

College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment



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as first line of defense from disease, pests
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CFWE NEWS • Spring 2025

Working with Nature for Society’s Well-Being

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Recognizing CFWE scholars, fellows and professors



Engaging alumni and friends

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Celebrating faculty tenure and promotion



Sharing food, fellowship at the Black Alumni Luncheon

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/// A message from THE DEAN



Dear Alumni and Friends,

Warm greetings from the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment! As we continue to grow and evolve, I'm proud to share the exciting developments that have taken place across our college. Your support and engagement remain vital to our mission, and we are grateful for the role you play in helping us educate future leaders, advance research and serve our communities.

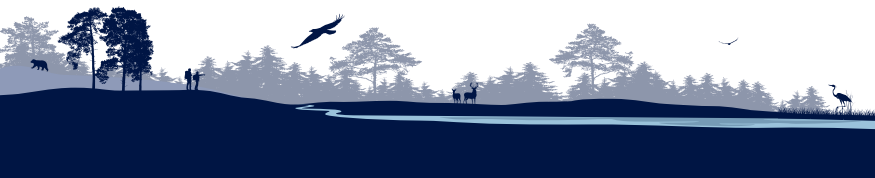
Our academic programs continue to inspire and transform lives. Students like Maleah Gonzalez, who found her passion in the new Parks and Recreation Management program, exemplify the impact of our diverse offerings. We're also excited to welcome Matthew Jurjonas, Molly Simonis, AnnaKay Newell and Jim Noles to our faculty. Noles will lead the development of a new Environmental Law minor. This initiative will equip students across disciplines with the legal insight needed to navigate the complex world of environmental policy and regulation.

Our research efforts are making a difference in critical areas such as disease ecology and climate modeling, with support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the USDA. Outreach remains a cornerstone of our mission, highlighted by the inaugural Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture in Forest Economics and Policy, the expansion of the Woodland Wonders Nature Preschool as Alabama's first nature based First Class Pre-K and the launch of Green Up Alabama—a statewide initiative to enhance urban forestry. From managing 10,000 acres of university forestlands to establishing sentinel gardens in Mobile, our faculty and students are deeply engaged in solving real-world challenges.

We are continually inspired by the generosity and accomplishments of our alumni and friends. In this issue we recognize our Woodlands & Wildlife Society members, and our youngest alumni within the Compass Circle. We also celebrated Joe Twardy, a 1972 alumnus, with the 2025 Outstanding Alumni Award for his lifelong dedication to forest management. They truly reflect the enduring spirit of Auburn and the powerful legacy our community continues to build together.

War Eagle!

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



College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment

CFWE NEWS • Spring 2025

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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.

Administration

CFWE hosts inaugural, prestigious lecture series in forest economics and policy

By Cole Sikes



Emmett F. Thompson and wife, ViAnn, pose for a photo at The Auburn University Hotel and Dixon Conference Center.

Advancing knowledge among stakeholders is an important component of Auburn University's outreach mission as a land-grant institution. One of the best ways to accomplish this mission is to host educational programs such as lectures, seminars and workshops for faculty and industry professionals. In 2025, the Auburn College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) proudly expanded its offerings by hosting the inaugural Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture in Forest Economics & Policy at The Hotel at Auburn University and Dixon Conference Center on Feb. 27.

This new lecture series was established by the founding dean of the CFWE, Emmett F. Thompson, and his wife, ViAnn. The Thompsons endowed this series to help the college enrich its academic programming. By inviting speakers to this series every year, a plethora of expertise will be showcased across the forest industry.

"When Vi and I along with our daughter, Meri [Pylant], were discussing the idea of endowing a lecture series in the CFWE, the general area of forest economics seemed a natural fit," said Thompson. "As a faculty member at Virginia Tech, I taught and conducted research in forest economics and management. At Auburn, I could always more than justify our programs by pointing to the economic importance of forests, forest landowners and the forest products industry in Alabama. We enjoyed particularly strong support from the forest products industry, as represented by the Alabama Forestry Association."

Alabama's forest industry is recognized as being among the nation's largest and most vibrant, with top five rankings in softwood lumber production, pulp and paper production and forest sector employment concentration according to the Alabama Forestry Commission. With more than 23 million

acres of forests in the state, the Thompson lectures will fill a critical role in creating a new avenue for learning about economic trends, operational strategies and other decision-making factors influencing the forest industry.

Pylant similarly echoes her father's sentiments regarding the importance of the endowed lecture series for practitioners, as well as the broader community.

"We wanted this series to reflect the parts of forestry that my dad is passionate about—mainly economics and policy."
– Meri Pylant

"We also wanted the lecture to attract as many people outside of academia as well. We decided on a yearly series to not dilute any of our potential speakers. Our intent is to show people outside of academia how important and interesting forestry is to everyone."



Brooks Mendell speaks to an audience at The Auburn University Hotel and Dixon Conference Center.

TOPIC OF INTEREST

Each guest speaker within the Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture in Forest Economics & Policy series will address topics such as forest economics, forest markets, forest policy and global trade. This year, the CFWE welcomed Brooks Mendell, president and CEO of Forisk Consulting, to spark discussions about forest investment decisions.

Mendell represents three decades of consulting, operating and research experience in the forest products and timber industries. In his lecture titled "Forest Finance and Economics: Making Investment Decisions in Times of Uncertainty," Mendell will speak to a framework of forest investment strategy encompassing physical facts, stakeholder priorities and policy environments that affect decision making.

Organized by the lecture planning committee chair and Auburn's Earl H. and Sandra H. Weaver Professor Marc Walley, the topic

of choice for the inaugural lecture is increasingly appropriate given the uncertainties of the current decade and what is forecasted for the industry in the coming years.

"Alabama's 23 million acres of forestland represent the third-largest timberland base in the United States, and the forest products sector is the state's largest manufacturing industry," said Walley. "Given the economic impact of this sector and the growing importance of forestry and natural resources in sustaining and improving our lives, it is essential to deepen our awareness in this area. Dr. Emmett Thompson, who served as dean of Auburn's forestry program during my time as a student, was always seeking ways to enhance our college's academic offerings."

"I am confident attendees at the lecture came away better informed of the challenges, opportunities and growth potential associated with our sector."

– Marc Walley



Visit our [website to view this story online.](#)

CFWE manages Auburn's forest lands, for people, environment

By Amy Burtch



Forestry Management Specialist Preston Payne manages 10,000 acres of university-owned wooded lands spread across 27 sites throughout Alabama.

