day.



Because of her resilience and dedication to making an impact on those around her, Cole's students nominated her for the Jesse C. Thompson Advisor of the Year presented by MANRRS, an award she won earlier this year in March. This honor is given annually to a professional MANRRS advisor who has shown evidence of noteworthy contributions to their local MANRRS chapter and national community through professional development, career training and leadership development of their members.

"It was the last night of the MANRRS conference at the All-Black Gala Dinner," Cole said. "I was sitting at the table with my students, taking pictures, and they were announcing all of the contest and award winners. Soon, it became time for Advisor of the Year. They called six names and one of them was mine."

"I was honored to even be considered. Then, it was announced that Michelle Cole from Auburn University was the Advisor of the Year winner, and the [Auburn] tables went crazy. I was shocked — I couldn't move. A young man escorted me to the stage, and I had to give an impromptu speech in front of 1,500 people. I was speechless, I am never speechless."

From starting her career as an Extension specialist in urban forestry unsure of her future at Auburn, to

now winning an award speaking to her success as an educator and mentor, there is no debate that she has earned this recognition. However, she gives all the credit to her students for their appreciation of her role and simply seeing her.

"To me, this is the highest award that an advisor can get — to have students that think enough of me to feel 'Mrs. Cole deserves Advisor of the Year,'" Cole said. "It makes me feel like I've done something right, that I impacted their lives in such a way they feel I deserve this honor."

#### OUTREACH IN HER COMMUNITY

Originally attending college for accounting, Cole graduated from Alabama A&M University in 1997 with a Bachelor of Science in forest management, after taking an Introduction to Forestry class, suggested to her by her college mentor Ron Smith, who worked for the U.S. Forest Service. She received her master's in adult education at Auburn in 2010 and joined the Auburn Alumnae chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc.

Cole continues her outreach work within her hometown by initiating programs at churches and local schools. One such program was the "College and Career Day" she hosted at Flat Rock Missionary Baptist Church. Cole and her husband brought local Alabama college recruiters to Tallassee, such as Alabama State University, Tuskegee University, Auburn University and her alma mater, Alabama A&M.

"We asked every college we could to attend," Cole said. "If they were in Alabama, they were at our church that day. We just wanted the students in Tallassee to know that college was possible for them. We wanted those kids to know that college is an option and there are multiple choices available for them."

Unfortunately, the event hasn't been held since being disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Cole found other ways to continue introducing career preparation to local high school students by going into the schools and giving the students mock interviews, informing them on the do's and don'ts of approaching potential employers and even reviewing their resumes, which their teacher then takes as an actual grade for their high school classes.

Cole often brings other people and companies along with her that are active in the community and have a vested interest in the youth of Tallassee to provide as much information to the students as possible, including Alabama Power and Sizemore & Sizemore, the forestry consulting company that gave Cole her start in her field after graduating. For students interested in enlisting

after graduation, she invites people with military careers and experience to speak with the students as well.

"I believe in community," she said. "If you're going to live in a community, why not do your part as a community member? So, I like giving back to the students and schools in mine."

"All three of my children went through the Tallassee school system, as did I, from elementary school to high school. As a parent, I always wanted to be involved in every way I could regarding their education. Because of my job at Auburn University, these programs felt like the perfect way to support the kids in my community, and it's well-needed."

Cole applies much of the teaching philosophy she uses to advise her students at Auburn to everyone she helps within her community. She even breaks it down into a short, relatable acronym, easy enough for anyone to remember.

"There is something I tell my students all the time," she said. "I'll say, 'Do you know what LOL is?' and they'll say, 'Of course I do.' However, I tell them my meaning of LOL is different — listen, observe and learn."

"You must be able to listen to people and hear what they are saying. Observe them and learn from them."

#### SPECIAL NATIONAL APPOINTMENT

Outside of community service and her involvement with MANRRS, Cole was recently appointed to the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council (NUCFAC). NUCFAC is a Congressionally designated advisory council to the Secretary of Agriculture on urban forestry and related issues. NUCFAC was created to bring together the wide variety of voices raised about a common concern: the present health and future preservation of American urban forests.

"I represent the smaller cities associated with NUCFAC," she said. "I make sure when people are asking about small towns and cities, what they need and where are they regarding urban forestry, that my voice is heard. I live in a small town and understand that these cities need someone advocating for them."

Cole's role on the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council showcases the impact of civic engagement for CFWE students at Auburn. Her leadership and dedication to service highlight the importance of active and intentional civic participation and how it's able to shape the future of environmental and forestry initiatives.

Cole inspires students to affect positive change within their communities, fields of study and in every area of their lives by doing so herself and leading by example.



## College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment

CFWE NEWS • Spring 2024

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The CFWE newsletter 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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#### Giving

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 602 Duncan Drive, Auburn, AL 36849. Inquiries may also be made to Heather Crozier via email at vannhea@auburn.edu or by phone at 334-844-2791.



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# Experiential Learning, a key to CFWE student success

Home Away from Home, the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center continues to be a vital resource for students studying forestry and wildlife sciences *By Kelley Young*



Forestry students at summer practicum at the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center.

After a long day of identifying trees and wildlife in the heat and humidity, Auburn students just want a good meal and an air-conditioned place to rest their heads.

Immersed in the forests of South Alabama, generations of students have found their refuge within the expansive campus of the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center.

