

Alabama Forestry Association annual meeting September 10, 2018

Thank you, Patricia. It's always terrific to see an Auburn graduate leading in their industry.

Good morning! I'm thrilled to be here. I couldn't ask for a better group of folks to start my day with than you all. I'm especially pleased to see several Auburn alums and supporters here today.

As representatives of Alabama's forestry industry, I am always impressed by your continuous support and leadership for our state. It is because of your work that Alabama's forests remain one of the most productive and sustainable resources in the nation.

I have a special appreciation for what you do. As some of you may know, I majored in plant pathology, and after earning a PhD, I moved into the academic world. I was an extension specialist, then a professor of agriculture, and later oversaw agricultural research in North Carolina.

While we were in North Carolina, Janet and I started a Christmas tree farm specializing in Fraser firs. It's still going strong after 20 years, and my son runs it today. And I have to say, that in addition to shooting my bow and hunting, getting out on our tree farm is one of my favorite things to do.

Another one of my favorite things to do is talk about Auburn. I am honored to serve as president of such an outstanding university.

Auburn is the largest land-grant institution in the state. And when land-grant universities were established in 1862, they were designed to support a more hands-on curriculum. They emphasized practical training to prepare the workforce to adapt to industrial innovations and teach citizens to understand and appreciate the role of agriculture in their state's economy.

Today, Auburn continues to serve the citizens of our state through providing exceptional instruction, groundbreaking research, and broad community outreach.

Our core values are consistently demonstrated by our continued efforts to develop new partnerships and collaborations—all focused on the changing needs of the communities and industries we serve.

Auburn's number-one contribution to the industry is preparing students who will lead not just in today's workforce, but also the workforce of the future.

The backbone of Alabama's forests and wildlife enterprises is Auburn's School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences. The school prepares qualified professionals by generating new knowledge and technologies to provide science-based solutions for real-world challenges.

The forest industry directly supports nearly forty-two thousand jobs in Alabama—putting 2.1 billion dollars in the pockets of Alabama's workers. Alabama's forests account for 69 percent of the total land in the state. And due to growth in innovations and technologies, the sector has the potential to expand even more.

Auburn is ensuring our industry will continue to have the innovators ready to lead as it expands and adapts to the marketplace of the future. Over the past three years, the School's undergraduate and graduate enrollment has grown by almost 50 percent, and it is poised to grow by another fifty percent.

For the past four years, nearly 100 percent of forestry students from the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences land jobs in the industry after graduation. For the alumni here today, that should make you very proud. Our exceptional track record of preparing industry-ready graduates demonstrates the value of your Auburn degree.

And I hear from those of you who employ Auburn grads that our students show up on day one willing to roll up their sleeves and get to work, and they have the skills necessary to contribute and lead.

The School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences maintains several core programs designed to educate future forest professionals. Our land-grant mission requires us to be forward-thinking in order to prepare us for the global economy of tomorrow. We're developing new, innovative undergraduate degree programs in anticipation of where the industry is headed.

We see the importance of our role as a leading provider of instruction for emerging forestry and natural resource professionals. Our students and alumni and the work of our researchers ... are major contributors to the forestry profession, but we are determined to do more. We are building the capacity for growth by advancing our academic programs and research.

Because of environmental concerns and evolving technologies, we're seeing a shift toward the use of sustainable forest biomaterial for everything from packaging and automobiles to pharmaceuticals and commercial construction.

In response to companies' changing demands, the sustainable biomaterials and packaging major was established. The program prepares students for the packaging industry—the third-largest industry in the world. Packaging is expected to become a trillion-dollar industry in the next few years. Graduates of this program will be ready to lead in a sustainable, bio-based economy.

Geospatial technologies have impacted every aspect of our lives—from digital maps and location services on our phones to the management and maintenance of forests and agriculture lands. They are also used to forecast potential markets for retail and development.

To respond to this societal need, Auburn developed the geospatial and environmental informatics degree. It's one of only a few programs of its kind in the Southeast that prepares students for in-demand, high-tech careers where "big data" drives decisions.

The demand for unique sporting experiences and adventures provided by outdoor enterprise continues to grow. Auburn's new wildlife enterprise management degree is a cross-disciplinary program that will prepare students for what promises to be an expanding sector of the nature-based economy. It combines the principles of wildlife management with business management, marketing and hospitality. The program is one of only two of its kind in the country.