Like all the world's forests, the 10,000 acres of wooded lands managed by Auburn University's College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment provide invaluable services: They generate income, ensure natural biodiversity and help purify water and air.

But as living laboratories and classrooms, those 10,000 acres spread across 27 sites throughout Alabama do even more.

"These properties are important because they provide research and educational opportunities for professors, students and others."

– Preston Payne

In addition to the value these forests provide to the Auburn community, researchers use these diverse sites to develop science-based solutions to challenges facing the forest industry and the environment. Forestry and wildlife professionals stay up to date on the latest best practices, landowners learn more about the best ways to manage their properties

OUTREACH AND EDUCATION FOR YEARS TO COME

The Thompson lectures in the CFWE are a prime example of how the college is contributing to the university's founding principles of research, instruction and extension. Through philanthropic initiatives such as this lecture series, the CFWE is poised to take a leap in educational outreach.

"The Emmett and ViAnn Thompson lecture series will serve as a testimony to the importance and impact that our college has on everyone who engages with it," said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson dean of the CFWE. "Our faculty, staff, students and past leadership are highly invested in what the CFWE is capable of accomplishing, and the future is incredibly promising because of the countless people who make the college what it is today."

For more information about the Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture in Forest Economics and Policy, visit its webpage to learn more about the 2025 Thompson Distinguished Lecturer and event details.

Nearly all of the experiment station's 16 centers have forested areas that support a range of research — from studies on optimum prescribed fire intervals at the Gulf Coast Research and Extension Center, to experiments on preparing sites for forest replanting at the Fayette County Experiment and Demonstration Forest, to long-term, multidisciplinary research on white-tailed deer biology and behavior at the Piedmont Research Unit.

For scientists and graduate students planning research studies, Payne helps pinpoint suitable Auburn properties. Reese Stogner, for example, came to Payne six months ago looking for sites where he could determine if feeders designed to attract wild turkeys increase the presence of predators.

The two sat down, and after consulting Payne's digital mapping tool, they decided on the North Auburn Forestry Unit and the MOT forest. The research is now underway, and Stogner expects that results, once in, will inform wild turkey management practices throughout the Southeast.

ONE AMONG MANY WHO'VE BENEFITED

As an undergraduate forestry major from 2016–21, he visited these forests often to receive the valuable hands-on instruction CFWE provides. Since joining Auburn's staff in June 2024, he's found himself drawing on what he learned during these visits every working day.

"In our forest measurements classes, we would cruise timber on some of these properties," he recalled. Those experiences gave him firsthand experience estimating the volume and value of timber at a given site.

Today, Payne uses those skills as he works with Mark Stirling, Auburn's director of real estate and property development, to create harvest management plans that are presented every five years to the university's Board of Trustees.

"I have the utmost respect for Preston and his work. The services he provides are valuable, and his efforts help us make the right decisions in how we manage the university's land."
– Mark Stirling

Based on the standing timber inventory Payne provides, the pair identifies what timber will be harvested or thinned and how those lands will be replanted and managed for the future. They also include estimates of how much revenue the harvests will generate to support the university's mission.

OTHER PRACTICAL LESSONS

Payne also frequently relies on lessons he learned at the MOT forest.

"That's where I got exposed to prescribed fire, learning how to

use that as a tool to manage the forest landscape," Payne said.

In late February, Payne found himself back at the MOT, helping prepare the site for forest fire ecology students to practice what they'd learned from Research Fellow John Kush about managing prescribed burns to reduce wildfire risk, improve wildlife habitat and restore natural ecosystems.

"My team used a bulldozer to put in fire breaks, and we also made sure that this was a safe forest stand for them to conduct the burn demonstration," Payne explained. "I was also there as they did the burn, riding around in a water truck and making sure that everything was going according to the burn plan, and the fire was under control."

THE VALUE OF PROPER LAND MANAGEMENT

Perhaps because the sites where Payne works are so disparate and serve so many purposes, he finds that no two days are ever the same.

"It's very broad — I could be doing prescribed fire one day and then cleaning restrooms at one of our properties the next day," he said.

While Payne said that makes it hard to describe his job, two CFWE property managers were quick to attest to the value of his services.

Colleague N.L. Hart noted that Payne had just transplanted longleaf pines at Crooked Oaks, an Auburn-owned events destination she manages in Notasulga, Alabama. He's also conducted prescribed fires, cleared trails and identified trees that posed hazards.

Such tasks are critical, she said, primarily "for the overall health of the property. They keep guests safe and property structures intact."

Meanwhile, KPNC Manager Michael Buckman reeled off a long list of Payne's contributions — from conducting surveys and evaluating forest health to coordinating with partners such as the local fire department, Auburn's Facilities Management and the Alabama Forestry Commission.

"We have 120 acres of forest that need to be managed in order for us to provide the high-quality environmental education and outreach services to the community that everyone knows and loves," Buckman said.

Remarking on Payne's character, Buckman cites the knowledge and work ethic he brings to his role as critical to the KPNC's mission.

"Preston works hard to ensure our lands are effectively managed. He makes it possible for the KPNC to continue to offer a beautiful, healthy forest for the community to enjoy."

– Michael Buckman

Lepczyk receives Sustainability Award

Chris Lepczyk, Alumni Professor of Wildlife Biology and Conservation in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment, was selected as the 2025 faculty recipient of the Auburn University Spirit of Sustainability Award in recognition of his work understanding factors that negatively impact nature using a socioecological systems approach aimed at improving policy and management of species, land and society to restore nature.