The Dixon Center, a facility run by the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE), is located near Andalusia in Covington and Escambia counties in south Alabama. Donated to the university by Solon and Martha Dixon, the center is home to dorms, a dining hall, auditoriums, classrooms and conference space surrounded by more than 5,000 acres of forest. For students studying forestry and wildlife sciences, completing long days of summer practicum there is both a rite of passage and a graduation requirement.

## WALKING IN THE WOODS

For students majoring in Forestry, summer practicum serves as their introduction to the program. As pre-forestry students, they spend the first two years of college completing core requirements and forestry prerequisites and then apply to be accepted into practicum the summer before their junior year. They complete 11 credits over nine weeks at the Dixon Center in subjects including tree identification and health, forest biology, surveying and management.

“They’re learning everything there is to know about growing and harvesting trees,” Steury said. “They start with a lecture at 8 a.m., and then they’re out in the field through lunch. They come back late in the afternoon and sometimes have classes in the evenings, so it’s pretty intense.”

*“It’s a chance to get the students out in the field to do stuff you just can’t do on campus, even in labs. It’s very hands-on.”*

– Todd Steury

## SQUIRRELS AND LIZARDS AND BEARS, OH MY!

While forestry students are just getting started on their major coursework, students studying wildlife ecology and management are preparing for their final year of college at summer practicum. They take a single class worth eight credits taught by several different instructors, and their days are just as long and challenging as those of the forestry students.

The wildlife students start each day out in the field at 5 a.m., observing bird calls or trapping mammals. After breakfast, they learn about

techniques for collecting data on animals and vegetation, then head to the lab to practice writing scientific reports while avoiding the midday heat. In the evening, they head back out to the woods to set traps or do more fieldwork.

Both faculty and outside experts share techniques the students could never learn on Auburn’s main campus. Faculty member Stephen Ditchkoff shows how to trap deer with a canon net, and Steury leads students on a trip to Mobile to learn about capturing bears.

“They do get practice doing radiotelemetry, where you put a collar on an animal for tracking — that takes some skill, so this is a chance for them to practice,” he said. “We use aquatic traps to catch snakes and lizards and turtles, pitfall traps to catch frogs and salamanders and Sherman traps to catch flying squirrels. You’d never know they’re everywhere down there because you never see them, but our students get to release them and watch them go back up the tree to do their flying thing.”

## A FACILITY FOR ALL

Joel Martin, director of the center, says Solon and Martha Dixon had a vision of creating a place where anyone interested in managing natural resources could learn by doing.

“He wanted them to be able to experience their book learning in a field setting,” Martin said. “He created a place which provides that experience on a larger scale than can be replicated in most situations.”

While its primary function is to act as a field station for Auburn students, the Solon Dixon Center is open for anyone to use, including school groups, government agencies and nonprofits. Each year, the U.S. Forest Service uses the Dixon Center as its



East Coast training center for the National Wildland Firefighter Apprentice Program for about three months, and the Alabama Forestry Commission visits for eight weeks to train employees on forest management and equipment operation.

“Outside of these two groups, we get herpetologists, ornithologists, botanists and every other type of ‘-ologists’ you can name that come here to do exactly what Mr. Dixon envisioned some 44 years ago,” Martin said. “We provide the hands-on opportunities these groups are seeking to better expand their learning opportunities.”



But at the end of the day, the Dixon Center is a home away from home for Auburn students acquiring many of the most important skills they’ll need in their careers. Rick Oates, the Alabama Forestry Commission’s state forester, has hired plenty of CFWE graduates, and he says their time at the center is one reason they’re so highly qualified.

*“The experience they get from attending summer practicum makes them much better prepared candidates for the forestry jobs we offer. It’s where classroom theory meets practical forestry and gives them an edge when it comes to their knowledge and ability to work in the woods.”*

– Rick Oates

Learn more about the Dixon Center at [sdfec.auburn.edu](http://sdfec.auburn.edu).



Auburn’s FEWL Academy experiences leadership in the nation’s capital *By Cole Sikes*

Auburn University’s Forests, Environment and Wildlife Leadership (FEWL) Academy recently acquired firsthand experience in governmental affairs and leadership during its annual visit to Washington, D.C. Comprised of select students expressing leadership abilities in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE), the group represented Auburn while engaging with natural resource leaders, organizations and agencies during the three-day trip.

The FEWL Academy was established in 2019 with the goal of preparing and developing undergraduate students for future careers in problem-solving and policymaking as it relates to the stewardship and utilization of natural resources. The program, which has proven to be of tremendous value to students, is led by Emmett F. Thompson Dean Janaki Alavalapati and Alabama Extension Specialist and the Harry E. Murphy Associate Professor Adam Maggard.

*“The academy provides students with experiential learning opportunities to enhance their personal development and leadership abilities. During visits to Montgomery and Washington, D.C., each cohort interfaces with government officials, CEOs and policymakers to observe diverse perspectives and leadership styles, and to become more aware of the complexity and wide range of issues impacting natural resources and how we manage them.”*

– Adam Maggard

For the 2024 academic year, there are 12 members of the FEWL Academy hailing from Alabama, Florida, South Carolina and Texas, representing seven undergraduate majors in the CFWE. The academy’s members are Sam Crowe, Cailey Smith, Kendall Anderson, Mary Ashlee Hughes, Thomas Davis, Connor Cox, John Strauss, GiGi Sharp, Jack Kennedy, Emily Legg, Morgan Kelly and Marley Acosta-Lee.