As I mentioned before, land-grant universities were designed to emphasize a hands-on curriculum. And for our students there is no better place to experience hands-on learning than the more than 5,300 acres that make up the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center. Solon Dixon is a foundation for experiential learning and research efforts in natural resource fields.

Auburn students are afforded the opportunity to spend summers completing practicums at Solon Dixon, where they are immersed in learning about forestry, wildlife and natural resource management. It's one of the finest facilities of its kind in the country, and it's another thing that sets Auburn apart from our peers.

Auburn has always had a practical research focus, one that is centered around our commitment to benefit our society. But we're aiming higher, and we are increasing our efforts to deliver a practical, meaningful impact on the lives of Alabamians.

To do this, we are increasing our engagement with private and public partners, including those in the forestry profession. Auburn has a long tradition of being a go-to in our state for providing innovative solutions to social, economic and environmental issues. Many of these issues directly impact our natural resources and agriculture.

A great example is Auburn researcher Dr. Lisa Samuelson. She is examining the longleaf pine ecosystem, and she's trying to discover the key to creating more drought-resilient forests and help sustain crucial plant and animal habitats.

Dr. Samuelson and her team are examining above and belowground mechanisms that control tree growth and survival. Their work will have a practical impact on your industry by increasing awareness of the consequences of drought on longleaf pine forests and helping improve the management of forests in the Southeast.

Auburn researchers are helping to create resilient forests for the future, which will make a tangible impact on both the forestry community and our society.

Auburn has several new initiatives in place to advance and accelerate our research endeavors.

One example is the Presidential Awards for Interdisciplinary Research program, or what we call the PAIR program. With 5 million dollars in seed money, the 11 teams are moving toward discoveries that will make a meaningful impact on the lives and economic futures of Alabamians.

The PAIR teams are also set to make an impact on forestry and the natural resource sector. One of the projects we've funded is working on ways to incorporate science-based climate information and prediction into planning, policy and practice. This team is aiming to improve climate resilience and risk management practices in agriculture and natural resources.

The goal for all the PAIR teams is to secure external funding. With additional resources, these innovative researchers will deliver practical solutions—solutions that have the potential to make a mark on the forestry industry. We're well on our way to seeing a return on our investment, and we're expecting great things from the PAIR teams.

Auburn is also increasing funding for our graduate researchers. We welcomed 25 top-tier PhD scholars to campus this fall. These exceptional scholars are recipients of Presidential Graduate Research Fellowships, and they're partnering with Auburn faculty make advancements in established and emerging fields of research.

To support our scholars and foster innovation, we're recruiting 500 scholarship- and research-focused faculty over the next four years. We're recruiting innovators, problem-solvers, and those who have existing relationships with private and public partners.

Many of these faculty will be focused on solving the challenges that face your industry and its impact on the Alabama economy. These new faculty will help support our research endeavors while reinforcing and advancing our instruction mission.

These efforts will undoubtedly continue to attract high-ability students to our programs and allow Auburn to produce leading researchers and professionals that will advocate our state's role in the forestry industry.

We are also committed to our land-grant mission of outreach. To fulfill this commitment, we must increase access to educational opportunities and lifelong learning across the state. Because when we expand the capacity of individuals and communities, we encourage innovation and create new opportunities to elevate our economy and our quality of life.

We also place a high priority on our extension efforts. Extension is part of the fabric of our university. Extension professionals connect the work Auburn researchers do with the people across Alabama. By taking our innovations and sharing them with Alabamians, extension improves the quality of life in our state.

I know Extension also plays a crucial role in what you do. It helps growers tremendously by providing education and management tools to help improve sustainable forest management practices and increase profitability, and it provides tools for recreational and multiple-use land management. Auburn continues to work closely with Extension to continue to deliver solutions with meaningful impact.

I hope you can see how Auburn is not only sustaining our state's future economy, but building a foundation for future growth and prosperity—particularly in the forestry industry. It's our shared goal, and we will not lose sight of this.

To ensure we remain committed to advancing our land-grant mission, we are engaged in a strategic planning process that will create the roadmap to carry Auburn into the future. We are soliciting feedback and input from stakeholders across Alabama to help Auburn continue to address our regional challenges, while embracing emerging opportunities to address the growing economic needs of our state.

From our efforts, I hope you can see how Auburn is not only sustaining our state's future economy, but building a foundation for growth and prosperity—particularly in the forestry industry.

I want to close by expressing my appreciation for all that you do to keep Alabama moving forward. Together, we are headed for a bright future.

Thank you for having me tonight. Thank you for your partnership with Auburn.