Alt-fuels experts to assemble at AU

As America searches for ways to reduce its dependence on non-renewable, imported oil from politically volatile parts of the world, a conference at Auburn next week will bring together many of the nation’s leading experts on alternate sources of energy.

“Energy Solutions from Alabama’s Natural Resources,” on Monday and Tuesday, Oct. 23-24, at the AU Hotel, will examine ways to convert agricultural and forestry products into viable substitutes for fossil fuels. Speakers will include high-ranking officials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, industry councils and energy-technology companies, as well as researchers and administrators from several universities.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, a leading congressional advocate of alternative fuels, is scheduled to deliver the keynote address at Monday’s luncheon.

President George W. Bush called attention to the importance of alternative fuels in his State of the Union address in February and again when he met recently in Birmingham with Auburn researcher David Bransby. A professor in the College of Agriculture, Bransby is one of the world’s leading authorities on production of energy from switchgrass, which many Alabama farmers regard as a weed.

Auburn is also a leading institution in research to develop fossil-fuel alternatives from forest resources and in improving technologies to convert biomass into fuel.

Organized by faculty and administrators in the new, interdisciplinary Auburn Alternative Energy Initiative, the conference will showcase the work of AU faculty in developing advanced systems to produce and deliver energy from renewable natural resources. Conferees also will explore ways to rapidly bring those technologies to market.

AU President Ed Richardson said Auburn launched the multi-disciplinary initiative and organized the conference to spur the development of technologies that can help the nation reduce its dependence on fossil fuels while providing a boost to Alabama’s economy. “Perhaps the greatest opportunity for a land-grant, comprehensive research institution in today’s economy is that of exploring alternatives to fossil fuels and developing ways to make processing and marketing of those alternatives economical and efficient,” said Richardson.

Ralph Zee of AU’s Ginn College of Engineering and Graeme Lockaby of the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences are co-chairs of the Auburn Alternative Energy Initiative, which involves more than 30 faculty members in Agriculture, Engineering, Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, the Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension.

“This is an exciting opportunity to leverage existing strengths to assume leadership in meeting the critical need,” said Zee. “Not only will these efforts reduce our nation’s dependence on foreign energy sources, but they will also advance economic development through reinvigoration of Alabama’s present natural resource-based industries and the establishment of new industries based on energy and value-added products from renewable biomass.”
While America forgot gas crisis, Bransby sought biofuel options

Editor’s Note: Profiles in Excellence is a periodic series about award-winning faculty at Auburn. In the first installment, this week’s article focuses on Professor Bransby of the Department of Agronomy and Soils, who is the 2006 recipient of the AU Award for Excellence in Faculty Outreach. Portions of this article appeared in the fall issue of Beyond Auburn, AU’s Outreach Scholarship Magazine.

By 1987, when David Bransby came to Auburn from his native South Africa, most American consumers were turning their attention away from energy conservation after a period of intense interest in the subject. Still, the new faculty member in the Department of Agronomy and Soils agreed to a request by his dean in the College of Agriculture to continue a biofuels program that had been started by two researchers who had left the university.

During the energy crisis of the early 1970s, the federal government had begun funding research into alternative sources of energy from petroleum-based fuels. That research emphasis continued into the next decade but faded gradually as oil prices declined. Arriving at Auburn as federal funds dried up, Bransby found himself in a charged environment in which the multiple stake holders in energy that could be economically produced and yield substantial quantities of energy.

At the time, Bransby insisted that he did not know enough about biofuels to lead the research. “But the response was that nobody else knew anything about it either,” Bransby recalls. “Renewable energy was a totally new area.”

For most of the next two decades, government and industry support for alternative fuels waned. Yet, intrigued by the possibilities of biofuels, Bransby continued his research into alternative sources of energy from agricultural products. And, through AU Outreach and the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, he continued sharing his findings with agricultural and government leaders in Alabama and beyond.

When the U.S. Department of Energy cut funding for Bransby’s research project in 2002, he secured funds from the AES to continue his investigations into growing switchgrass and processing it into a commercially viable fuel. “I’ve continued because I believe this is really important stuff,” Bransby said. “It’s going to play a major role in the country’s future. I’ve learned that.”

By 2006, when rising energy prices refocused consumer, industry and government attention on alternative fuels, the biofuels program that Bransby had emerged as one of America’s most knowledgeable authorities on the subject.