## CFWE IN THE CAPITAL CITY

On day one of the academy’s trip to D.C., the students took a journey through American history at the Capitol to learn about leaders that had shaped the foundation of the United States’ values and policy. Led by Tyler Zidlicky, legislative correspondent from the Office of Congressman Gus M. Billirakis (Florida), the students discovered that leadership is important within a wide variety of roles and can be cultivated at any phase of one’s career.

“Our tour guide stood out as a leader because of her professionalism, patience and humility throughout the duration of the tour,” said Thomas Davis. “A twenty-four-year-old, not



FEWL Academy members visited with Auburn University President Christopher B. Roberts (center) and members of Auburn’s McCrary Institute Advisory Board shown from left to right behind the students: Charles McCrary (front left), Auburn Senior Vice President for Research & Economic Development Steven Taylor, Auburn Trustee William P. Ainsworth, CFWE Emmett F. Thompson Dean Janaki Alavalapati, Lt. General Ronald L. Burgess Jr., Auburn Trustee Zeke Smith and Auburn Trustee Michael DeMaioibus.

much older than most in our group, she still held herself with posture and confidence and made our tour very enjoyable. It was inspiring for us to see leadership of this kind from a person who was not so far removed from where we stand today.”

The second day included a visit to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) led by OMB representatives Drew Bailey and Katy Berrey. The duo shared how the agency is responsible for gathering and executing budget data, providing oversight of OMB performance, reviewing federal regulations and policies and executing the president’s orders.

“They are constantly having to live in the past, present and future since it takes two years to finalize each of their fiscal year budgets,” said Marley Acosta Lee. “In addition to this, with each fiscal year the OMB decides if a new budget should be administered for federal agencies. If something is performing poorly, the OMB can cut budget allocation or give more if a program has proved to be successful. The OMB is a unique government office since it has to work with every agency within the government that is receiving federal funding.”

## FROM OCEANS TO FORESTS

The next stop on day two was highlighting the U.S. Department of State, specifically the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (OES). FEWL Academy members said this was one of the favorite stops because of the facility’s unique architecture and variety of personnel. Comprised of eight separate offices focusing on unique levels of the environment, OES intrigued many of the CFWE’s undergraduates after hearing from bureau representatives Trevor Hampton and Whitney Wiedman.

“OES was described as covering ‘issues that reach from the vastness of space to the depths of the oceans,’ which is a pretty large margin,” said Acosta-Lee. “But during this meeting most of the topics discussed were all things that each of us had likely heard about during our classes at the CFWE. Items such as the Lacey Act and CITES were discussed and it was interesting to hear insider information about things we have presented on and talked about during lectures.”

On the final day in Washington, the group met with employees of the U.S. Forest Service to learn more about the agency’s leadership standards and recruitment processes. During this discussion, Tina J. Terrell, senior executive for national recruitment, shared valuable insights that the students were able to take home with them.

“We discussed how leadership is about understanding people, understanding connectivity, dealing with systems of life, realizing that people will always remember how you treated them, working with others and putting your ego in check,” said Cailey Smith. “We discussed the importance of having a mentor throughout your career and how

they should push you out of your comfort zone.”

Additionally, Terrell shared what qualities she looks for when hiring employees. Some of those traits that Terrell felt were critical for success included, problem solving, conflict resolution, communication skills and resilience. Following the discussion, the students took time for self-reflection as a comparative study of their own skills and behaviors.

## FEWL ACADEMY LEAVES LASTING IMPACTS

Legg, a senior majoring in Wildlife Ecology and Management, says that she chose to get involved in the academy because of her drive to understand how leadership is possible within herself and her community.

“I knew the opportunity would teach me qualities, characteristics and ‘how-to’s’ of becoming a great leader within my field of study and as a person in the world,” Legg said. “I wanted to know how it all connected and to gain a greater sense of awareness about workplace dynamics. I feel that the FEWL Academy has helped me grow in far more ways than one.”

*“The experience is more than learning about leadership but developing yourself and reaching out to those that might look up to someone like you.”*

– Emily Legg

Legg adds that she believes other CFWE students should consider getting involved with the academy to further their professional lives.

For Maggard, the gratitude of assisting in the leadership of the FEWL Academy is what makes this venture special.

*“With every FEWL cohort, there are new experiences to be had and potential to unleash. Dean Alavalapati and I are honored to be able to help shape the next generation of natural resource leaders.”*

– Adam Maggard

CFWE students who are in good academic standing are encouraged to apply to the FEWL Academy. The college accepts 12 to 15 new members each year to participate in this prestigious opportunity. For more information about the academy and its members, visit the FEWL Academy webpage.

If you are interested in supporting the FEWL Academy, contact CFWE Development Director Heather Crozier at [vannhea@auburn.edu](mailto:vannhea@auburn.edu).



## Alexander awarded USFS grant for southeastern forest carbon research By Cole Sikes

An Auburn University researcher in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) has received a U.S. Forest Service grant to study forest carbon sequestration. The funding will support research to quantify the relationship between forest restoration, carbon storage and wildfire risk in southeastern forests.