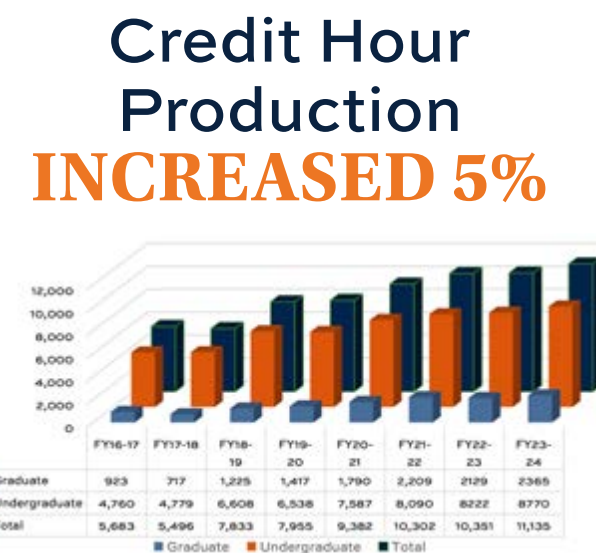
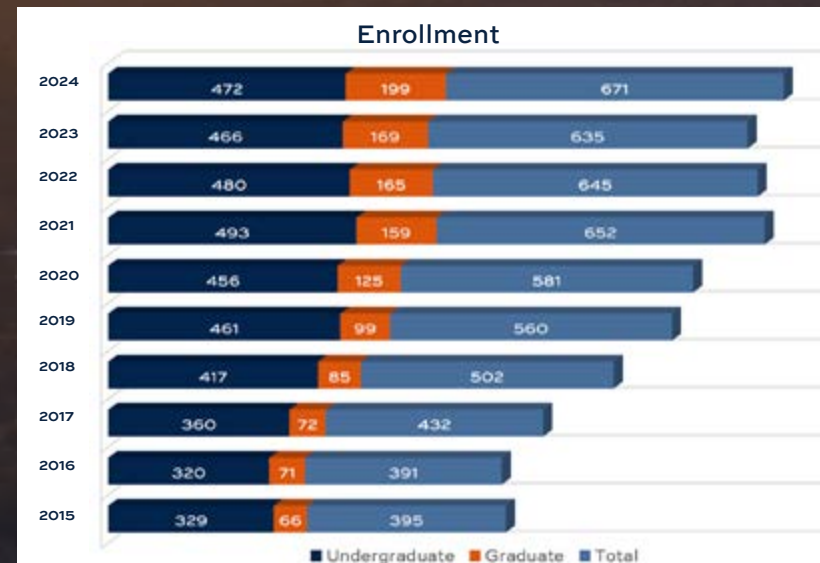
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College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Academics & Learning

INCREASED
FIRST-YEAR
FALL
ENROLLMENT
15%



Students learn about jobs and internships during the annual Career Fair.

60%
OF CFWE LAB
COMPUTERS
REPLACED



Forestry and wildlife students attend Dixon Center summer practicum for 6 to 9 weeks.

Research & Discovery

CFWE AWARDED
\$10 Million
IN CONTRACTS
& GRANTS IN 2024

**NUMBER OF
SUBMITTED
PROPOSALS**
INCREASED
125%
FROM 2023



Faculty research species varieties that may increase pulp mill yield of sustainable fibers up to 40%.

Outreach & Extension

FORESTRY, WILDLIFE & NATURAL RESOURCES EXTENSION ACHIEVED

429
programs

20,886
Alabamians
positively
impacted

MARBLE BOWL GENERATES
NEARLY **50K SPECIES**
RECORDS, ENGAGES
500 VOLUNTEERS

NATURAL RESOURCES
WEBINAR SERIES
8,000 participants

INCREASED
SOCIAL MEDIA
ENGAGEMENT
40%



The CFWE CLT Conference attracts 198 participants.



FWNR Team demonstrates proper tree pruning techniques.

KREHER PRESERVE & NATURE CENTER

60,000

CONTACT HOURS
FACILITATED BY
THE KPNC



Completed construction and dedication of the KPNC's new CLT-built Environmental Education Building.

SOLON DIXON FORESTRY EDUCATION CENTER

13,964 RECORDED
USERS DAYS
13,126 USER NIGHTS

30% OCCUPANCY
INCREASE OVER
LAST YEAR



The Dixon Center hosts Wildland Firefighter Apprentice Program 10 to 12 weeks per year.

THE **CENTER FOR
NATURAL RESOURCES
MANAGEMENT ON
MILITARY LANDS**
BROUGHT

\$3.2 Million
TO AUBURN UNIVERSITY
IN 2024

Alumni & Friends



Alumni enjoy the CFWE's annual Homecoming Tailgate.

CFWE
SURPASSED
GOAL BY **245%**
\$5.61
MILLION
TOTAL RAISED
68%
OF PROPOSALS
WERE FUNDED



CFWE honors its donors and scholarship recipients.

Gonzalez finds eye-opening experiences in new parks and recreation major

By Jenna Parnell



Maleah Gonzalez and her supervisor, Maura Toohey, tour the expansive pool area at the new Lake Wilmore Recreation Center.

Maleah Gonzalez’s journey into the field of parks and recreation began with a summer job at her local pool and recreation center when she was just 16 years old. Little did she know this experience would spark a passion for community-focused work that has guided her college career at the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE). “I started working at the pool and rec center every summer, and it really shaped my view on what I wanted to do with my career,” Gonzalez said. “I loved being able to interact with the community, and I knew this was something I wanted to pursue.” Gonzalez, a sophomore majoring in parks and recreation management, initially enrolled as an education major; but quickly realized it wasn’t the right fit. After discovering the Parks and

Recreation Management (PARK) undergraduate program, she found her true calling. “I was drawn to the newness of the major,” she said. “It’s exciting to be a part of something that’s still growing. There’s a lot of potential in this field.” The program may be small currently, but for Gonzalez, that is a strength, not a weakness. “There aren’t many of us in the major right now, which creates a unique opportunity to build close relationships with professors and fellow students,” she said. “You really get to know people here, and that’s something I value.” Those relationships have played a key role in Gonzalez’s education. Through courses such as Leadership in Parks and Recreation and Safety, Risk and Legal Aspects of Parks, Recreation

and Sport Facility Management, she has built a solid foundation in her studies and with her peer group. The greatest benefit, however, has been the mentorship from her professors. **“The professors at the CFWE go above and beyond to support us. They give us the tools to network, build relationships with companies and prepare us for life after graduation.” – Maleah Gonzalez**

A standout experience for Gonzalez was attending the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, with Allie McCreary, assistant professor in the PARK program. “The NRPA Conference provided students with a valuable opportunity to network and learn from over 8,000 professionals in the park and recreation industry,” McCreary said. “Attending the conference was truly eye-opening for the students, showing them the diversity of the recreation industry and the value of professional development for career success.”

The CFWE also gave Gonzalez a fresh perspective on sustainability and the environment, both of which are key objectives of managing parks and recreation practices. “Moving to the CFWE really opened my eyes to how we live our day-to-day lives,” Gonzalez said. “It gave me a fresh perspective on sustainability and the environment.”

Gonzalez recently took a major step in her career by accepting a position at the newly constructed Lake Wilmore Recreation Center in Auburn, Alabama. The facility is home to a wide variety of amenities, including two full-sized basketball courts, locker rooms, activity rooms, fitness rooms, an elevated indoor walking track, covered pickleball courts, party rooms, conference rooms and lap and zero-entry pools featuring shallow areas for lessons.