Carbon storage within forests has a direct relationship with fire. The more living and dead biomass available on a forest floor, the more likely fire becomes severe and sometimes even out of control — especially if the forest is ignited unintentionally.

Concerns about climate change resulting from reforestation, afforestation, forest conservation and carbon storage are driving this new research. Heather Alexander, the Dwan G. Luce Endowed Associate Professor in the CFWE, and her team will gather data on proper forest restoration and its impacts on wildfire risk and carbon sequestration.

*“Most southeastern forests are fire-dependent, requiring periodic, low-intensity fire for their maintenance and perpetuation.”*

– Heather Alexander

“Decades of intentional fire exclusion, however, has created dense stands with considerable biomass stored in trees, woody

debris and organic soils that could pose a risk of severe wildfire.”

Alexander says there is existing research on quantifying carbon storage in trees within southeastern forests. However, the relationship of carbon as it relates to fire in these systems has rarely been a focus, nor has the accounting of carbon stored in non-tree pools like soils. Among decision-makers, the focus on prescribed fire as a tool for forest management and restoration has come into question as being climate-smart, providing the stage for Alexander’s team.

The team, including post-doctoral researchers Tamara Milton and Monika Rawat, and co-led by Brice Hanberry of the U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, plans to study forest carbon pools within understories as well as soils to discover how forest management and restoration will affect carbon storage.

To accomplish their goal, the researchers will perform carbon sampling at field sites across the Southeast, including within longleaf pine, mixed wood and upland oak forests. Some of the sites chosen for the study range from those that have experienced no fire management for multiple decades to sites where tools such as prescribed fire or silvicultural thinnings have been practiced for at least a decade. Carbon measurements will then be compared to evaluate the impact of fire on forest carbon pools.



Heather Alexander (center) and her students walk through a fire-maintained forest.

As an added benefit, Alexander’s team will identify fuel loads as well as other understory characteristics that will be compiled into a flammability trait database. This source can help scientists, landowners and managers assess fire risk.

“The regular use of prescribed fire could prevent forests from over-accumulating live and dead biomass while mitigating wildfire risk,” Alexander said.

*“It also promotes many of the desired ecosystem services provided by southeastern forests including carbon storage, biodiversity and provision of wildlife habitat.”*

– Heather Alexander

The Southeast is also prone to high wind events such as windthrows, tornadoes and hurricanes. Trees are subject to mortality because of these natural events, adding another objective layer to the team’s research. Alexander said their project will factor in carbon implications for wildfire risk at sites affected by significant wind or hurricane damage to provide whole-ecosystem perspectives.

Ultimately, Alexander and her team anticipate the research will have far-reaching implications, providing crucial and necessary data for policymakers to be well-informed about public safety, forest health and climate change for decades to come.



## CFWE brown spot needle blight research, the focus of international spotlight By Kelley Young

A team of Auburn University researchers was front and center on an international stage this past June.

Attendees at the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) World Congress in Sweden this summer learned how faculty in Auburn’s College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) are attacking the problem of brown spot needle blight, a disease running rampant in the southeast U.S. with the potential to impact forestry markets around the world.

The research was highlighted in a video produced for the world congress, because despite the escalating concern over insect pests and fungal diseases, which can have devastating impacts on the forest industry, solutions remain elusive.

The college’s aim is to assist forest product manufacturers, landowners and government entities in keeping trees healthy by sharing science-based findings and solutions. The impact of this research is immense, as the forestry industry contributes \$34 billion to Alabama’s economy. In an interview for the video, Kris Bradley, a registered forester and land manager, stressed how vital this project is to the state and the Southeast.

“This pathogen has a potential to cripple our forest industry,” he said. “Just in my little slice of the world, thousands of acres I manage are either dead or dying.”

Several CFWE faculty members are currently working on the project, which was funded by a \$2.1 million grant from the U.S. Forest Service. Lori Eckhardt, a professor of forest health, is the primary investigator leading the research. She’s working closely with colleagues Janna Willoughby, an assistant professor of conservation genetics who is using genome sequencing to study the fungal pathogen responsible for the disease, and Lana Narine, an assistant professor of remote sensing and modelling who is using drone-based imagery and LIDAR to assess forest health and disease spread.

Eckhardt’s focus is on finding ways to manage brown spot needle blight in loblolly pines, the most common pine tree in Alabama. In longleaf pines, the disease is easily managed through controlled burns, but since loblolly pine needles are located at the tops of the trees, anywhere from 30 to 100 feet off the ground, controlling the spread of the disease is more challenging.

She has enlisted the help of five graduate students, eight undergrads and four interns to help take samples from trees and soil and conduct research in different areas ranging from plant physiology and genetics to GIS mapping, soil health and environmental impact.

This project is the perfect illustration of how Auburn’s land-grant mission is carried out through simultaneously



A film crew shoots footage as CFWE graduate student Swati Singh (on right) and undergraduate student Blake Johnson prepare a drone to map a sample area impacted by the brown spot needle blight.

conducting research, educating students and disseminating solutions to problems through outreach.

*“As the study moves along, we want to keep the community involved and be their main resource of what have we learned so far. We do this through meetings and workshops, and we meet with landowners, the Alabama Forestry Commission and other folks. We even have a website dedicated to this project.”*

– Lori Eckhardt

Eckhardt says the students involved are having such a good time they may not understand how important their work is. “They’re coming to the field, they’re having a really good time, they’re doing their research, they’re making new friends, they’re making new contacts through the landowners and the companies they meet,” she said.