Gonzalez’s role is centered on lifeguarding, but she’s eager to grow and take on more responsibilities. “The new center is amazing,” she said. “There really is something for everyone here. It’s a great resource for our community.”

For current and future students considering a career in parks and recreation, Gonzalez offers her advice.

“This field has so many different opportunities and there is always something to suit your personal goals and abilities.” – Maleah Gonzalez

As Gonzalez continues her studies at the CFWE, she is excited about the opportunities that lie ahead. With the support of her professors, advisors and new experiences at the Lake Wilmore Recreation Center, Gonzalez is well on her way to making a meaningful impact in the field of parks and recreation.



Auburn CFWE collaborates to investigate southeastern bat disease ecology

By Cole Sikes



A southeastern bat (top) and a tricolor bat (bottom) share a dwelling in a culvert in Lee County, Alabama.

Researchers at the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are working together to study disease ecology in southeastern bat populations. Through the efforts of CFWE faculty and local USFWS personnel along with several partners, the team is dedicated to proactively uncovering the mysteries of Alabama’s bat populations and the diseases that affect them.

THE CULPRIT
The researchers are honing their efforts on a deadly disease: white nose syndrome (WNS). This illness is caused by a certain fungus, *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*, that is believed to have originated in Europe or Asia and arrived in North America in the early 2000s, according to the National Park Service. This fungus thrives in communal bat habitats, making several species susceptible to disease transmission.

Since its introduction, it has been recorded in a majority of the contiguous U.S. and Canadian provinces. Cave-dwelling bat species have witnessed dramatic population declines in the previous two decades because of WNS, spurring the need for proactive research to acquire more information about where bats are dwelling and which species are present.

Brittany Barker-Jones, USFWS fish and wildlife biologist, says that since caves are not common in south Alabama, bats will find more unnatural dwellings to call home. “In the southern part of Alabama, where caves aren’t common, bats have been found occupying culverts in the winter,” she said.

“Culverts are manmade structures found under roads that can mimic cave environments.” Because of their intended function, culverts provide the dark, moist habitat that a cave typically exhibits. Complimenting their nocturnality, bats take safe harbor in these spaces during winter while feeding on insects for nourishment. True to its name, bats displaying WNS will exhibit a ‘white nose’ where the fungus can be seen, as well as on their wings where the fungus can deteriorate thin membranes. Bats are flying mammals, and severe infections that create holes in their wings can impact their ability to fly and eat. Because of the disease, infected bats will also use more of their internally stored energy while hibernating and will often fatally starve before seasonal temperatures warm.

SPECIES UNDER INVESTIGATION
WNS is known to affect little brown bats, northern long-eared bats and tricolored bats in North America. Tri-colored bats are currently proposed to be listed as endangered in accordance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This is the primary species the team is investigating.

Bats are an important animal for ecosystems across the Southeast and beyond. According to Barker-Jones, bats provide free pest control and can consume more than 1,000 mosquitoes in one night. Agriculture, a staple in the Southeast, also benefits from bats’ predation on harmful insect pests, saving the U.S. agriculture industry more than \$3.7 billion per year on average. Bats are also known pollinators, contributing to the pollination of more than 500 plant species globally.

Molly Simonis, CFWE assistant professor and wildlife disease ecologist, says that being in front of the species’ potential ESA listing with accurate, current population data is the goal of the voluntary research. “We surveyed culverts in eastern Alabama to find bat species seeking refuge in these culverts in winter months to gain better population estimates of species threatened by WNS in the U.S.,” she said. “Other states like Mississippi, Georgia and Texas also monitor culverts for bats sensitive to WNS, and Alabama uses similar methods.”



Molly Simonis searches for bats in a culvert under Interstate 85 in Lee County, Alabama.

“Culvert surveys in Alabama are a part of a broader effort to understand the abundance, ecology and behaviors of North American bats imperiled by this disease.” – Molly Simonis

Conducting the bat surveys, as some could imagine, is a dirty job. Wading through water flows, thick mud, steep drop-offs and seemingly endless mosquitoes is not for the faint of heart. For researchers like Barker-Jones and Simonis, it is the best part of their workday.

“We search for bats methodically; scanning the ceilings, weep holes and walls of the culverts looking for bats or signs of bats,” Barker-Jones said. “Typically, the bats are found packed snugly into holes or cracks of the culverts. They’re also seen hanging on the ceilings and walls. We try not to disturb them, visually documenting the species and number of each. We also gather information about the culvert size and type to better understand if bats have a preference of culvert they’re occupying.”

ALL HANDS ON DECK
The team is not alone in their quest for bat disease ecology knowledge. An interdisciplinary partnership with the Alabama Bat Working Group, a collaborative effort between private, state and federal organizations, provides plentiful resources to accomplish the task at hand. This group is comprised of Auburn University, Alabama Power, the

Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, USFWS, U.S. Forest Service, Alabama Forestry Foundation, Alabama Department of Transportation and several environmental consultants.

For example, Simonis and Barker-Jones are utilizing maps and other information from ALDOT to expedite the location of bridges and culverts along interstates in the area to survey bats. As a unified entity, the collective resources of the Alabama Bat Working Group ensure all hands-on deck to protect the designated bat species.

This collaborative effort among conservation partners highlights the critical importance of pooling resources to advance land-grant research efforts.

“These surveys have given me the opportunity to do some important work as a new principal investigator (PI) at Auburn,” said Simonis.

“It is very valuable to work with other bat researchers here in Alabama and to gain insights into how Alabama bats use the landscape compared to other places I’ve performed research.” – Molly Simonis

The team plans to continue gathering and processing their findings in hopes of protecting the beloved bat species that call Alabama home.

For more information on WNS and where it can be found, refer to the spread map located on the WNS Response Team website.



Noles to pioneer environmental law curricula

By Jenna Parnell



Jim Noles has joined the faculty in the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) to spearhead the development of a minor in Environmental Law, a program designed to equip students with legal knowledge in the evolving field of environmental policy and law. With decades of experience spanning military service, private practice and academia, Noles brings a dynamic perspective to Auburn. Raised as a United States “Army brat,” Noles moved frequently across the U.S., Germany and the Middle East before settling in Birmingham, Alabama, where he has resided for 27 years. Noles graduated from the United States Military Academy at

West Point with a bachelor’s degree in international history. His transition into law began at the University of Texas School of Law, which led to a career at a regional law firm before cofounding his own practice.

“Like it or not, issues of environmental law touch on literally every discipline and profession encompassed by the CFWE,” Noles said.

“If our students are educated in environmental law, I hope that they will know the issues to consider, the questions to ask and the mistakes to avoid, whether they are engaged in forestry, wildlife management, the natural resources field or the parks and recreation profession.” – Jim Noles

NOLES’ CAREER AND CURRICULA
Noles did not initially plan to specialize in environmental law, but a clerkship during law school with a firm known for its expertise in the field sparked his interest.

“Its practice encompassed all sorts of interesting aspects of law and public policy, and I really came to enjoy it and to appreciate the various challenging opportunities to help our clients,” he said.

The CFWE’s Environmental Law minor aims to provide students with a solid foundation in environmental regulations and

policies, preparing them for careers in environmental management and protection, natural resources and sustainable development.

The curriculum includes two core courses: Environmental Law and Property Law along with three additional courses from a list of restricted electives. Currently, Noles teaches Environmental Law and Property Law.

A graduate certificate in Environmental Law is also in the planning stages. This program would arm postgraduate students with a greater understanding of environmental law and policy to advance their knowledge and career opportunities.

Noles expresses his teaching philosophy focuses on organization, real-world applications and student engagement. He incorporates current events into lectures and assignments while also trying to find ways to interact personally with his students, even in online courses.

Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE, echoes Noles’ passion for student impact and reinforces his fit within in the new Environmental Law minor program.

“We are excited to see what he will do with this opportunity and the many future careers that will benefit from his instruction.” – Dean Alavalapati

“Jim’s drive to instill confidence and knowledge in others, as well as his decorated qualifications, makes him a perfect pioneer for this new program,” Alavalapati said.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE
Enthusiastic about his new role, Noles views Auburn as a place of collaboration and opportunity.

“It’s exciting to be working with Dean Alavalapati along with his faculty and staff,” Noles said. “It is clear they have an ambition for the CFWE that will take it to the next level.”

Noles encourages students to fully engage with the minor, emphasizing the importance of active participation. With only a handful of environmental law minors offered at universities nationwide, Noles hopes Auburn students recognize the unique opportunity before them.

“I’m looking forward to getting to know my new colleagues and the students in the college,” he said. “It really does seem to be an awesome community.”



Kumar co-leads study revealing past soil moisture predicts future drought

By Jamie Anderson

With climate extremes such as droughts and heatwaves becoming more frequent and severe, reliable soil moisture forecasts can enhance community resilience and disaster preparedness.

A research team co-led by faculty in Auburn University’s College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment has concluded a study to improve soil moisture prediction at sub-seasonal timescales—ranging from two to six weeks—in support of agricultural decision-making and improved water resource management.

Accurate forecasts at these lead times help bridge the gap between weather and seasonal forecasts, enabling better drought preparedness and irrigation planning.

The study titled “Enhancing sub-seasonal soil moisture forecasts through land initialization,” recently published in the peer-reviewed scientific journal npj Climate and Atmospheric Science, concluded that contrary to the common focus on oceanic and atmospheric drivers, land initialization—especially soil moisture memory—dominates predictability, accounting for over 90% of the soil moisture forecast skill in many regions.

Co-led by Sanjiv Kumar, an associate professor of earth system modeling and observation, the study employed a novel set of climate modeling sensitivity experiments using the Community Earth System Model Version 2 Sub to Seasonal (CESM2-S2S) climate framework to

isolate and quantify the individual contributions of land, ocean and atmospheric initializations to sub-seasonal soil moisture forecast skill.

Funded by a \$500,000 grant from the USDA-NIFA FACT program, the team used eight sensitivity experiments to disentangle the individual impacts of the three components and their interactions on the forecast skill for the contiguous United States.

A comparative analysis against two other climate models identified the potential for improving the representation of soil moisture-precipitation feedback. Revealing that land initialization plays a key role, the research team has highlighted the importance of land surface processes, particularly soil moisture memory.

“The findings provide a path to improving operational forecast systems for agriculture, drought early warning and water resource planning. Further, improved irrigation scheduling and drought response will reduce crop losses and enhance farm-level decision-making, benefiting the agricultural economy.” – Sanjiv Kumar



Developing sentinel gardens

as first line of defense from disease, pests *By Amy Burtch*



You don't need a green thumb to enjoy the beauty of a blooming azalea bush or a flourishing garden. But you may have never considered that a garden could have a superpower.

Unless, of course, you are Lori Eckhardt.

This professor at Auburn University's College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) understands the power of gardens to be a first line of defense against plant diseases, pests and environmental changes.

Eckhardt earned funding to partner with the City of Mobile, Alabama, and the Alabama Port Authority to strategically locate sentinel gardens at the Port of Mobile as early warning systems for potential invaders.

"While precise annual figures are challenging to determine, shipping ports are a significant entry point for invasive pathogens and insects to enter the United States. And once here, invasive species cause major economic losses — with the forest industry losing \$4.2 billion annually."

— Lori Eckhardt

PREVENTING LARGE-SCALE DAMAGE

Invasive plant pests and diseases can wreak havoc on once-healthy native species and often go undetected until it's too late. But improved prevention could soon be a reality with the addition of sentinel gardens to the Port of Mobile.

These gardens have been successfully used worldwide as early detection systems before pests or diseases can cause large-scale damage.

This proactive application has been endorsed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.



The sentinel garden will be located near the APM Terminals Intermodal Rail Facility at the Port of Mobile.

The Port of Mobile sentinel garden project is currently underway. Eckhardt secured funding from the U.S. Forest Service and has met with both the city and the port.

"We have secured the locations in which to establish the sentinel gardens, strategized the timing to establish the gardens in late fall or early winter and have determined which species should be planted," Eckhardt said.

Designed to monitor and detect the presence of plant diseases, pests and environmental changes, these gardens are strategically placed in key locations to identify impending threats to agriculture, forests and native ecosystems.

"In our case, we will look at the economically, ecologically and culturally important tree and shrub species found within Alabama's forests," Eckhardt said.

SPECIES SELECTION COMPLETED

The list of species to be included in the sentinel gardens has been finalized.

Among other species of trees, loblolly pine, longleaf pine, pecan and bald cypress were selected due to their importance to the state of Alabama.

Loblolly pine is the most widely planted pine species in the Southeast, and longleaf pine is a keystone species in the longleaf pine ecosystem. Highly produced in Alabama, pecan is a valuable nut crop used domestically and exported, and the presence of bald cypress stabilizes ecosystems and helps with flood control and water purification.