*“But, in essence, what they’re doing is really going to affect how trees are managed across the state of Alabama and how it impacts the economy.”*

– Lori Eckhardt



## CFWE pandemic research reveals collaborative impacts By Cole Sikes



Jean Fantle-Lepczyk (left) and Chris Lepczyk (right) mount a game camera to a tree for wildlife research.

Researchers in the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) say that human interaction and wildlife presence go hand in hand, especially during a global pandemic. Recent studies conducted at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center (KPNC) reveals the importance of using a citizen science framework to conduct research and outreach.

The CFWE team led by Christopher Lepczyk, the Alumni Professor of wildlife biology and conservation, and Jean Fantle-Lepczyk, assistant research professor, gathered crucial wildlife data for a coauthored paper titled “Mammal responses to global changes in human activity vary by trophic group and landscape.”

The paper was recently published in Nature Ecology & Evolution, a premier publisher of high-quality research. The study reports that a global dataset of cameras illustrates how

wildlife altered their behavior when faced with fluctuating human activity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### THE PERFECT LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

As a piece of the larger, 37-country research puzzle, Lepczyk and Fantle-Lepczyk focused on acquiring information during the pandemic lockdown period (March 2020-January 2021) in support of the long-term Snapshot USA project. Their research took place at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center (KPNC) located in northern Auburn, Alabama, where they worked alongside Michael Buckman, KPNC manager.

“I was approached by Dr. Lepczyk because the conditions at the KPNC were a perfect fit for the data he was collecting for the project,” Buckman said.

*“I was very excited to get involved because, in addition to supporting this important project, we would also be gathering some very valuable information about wildlife populations at the KPNC that we can use in our own environmental education programming.”*

– Micheal Buckman

According to Buckman, the KPNC offers several opportunities for citizen science, a term that references the public’s voluntary involvement in scientific research. From invited studies on monarch butterflies to counting songbirds, visitors to the KPNC are able to

participate in studies that provide useful data for researchers.

The study employed various research methods including the placement of camera traps in multiple locations where photos would capture animal movement. The scientists would then categorize each image based on species, animal type and habits.

“By placing cameras out during late summer through early fall each year in the same places, we are able to gather a long-term dataset of what species are on the preserve and when they are active, allowing us deeper insights into a wide range of animals,” said Lepczyk.

This research proved useful to learn about wildlife biodiversity, and their relationship with people and their activities. Furthermore, the upticks in visitation to the KPNC during COVID-19 proved to be an excellent opportunity for researchers and staff to work together.

“This study is extremely helpful in understanding the degree activities within the KPNC impact our wildlife populations, and how we can use these data to manage our forests (and visitors) to ensure we continue to provide good wildlife habitat,” Buckman said. “The results are also just fun and fascinating.”

### RESULTS SHOW IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

The global study revealed that increasing traffic to areas such as the KPNC reflected more mammal activity in modified landscapes, indicating that the increasing presence of people in outdoor recreation areas also influences the presence of wildlife. In

less modified, more wild landscapes, mammals became less active.

Among approximately 1,065 global research responses, human interaction increased activity in some mammal species within recreational areas and recorded more nighttime animal activity than before. This research ultimately concluded that managing human activity might be the key for better protecting sensitive species.

From theory to the dissemination of scientific knowledge through outreach and Extension programs, the trifecta of science, teaching and outreach serves as the recipe for growing a sustainable world. Through collaborative opportunities such as the COVID-19 project, policymakers and government officials are provided proven, effective knowledge to guide future decisions.

The return on investment for intersecting research is threefold. By performing applied studies, the college is primed to discover solutions to natural resource issues to benefit our environment and industries. In turn, this influences community environmental education programs delivered through outreach and produces highly qualified professionals for the workforce through its academic programs.

The drive for impactful research is shared by the CFWE’s faculty and students. The college strives to collaborate in more research opportunities, helping it achieve its mission of working with nature for society’s well-being.

For more information about CFWE research, visit the college’s website at [cfwe.auburn.edu](http://cfwe.auburn.edu).



# Outreach & Extension

## Auburn professor and Alabama Extension specialist honored as the governor’s 2024 Conservation Communicator of the Year By Jamie Anderson



A statewide champion for forest landowner education, Auburn faculty member and Alabama Extension specialist Adam Maggard was recently honored as the 2024 Conservation Communicator of the Year by the Alabama Wildlife Federation at the Governor’s Conservation Achievement Awards banquet held in Prattville this August.

The Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) Governor’s Conservation Achievement Awards (GCAA) are the most respected conservation honors in Alabama. For the past 50 years, AWF has presented these awards to individuals and organizations that significantly contribute to the conservation of Alabama’s wildlife and related natural resources.

### A COLLABORATIVE FORCE

Maggard, who is the Harry E. Murphy Associate Professor in the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE), has been recognized regionally and nationally for his efforts to provide applied research and educational

resources to forest landowners, was nominated by William Green, Jr., forestry and wildlife divisions director of the Alabama Farmers Federation and Brandon J. Loomis, registered forester and woodlands director of Westveit Forest Resources.