"In short, these trees reflect Alabama's rich natural resources, support key industries and embody aspects of Southern identity and tradition," said Eckhardt.

While several other varieties were also chosen, the shrubs selected for the sentinel gardens — rhododendron, sassafras and beautyberry — hold ecological, cultural and aesthetic value in Alabama.

Eckhardt recognizes that, "while these shrubs may not have the same commercial weight as pines or pecans, they contribute significantly to Alabama's biodiversity, traditional knowledge and natural beauty."

That said, they have important functions: rhododendrons offer habitat and nectar for pollinators; sassafras hosts several butterfly species and provides birds and small mammals food; and beautyberry provides critical seasonal food for deer, birds and small mammals.

Eckhardt said several companies have donated trees to the project, including ArborGen, Hunter Trees and Tom Dodd Nurseries. However, most of the shrub material is still needed,



Logan Schatz (left), Professor Lori Eckhardt (center) and Jessica Baldwin (right) discuss plans for the sentinel garden at the Mary Olive Thomas Demonstration Forest.

including beautyberry, firebush, native azaleas, rhododendron, sassafras and sparkleberry.

STUDENTS MONITOR, EDUCATE, ADVOCATE

Once the gardens are up and running, CFWE students will play an active role in garden research and education.

"They will be engaged in monitoring and data collection, community education and awareness campaigns and policy and advocacy engagement," said Eckhardt.

Sophomore Logan Schatz, a mechanical engineering major, is already involved with the project. One aspect he quickly learned about was how critical yet difficult it is to monitor and understand diseases.

"With the global highways we've created, the potential for invasive diseases to land within and infect our ecosystems is incredibly high," said Schatz.

Schatz looks forward to the process of designing the gardens, as design optimization is "a passion" of his.

"Since we have limited space, the gardens need to be optimized to make efficient use of the designated land but also to be healthy and ideally attractive," Schatz said.

Eckhardt is in recruitment mode now, looking for students to participate as well as community groups interested in citizen science.

With a formidable team in place, Eckhardt should experience no difficulty achieving the project's straightforward objectives. First, establish the sentinel plantings. Next, develop educational programming for communities surrounding the Port of Mobile. Lastly, conduct sentinel planting at CFWE's Mary Olive Thomas Demonstration Forest.

PARTNERS PARTICIPATE IN MANY WAYS

Project partnerships are central to the success of the Port of Mobile's sentinel gardens.

"Planting on a campus property enables our team to both monitor the plants and offer a training and education facility for citizen science groups, extension, master gardeners, 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA), scouts and K-12 classes."

— Lori Eckhardt

Partners help acquire funding, determine which species to plant and assist with garden design, monitoring protocols and training. According to Eckhardt, they will also connect with other people and organizations who are interested in participating in the gardens in some way.

THE PROACTIVE POWER OF PREVENTION

The benefits of these proactive efforts will be substantial and impactful.

"Sentinel gardens provide an early detection system of threats, help prevent the spread of invasive species, help researchers understand the behavior of invasives, provide data for global monitoring networks and support integrated pest and disease management."

— Lori Eckhardt

These gardens can diminish the economic, ecological and agricultural damage caused by threatening pests and diseases.

"This proactive approach also minimizes reliance on chemical treatments, helps conserve biodiversity and supports sustainable land management," Eckhardt said.

A groundbreaking ceremony is being planned for winter 2026.



Eckhardt chose species like the shrub "American beautyberry" for the sentinel gardens because of their ecological, cultural and aesthetic value.

SENTINEL GARDENS PARTNERS:

Alabama Department of Agriculture; Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; Alabama Forestry Commission; Alabama Forestry Association; Master Gardeners Chapters; National Forests and Parks; Natural Resources Conservation Service; U.S. Forest Service; Urban Foresters; and USFS-Forest Health Protection.



Good evening,
It's 7 p.m. on Wednesday, May 7, and this is an update from the City of Mobile.

Having one of the fastest-growing ports in the nation brings numerous benefits to the City of Mobile, but even though we want to keep some stuff, like invasive insects, out. An incredible team from Customs and Border Protection provides a frontline defense at the Port with offshore screenings, spot-checked shipments, and even quarantines when needed.

To further support their efforts and help mitigate potential risks, the City of Mobile and the Alabama Port Authority are partnering with Auburn University on an innovative research program to install sentinel gardens in strategic locations. These gardens will serve as early warning systems for invasive pests and plant diseases that might have been missed offshore.

Set to be planted later this year, the Sentinel Gardens will be monitored by students from Auburn's College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment. These students will play an active role in research, education and policy efforts tied to the gardens' findings. Together, these efforts are cultivating more than just plants — they're growing a safer, healthier future for Mobile's natural environment. I want to thank Auburn University and the Port of Mobile for launching this forward-thinking initiative.

—Mobile Mayor Sandy Stimpson

Auburn’s Green Up Alabama engages communities to improve lives, one tree at a time

By Jamie Anderson



Alabama’s small and rural communities are becoming increasingly more vulnerable to a range of issues as their often-sparse tree canopies age and decline.

Lacking sufficient resources to establish and maintain their urban forests, these communities are at greater risk from storm damage, heat and environmental degradation.

Funded through a \$1.5 million grant awarded by the U.S. Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry Program, a new collaboration between Auburn University and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) will engage local partners to address the environmental, social and economic challenges at the root of the problem.

“Green Up Alabama is a strategic response to these multiple intersecting challenges largely affecting urban communities in the state, especially those that have been historically underserved and environmentally disadvantaged.”
– Georgios Arseniou

A THREE-PRONG ISSUE

Georgios Arseniou is an assistant professor in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) and Alabama Extension specialist who co-leads the project team.

Contributing to Alabama’s Forest Action Plan and the Ten-Year Urban and Community Forestry Action Plan (2016–2026), the Green Up Alabama project will deliver a wide spectrum of benefits that collectively support a more just, resilient and prosperous future for urban communities.

One of the central problems it aims to tackle is the lack of equitable urban tree canopy, which disproportionately affects lower-income neighborhoods.

“These communities are often subject to urban heat islands, poor air quality, limited shade and a general lack of access to natural spaces, all of which negatively impact physical and mental health,” said Arseniou.

Due in part to a shortage of trained professionals and a lack of reliable urban forest inventory data, many municipalities across Alabama also face limited capacity and outdated practices in managing urban forests.