Citing Maggard’s work with a range of stakeholder groups, including Alabama’s regional Extension agents and county Extension coordinators, county forestry planning committees, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) and the Alabama Forests Forever Foundation, Green states these collaborative efforts are testimony to Maggard’s commitment to enhancing forest management and conservation.

“His accolades, including three Southern Region awards for Extension products and a nationally recognized silver award for a comprehensive program on prescribed fire, further attest to his excellence,” said Green.

### DELIVERING SCIENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

As an Extension specialist and faculty member, Maggard aims to bring science-based solutions and educational resources to forest landowners and enterprises to improve and conserve native ecosystems, encourage healthy working forests and provide economic benefits to stakeholders. This work is best demonstrated by the

Forest Business Resources (FBR) – Increasing the Health and Wealth of Private Forestland in Alabama program, which he created in 2017.

The focus of the FBR program is to enhance the livelihoods of the citizens of Alabama through the betterment of forest management, business practices and increased opportunities for producing income. The resources and tools provided by the program focus on temporary or small-scale income-producing opportunities for forest landowners. As a result, the program creates value-added businesses that help private forest owners achieve their goals and objectives.

Combined with Maggard’s Extension programs, these initiatives have influenced the management of more than two million forestland acres owned or managed by program participants, improving forestland value, recovery of losses and financial decision-making by an estimated \$19.5 million.

On a personal and professional level, Loomis, who is a current officer in the U.S. Army National Guard, noted that Maggard possesses a unique blend of professional expertise, leadership ability and personal dedication, which he defines as quintessential to a servant leader. “His efforts add value to our profession, industry, forest resources and State,” said Loomis.

### SHAPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

In addition to Maggard’s considerable achievements on behalf of forest landowners, he takes an active role in shaping the next generation of forestry leadership, both within and outside the classroom.

Alongside Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE, Maggard leads the Forest, Environment and Wildlife Leadership (FEWL) Academy, which prepares undergraduate students with leadership abilities necessary for the critical problem-solving of issues related to the management, utilization and stewardship of natural resources.

He also led the development of Auburn’s Forest Business and Investment master’s degree program, the country’s only online forest business master’s program designed to provide forestry technical skills with expertise in business, finance and economics.

*“His passion for promoting forest conservation and his services to enhance the profitability of forestry has been extremely beneficial to forest landowners and the state of Alabama.”*

– Dean Alavalapati



## CFWE hosts state-wide summit to engage professionals, enhance parks and recreation management curriculum By Jamie Anderson



Michael Brunson, Allie McCreary and Wayde Morse, all Auburn faculty, organized the PARK Summit for numerous departments and representatives of parks and recreation.

The Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) recently hosted Alabama parks and recreation leaders to advance opportunities for students within Auburn's new parks and recreation management degree.

The PARK Summit, organized by Auburn faculty, including Wayde Morse, Michael Brunson and Allie McCreary, was attended by approximately 50 representatives of parks and recreation departments, agencies and organizations from throughout the state.

*"We hoped to engage stakeholders to gain insights about the applied skills necessary for parks and recreation careers, gather feedback about the curriculum and build a robust professional network for future internships and employment opportunities for our students."*

– Allie McCreary

The goal of the summit was three-fold, stated McCreary.

The forum included attendees ranging from early to mid-late careers who were able to provide their professional insights and expertise to help shape the future of the new Parks and Recreation Management degree.

"We are fortunate to have participants hailing from a range of backgrounds, size of facilities and geographic areas who bring a wide variety of experiences and perspectives to the table," said Morse. "Those

diverse viewpoints were invaluable for identifying the key knowledge and skills graduates need and how best to integrate those learning objectives into our current courses."

To prepare students for their future careers, the degree requires an internship which provides opportunities for on-the-job training and a field practicum experience to earn micro-credentials such as Wilderness First Aid and Leave No Trace.

*"We view this as a collaborative effort where current professionals will help guide and educate our students as internship supervisors, and through this mentorship they can actively contribute to the livelihood of the industry."*

– Wayde Morse

During the conference, the group, comprised of 20 parks and recreation agencies, identified several methods for student/industry engagement along the curriculum pathway.

"Members of industry can become involved with Auburn to facilitate student tours at local park facilities, by hosting recreation-related volunteer programs and inviting students to shadow professionals for a day," said Brunson.

Brunson said they can also serve as invited guest speakers and participate in networking events between students and professionals at state or regional conferences.

To continue the work launched at the PARK Summit, the faculty also intends to create an advisory panel of industry stakeholders that will meet annually.

Natalie Norman, executive director of the Alabama Recreation and Parks Association, shared how she envisions the program would benefit industry within the state.

"It was good for there to be interaction/introductions between participants in the field and university personnel. Fostering good relationships should enhance the communication between the two parties," said Norman.

"Further, I think it is helpful for university personnel to understand the needs of the agencies represented by the participants."

The new major, which is the only parks and recreation degree offered in Alabama, will address the unique needs of both sectors of the industry: community-based and outdoor-focused parks and recreation programs.

*"Because of this diversity, there is great potential for students to experience the various types of organization that comprise this industry right here in within Alabama. Including national agencies and private enterprises."*

– Michael Brunson

Attendees of the summit helped the faculty to map an additional 70+ organizations within Alabama to potentially network with for student internships and other opportunities.