Further, though well-intentioned, tree-planting efforts often fail or fall short without fully considering the social barriers that may exist within a community.



REQUIRING A LAND-GRANT SOLUTION

Distinguished by its multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary approach, Green Up Alabama will blend community engagement with applied research, education and workforce development to address the issues impacting the long-term success of urban greening initiatives -a model the team hopes can be replicated across the state, region and nation.

“What makes the project truly unique is the integration of community-driven greening efforts with educational programming, cutting-edge technology and academic research over a sustained five-year period,” said the project’s co-leader Beau Brodbeck, ACES’ assistant director of field operations.

“We anticipate Green Up Alabama will create lasting transformations in how urban forestry is practiced, perceived and sustained across the state.”
– Beau Brodbeck

One key objective is the successful planting and long-term maintenance of over 350 trees in disadvantaged urban areas, providing much-needed environmental relief and beautification.

But the project’s ambitions go far beyond tree counts.

It aims to establish a pipeline of skilled, local arboriculture professionals by training municipal workers and emerging green-sector employees, enhancing their technical expertise and employability. The initiative also seeks to engage and inspire young

people, offering them leadership roles and hands-on experience in environmental stewardship.

On the research side, the project will produce high-quality urban forest inventory datasets and actionable insights that municipalities can use to guide future planning. Importantly, the research component will further explore the social and cultural factors that affect tree adoption, survival and public acceptance, enabling future urban greening efforts to be more culturally attuned.

A MODEL FOR ALL

“At the end of the five years, the goal is to have created a replicable, community-rooted model for urban forestry that can be scaled across other regions of Alabama and beyond,” said Brodbeck.

This novel approach combines technical innovation, human-centered design and educational investment, giving the project the unique capacity to generate measurable impact at multiple levels.

“By aligning ecological restoration with economic empowerment and social inclusion, Green Up Alabama will generate enduring value for communities and ecosystems alike.”
– Dean Alavalapati

To learn more about the project, visit Green Up Alabama: Growing Greener, Stronger Communities - Alabama Cooperative Extension System.



CFWE receives matching gift to restore nursery at Coach Pat Dye’s Crooked Oaks

By Jamie Anderson

Auburn University’s College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) has received a matching gift from the You Might Be For Auburn Foundation (UMB4AU) to support a restoration project underway at Crooked Oaks, the former homestead of Auburn’s famed football coach, Pat Dye.

The CFWE was gifted the 415-acre property in 2023. Located not far from Auburn’s main campus in Notasulga, Alabama, Crooked Oaks now serves as a living legacy to Dye’s vision to provide hands-on learning experiences for Auburn students.



Auburn’s famed football coach Pat Dye is shown with one of the Japanese maples he planted throughout Crooked Oaks.

DEVOTED TO EDUCATION

Born from fellowship and a shared devotion to education, the UMB4AU foundation is humble but very serious about its mission to support Auburn.

The founding directors of UMB4AU, Dan Lovell and David Pursell, are passionate about the charity’s mission to fund activities that benefit Auburn faculty, students, athletes and facilities, and have significantly contributed to numerous projects that advanced the university and its academic programs.

By virtue of a recent discussion with CFWE development director Heather Crozier, one of the original foundation members, Jay Evers,

connected with Coach’s intent for Crooked Oaks and championed the restoration initiative with the directors.

Like other successful philanthropic endeavors, the foundation hopes its gift will galvanize the Auburn community to donate the matching funds required to complete the project during Auburn’s 2025 Tiger Giving Day crowdfunding event this fall.

LOVE OF THE LAND

As a fellow nature lover and former high school football player, Evers feels a kinship with Dye, whom he knew personally.

“You know, he moved from one season to another, and I know football gave him great pleasure,” said Evers. “But, if you asked him how he identified, he would probably lean more towards the land than he would football.”

Dye began developing the property in 1998 with his partner, Nancy McDonald and continued to improve all aspects of the land until his passing in 2020. The Tiger Giving Day project will restore the cherished Japanese maple nursery that Dye had planted himself.

Crooked Oaks’ Manager N.L. Hart feels the project will ensure the property maintains the horticultural integrity envisioned by Dye and McDonald as an educational and recreational resource.

“These funds will be crucial to enable our staff and students to improve the infrastructure and layout of the nursery to optimize both its functionality and accessibility.”
– N.L. Hart

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY RESOURCE

“This includes installing and repairing irrigation systems for the various gardens and drainage areas that will prevent erosion.”

True to Dye’s vision, providing student experiential learning opportunities will be a cornerstone of the project.

The Crooked Oaks staff and Auburn faculty in the CFWE and the College of



While developing Crooked Oaks, Coach Pat Dye and his partner, Nancy McDonald, created a two-acre retreat called Quail Hollow Gardens, which features walking paths that wind among 200 mature Japanese maple specimens of 71 Japanese maple cultivars interspersed with other trees and flowering shrubs.

Agriculture will engage graduate and undergraduate students to develop the nursery and assist with grafting new Japanese maple seedlings and other species that will be featured.

Hart said the Crooked Oaks nursery is presently offering numerous Japanese maple cultivars and Camellia sasanqua, japonica and hybrid cultivars for sale, with future plans to diversify the inventory.

To complete the Tiger Giving Day project, Crooked Oaks will require high-quality supplies and materials, such as grafting tools, soil amendments, multi-purpose gardening tools and shade material to enhance the overall gardening process.

Additionally, a key component of the project is to revitalize the existing greenhouse that will be used for overwintering seedlings and other plants. The anticipated cost for the projects is estimated to be more than \$100,000.

SHARING A LEGACY

“UMB4AU’s matching gift will have a tremendous impact at Crooked Oaks that will benefit the college, its students and academic programs,” said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE. “On Tiger Giving Day, we are hopeful the Auburn Family will help us exceed the match required to leverage

UMB4AU’s generous donation to restore Coach’s beloved gardens.”

This year, Auburn University will celebrate the 10th anniversary of Tiger Giving Day on September 10. During the popular crowdfunding event, the community is invited to support various projects that will change lives on campus, in our communities and across the state.

“When you think about all the different facets in the opportunities out there for people to be involved, whether they’re bird hunting or buying plants or having a corporate retreat or whatever it is, there’s a legacy we can all share in from now on, and as long as there is planet Earth, there will be Crooked Oaks.”
– Jay Evers

Individuals who wish to participate in this campaign or to learn about additional giving opportunities may contact Heather Crozier at (334) 740-9522 or vannhea@auburn.edu. For more information about Crooked Oaks or to inquire about nursery sales, visit the Crooked Oaks website.