To participate in the internship program or to engage with the students on campus, members of the parks and recreation community are invited to contact the college's faculty at [cfwe.auburn.edu](http://cfwe.auburn.edu).



Parks and recreation representatives gather for the PARK Summit.

## Igniting a spark: Auburn alumnus shares his career journey By Cole Sikes



John McGuire helps conduct a prescribed burn.

From the Pacific Northwest to the southeast, forest management has captivated Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) alumnus John McGuire.

What once was a silvicultural sabbatical has turned into a dream career working with forests and utilizing prescribed fire as an essential management tool.

The seeds of McGuire's fascination with forests were sown at an early age. A resident of Bainbridge, Georgia, he was not a stranger to the importance or presence of forestry in the South. His curiosity for forestry led him to explore new experiences while acquiring degrees at Washington State University (WSU).

"Under the counsel of my advisor at WSU, I traveled South to learn about prescribed fire," McGuire said. "My intent at the time was to spend a few years to learn about fire and forest management and bring that knowledge back to Washington to work in the dry forests (such as ponderosa pine), grasslands and scrublands of eastern Washington, Oregon and Idaho."

*"My attachment to the longleaf pine forests has gone on too long to sever, and I call these forests and the South my home now. Fire has always been a central theme in my professional and academic career and that spark was ignited in White-Smith Hall (the previous home of the CFWE) at Auburn many years ago."*

– John McGuire

He adds that the Pacific Northwest's dry forests share similar needs with longleaf pine forests for frequent, low-intensity fire to help manage natural competition, soil nutrients and forest litter that serves as fuel for large wildfires.

For McGuire, the extension of this hiatus to work in the southeastern longleaf pine ecosystems irrevocably shaped his life and career.

### A CAREER-DRIVEN EDUCATION

Upon arriving at what was then Auburn's School of Forestry, McGuire enjoyed the school's intimate setting and the many mentors and colleagues he met along the journey. While earning his Master of Science in Forestry at Auburn in 1999, he conducted silviculture research and learned about wildlife habitat management.

"Under the guidance of Auburn forestry faculty and staff like Dr. Dean Gjerstad, Rhett Johnson, Dr. John Kush, Kent Hanby and others, my appreciation of the recovery of fire-dependent forests and the application of fire blossomed," McGuire said.

These mentors were critical to McGuire's progression through forestry research, and the relationships formed during this time are still important to him today.

"John is driven," said John Kush, retired CFWE forest ecology research fellow and instructor. "He is driven to keep his word, which seems to be rare today. John understands the critical need for fire from the safety perspective as well as from the ecosystem perspective. I have been very fortunate in that John has stayed in touch with me since he moved away from Auburn. He has helped me and so many others to spread the word about fire."

As a member of the Xi Sigma Pi honor society and Society of American Foresters, McGuire began to appreciate the need for sound forestry research as well as the art of land management.

Today, McGuire is the director of the Private Lands Fire Initiative at Tall Timbers, Inc., located in Tallahassee, Florida. As a landmark organization in the southeast for fire ecology and forest management research, their mission is to foster exemplary land stewardship through research, conservation and education.

"My interests and responsibilities revolve around trying to maintain a culture of prescribed burning and to increase the scale of prescribed burning in both the southeast and nationally," McGuire said. "This includes working with a dedicated staff (including several Auburn graduates) in outreach, training and implementation of prescribed burning."

McGuire's office now sits in the center of a 4,000-acre forest, which he says is among some of the last geographic vestiges where old-growth longleaf pine forests can be found. The location gives him abundant opportunities to assist with prescribed fire and to admire the diverse wildlife that inhabit the region's forests and grasslands.

### REFLECTING ON THE JOURNEY

Many of McGuire's college contemporaries are still friends and business associates. Throughout his tenure as a land steward expert, he has valued his relationships and alliances, as well as their opinions. His affinity for Auburn and the forestry program gives him a sense of fraternity that he carries with him today.

*"The science of forestry and fire management was taught well at Auburn. I know what the program represents and what it takes to get a degree from Auburn. I may look more intently at a prospective employee solely because they've graduated in forestry or wildlife from there."*

– John McGuire

### CONSERVATION INSPIRES CAREER, NEW BOOK

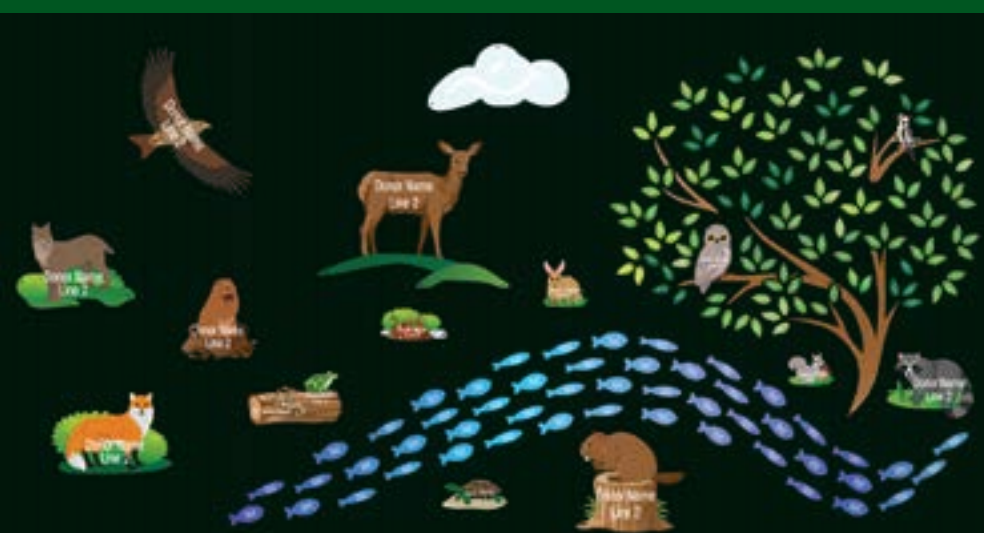
Drawing from his life's passion and admiration of the longleaf ecosystem, McGuire recently published a book titled "The Forest that Fire Made." Co-written with Carol Denhof and Byron Levan, the book serves as a historical account and introduction to the common species of plants, animals and insects found within the once-vast forests and the ecological processes they depend upon for their survival.

"Over the past 20 years, John has been my student, employee, friend and valued colleague," said Rhett



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## Alumnus develops passion for mass timber innovation By Amy Burtch



Auburn alumnus Troy Harris is featured at Ponce City Market, the adaptive reuse project Jamestown constructed in downtown Atlanta.

Speaking with Troy Harris quickly reveals two things for which he is passionate: the forestry industry and Auburn University.

During his interview, Harris showed off the Auburn Creed tacked to his office note board, a practice he has repeated throughout his career.

*"The Creed starts off 'this is a practical world,' and I believe that. It advises you must be honest and have integrity and have a 'spirit that is not afraid.' I was not afraid to jump and try a new thing."*

– Troy Harris

Harris said, referring to his unique career transitions.

### FROM PRE-MED TO FORESTRY?

Raised in Oregon, becoming an Eagle Scout meant being outdoors was a huge part of Harris' upbringing. A move to the South his sophomore year in high school introduced him to Auburn, and he knew Auburn "was the place, the type of campus he wanted to be on."

Oddly enough, Harris went to Auburn for pre-med, but during registration decided he did not want to be in school that long.

"I thought maybe I should do what makes me happy, and off I went to forestry. The career path has been great, and I have never looked back," Harris said.

Harris graduated from the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment in 1992 with a bachelor's in forestry and a minor in business administration.

### FROM DIRT FORESTER TO BUSINESS LEADER

Currently, Harris is managing director of Timberland and Innovative Wood Products at Jamestown, and his enthusiasm for this position is apparent. But that's not where he started.

"My professional evolution seems to mimic the evolution of the forest and timber industry," he said.

Following graduation from Auburn, Harris worked for Union Camp, a large paper company, as a dirt forester, which entailed being in and caring for forests. The paper companies, especially in the South, owned and managed most of the timberland, and the foresters managed the land for them.

In the late '90s, pulp and paper companies began realizing they needed to focus on making pulp and paper and did not need to own the timberland because there were institutional investors willing to purchase the timberland as an asset class that would continue to grow timber and supply the mills with their needs.

"I noticed this transition, and I jumped ship early from pulp and paper companies and joined timberland investment management organizations (TIMO), who were basically going to become the next owners of the timberland asset class," Harris said.

In this new role, Harris built funds for managers investing in timberland and managed those funds, still with his foot in the timber space as his skillset evolved more on the business side of forestry.

"The most fun thing about being a forester now is that foresters were once seen as the evil villains that

cut down trees," Harris said. "But it has been exciting to be a forester in the last few years as people realize taking care of your forest enables the forest to be healthy and survive.

"We are becoming understood by society."

### IN PURSUIT OF INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

With innovative solutions, Harris joked that foresters are finally becoming "the cool kids in the room."

This especially rings true when you look at 619 Ponce, a mixed-use office building, sourcing and processing the timber in Georgia, manufacturing the wood in Alabama and constructing the building in Atlanta.

The need for engineered mass timber becomes evident when we think about global emissions, explained Harris, who stated globally about 40% of carbon emissions are caused by the built environment, with 11% of that rooted in the products with which we build.

"Traditionally, steel, concrete and other construction products are huge emitters of carbon," he



said. "If we change how we build, we could have a huge impact on reducing carbon emissions, so we started connecting the dots.

*"We can build mass timber buildings, reduce our carbon footprint and create a unique and beautiful product."*

– Troy Harris

And that is exactly what Harris and his Jamestown team did — create a locally sourced "farm-to-table" building, sourcing and processing the timber in Georgia, manufacturing the wood in Alabama and constructing the building in Atlanta.

Jamestown tells the story of 619 Ponce on the Seedlings to Solutions website and at the "mass timber pop-up" within the building.

"People can come by and see it, interact with it and feel its sturdiness," Harris said. "We want people to learn about this material and understand this building shows a 75% reduction in carbon emissions when compared to concrete and steel buildings."

### A STORYTELLING FORESTER?

A substantial part of Harris' job is telling the story of innovative wood products and the impact they are having on the forestry industry.

"Many foresters got into forestry because they wanted to be in the woods, not in front of people," Harris said. "But all of the sudden, we are the cool kids in the room, and people are listening. We have an opportunity to tell this innovative sustainability story, and that's really exciting.

"I am passionate about mass timber, the timber industry and being a forester."



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