Auburn now home to Alabama’s only First Class Pre-K, nature-based school

By Cole Sikes

The Auburn University Kreher Preserve and Nature Center (KPNC) Woodland Wonders Nature Preschool (WWNP) will now expand with tuition-free access to the program’s first-class educational experiences thanks to extramural funding and a new Alabama First Class Pre-K designation. This long-conducted program is the first nature preschool in the state to receive such recognition. The designation marks an advancement for Alabama and the nature-based learning community.

A NEW FRONTIER

The Alabama First Class Pre-K program provides pre-kindergarten programming for approximately 24,000 four-year-olds across the state. This platform is administered through the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE), the state agency tasked with giving high-quality care and education to young children across Alabama. Their program has received high ratings from entities such as the National Institute for Early Education Research for almost two consecutive decades.

“This milestone represents a significant advancement for both Alabama and the entire nature-based learning community,” said Michael Buckman, KPNC manager.

“WWNP will be the first nature preschool in the state to receive this prestigious certification. It is noteworthy that, nationwide, very few state-level education departments recognize or license nature-based schools at any grade level.”

– Michael Buckman

A NATURAL FIT

According to KPNC’s staff, there is a natural fit for First Class Pre-K within the center. The KPNC’s mission is to ‘promote a sense of stewardship towards nature through quality environmental education, recreation and outreach programs with Auburn University and its community partners.’ With aligned goals, the center was highly enthusiastic about the possibility of becoming a First Class Pre-K school several years ago.

Sarah Crim, the education director at KPNC and director and founder of WWNP, learned about this designation while working with colleagues in Auburn’s College of Education.

“After the nature preschool opened and began to develop and evolve, we always had the idea in the back of our minds of applying to be a First Class Pre-K but it was never quite the right time,” Crim said. “With the opening of our new classroom

in the Environmental Education Building, it just felt like the door was opening and we reached out to state representatives about our idea. We had very encouraging conversations with representatives from the First Class Pre-K program and found that our ideas and philosophies in education were very aligned. With encouragement from them, we applied for the opportunity to open a classroom in the 2024-2025 school year and are thrilled to have been accepted.”

The program has already received its first grant as First Class Pre-K for the 2025 award year in the amount of \$135,000, which has enabled the KPNC to offer tuition-free education for enrolled students as well as hire two certified early childhood educators for the school. Lead teacher Elise Wilkins and auxiliary teacher Amanda Prince assumed their new roles this spring.

A NEW ERA

This year begins a new era for the KPNC and its educational programming. New, state-of-the-art facilities in its Environmental Education Building, legislative support for education and highly motivated and invested team members make for endless possibilities. The team is eager to embark on this journey and is grateful to everyone who has made this feat possible.

“We are so excited to be the first nature preschool to provide a First-Class Pre-K in the state of Alabama,” said Crim. “We thank the representatives from ADECE for believing in the teaching philosophy of nature preschool and its benefits to the students of our state. We have seen these benefits firsthand through the last five years of the WWNP, and it is truly an honor to be able to open another classroom at our facility. It is our hope that we can lead through example so that other nature preschools and future nature preschools will also apply to be a First-Class Pre-K.”

If you are interested in learning more about the first-class WWNP or the WWNP, please contact Sarah Crim at natureeducation@auburn.edu. Applications for the First Class Pre-K for 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years are now available through the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education website.

Those wishing to support the KPNC, its programs and new facilities with a naming opportunity or other tax-deductible donation may contact Heather Crozier, CFWE’s director of development, at vannhea@auburn.edu or by visiting https://kpnc.auburn.edu/eeb/.



Twardy celebrated by Auburn CFWE for a career of service in forestry

By Cole Sikes



Joe Twardy has lived a life of service based on forest management. As a 1972 alumnus of the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE), Twardy’s significant impact on Alabama’s forests earned him the nomination and awarding of the CFWE’s 2025 Outstanding Alumni Award.

The CFWE honored Twardy’s lifelong commitment to natural resources during its annual awards ceremony held in April 2025, when Twardy was presented with his award among many of his former colleagues, friends and family members.

Twardy earned a Bachelor of Science in forest management and later joined the forestry workforce in Alabama following his graduation. His extensive career started at a paper mill in Pine Hill, Alabama, while working in wood fiber procurement for MacMillan Bloedel.

Bob Sharp, a longtime friend, coworker and award co-nominator of Twardy, says that Twardy’s role was crucial for the mill, and he perfected it over time.

“Procurement is vastly different today from what it was 25 or 30 years ago,” Sharp said. “Relationship building was much more important then and Joe was a master at it. Joe’s character and integrity inspired loyalty from his suppliers, but it also created trust and respect from his coworkers, his peers and even his competitors. A rare accomplishment which few can claim to have achieved.”

Nearing the culmination of his career, Twardy began serving in several leadership positions within Alabama, beginning in 2004 when Gov. Bob Riley appointed him to a Hurricane Ivan response task force that would help the state’s forest landowners and industry recover from devastation. From 2010 to 2011, he served on the Alabama Forestry Association board of directors and ultimately as president.

“As the state forester, I rely on Joe for wisdom and guidance to help me make decisions that affect our agency and the people we serve,” said Rick Oates, Alabama Forestry Commission state forester. “His sound, levelheaded advice helps the commission function more efficiently.

“I can think of no other alumni who personifies the values embedded in the Auburn creed as Joe Twardy.”
– Rick Oates

Exemplifying the values of Auburn is precisely why he was awarded the CFWE Outstanding Alumni Award.

Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE, salutes Twardy for serving as an example of what is possible with an Auburn education.

“Joe Twardy’s career reflects the very best of what we hope our graduates will achieve—a lifetime of leadership, integrity and service to natural resources,” said Alavalapati. “His unwavering dedication to Alabama’s forests and his ability to lead through times of change make him an outstanding ambassador of the Auburn spirit.”

Joe and his wife, Claire, currently live in Auburn and enjoy spending time with family. Their two daughters, Sara and Anna, are Auburn alumnae, avid Auburn fans and work and live in Atlanta, Georgia.



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If you’re within 15 years of graduating from the CFWE, consider joining or renewing your membership today. Your annual membership will fund the Compass Circle/Bashinsky Ever Auburn Scholarship or an area of your choice.Scan the QR code to be directed to the Compass Circle webpage to learn more.



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