Earlier this year, after President George W. Bush referred in his State of the Union address to the potential for developing biofuel from switchgrass in an effort to reduce America’s dependence on imported petroleum, the national spotlight shifted to the Auburn professor. More recently, President Bush traveled to Birmingham, where he discussed the potential of switchgrass with Bransby.

Bransby was not caught off guard by the president’s interest. The agronomy researcher had at his disposal a substantial knowledge base on biofuels from switchgrass and other agricultural products, and he had been working for years with Alabama agricultural leaders to promote the development of a biofuels industry in the state.

Since the renewal of interest national attention on biofuels, leaders in industry and government have been seeking Bransby’s advice on how to develop a biofuels industry. The Auburn professor says he hopes the renewed attention on biofuels will induce Congress to appropriate funds for a commercial refinery that will demonstrate the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of biofuels.

“The government has been waiting for private industry to commercialize the technology, but private industry isn’t willing to take that initial risk,” Bransby said. “In that case, it will be just one federal-funded commercial refinery, and industry will take it from there.”

Tuesday, October 17

Professional Development Seminar
“Engaging the Next Generation: Instructional Technology Tools To and Outside the Classroom,” noon-1:30 p.m., Foy 208; open to faculty, staff and graduate students; bring your lunch

Saturday, October 21

AG Roundup/Taste of Alabama Agriculture-related exhibits and demonstrations, samples of Alabama-produced foods, 9 a.m.-noon, Ag Horticulture, admission $5 per person, children 6 and under admitted free

Tuesday, October 24

AU Report
October 16, 2006

Upcoming Events

Properly Named Scene
Images from AU’s First 150 years

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Thursday, October 19

Book Discussion
Editors of History and Hope in the Heart of Dixie: Scholarship, Activism and Flyght in the Modern South, book about AU emeritus professor, 4 p.m., Special Collections, Draughon Library

Monday, October 23

Next AU Report
Conference
“Alternative Energy Solutions from Alabama’s Natural Resources,” AU Hotel, also Tuesday; for agenda, see www.eng.auburn.edu/alternative-energy

Tuesday, October 24

Sesquicentennial Lecture
“Auburn University: A Pictorial History,” retired journalism Department and Professor Emeritus Hoad Jack Simms and co-author with Journalism Professor Emeritus Mickey Logue of Auburn: A Pictorial History of the Loveliest Village, 4 p.m., Special Collections Library

Littleton-Franklin Lecture
“One Culture,” philosopher and Nobel Prize winning chemist Roald Hoffman, who is also a poet and playwright, 4 p.m., auditorium, Sciences Laboratory Center

Auburn and the United Nations World Food Programme are scheduled to officially launch the Universities Fighting World Hunger program Monday, Oct. 16, from the campus of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Universities Fighting World Hunger is an outgrowth of an emerging student movement that began in 2004 in partnership with the United Nations World Food Programme, to mobilize colleges and universities both nationally and worldwide to create a grassroots student campaign to conquer world hunger and malnutrition.

The launch on World Food Day features representatives from the UN World Food Programme, academic leaders, dignitaries and representatives from colleges and universities. Among others taking part in UWFW activities isalles Morris, executive director of the UN World Food Programme and Peter McPherson, president of the National Association of Universities and Land Grant Colleges.

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Auburn, through an effort initiated by Dean June Henton of the College of Human Sciences, became the first university to partner with the United Nations in developing a model for other universities to follow. Now, more than 50 colleges are part of the effort.

“The timing appears right for a student movement to address world hunger,” Henton said. “As the world shrinks, students are becoming increasingly aware that a quality education involves not only technical competence in one’s chosen field of study, but an awareness of global issues and a commitment to making the world a better place.”

In connection with Monday’s ceremony, all AU websites will host a pop-up event to show the united effort to address both short-term and long-term solutions to ending world hunger.

Auburn’s World Food Day event includes the start of the annual “Beat Bama Food Fight,” a friendly rivalry between AU and the University of Alabama that will help feed the hungry.

Gift funds eminent scholar chair in horticulture

Ray Crowell, former Auburn horticulture faculty and department chair, is funding an endowed chair at the university. The chair will honor Eddie Aldridge’s late father, Eddie McVeyre Aldridge, who died from a brain tumor in 1952, two years after graduating from Auburn with a degree in horticulture.

Crowell gave a $1 million endowment to AU to create an eminent scholar chair in the College of Agriculture’s Department of Horticulture. The chair will honor Eddie Aldridge’s late father, Lauren McVeyre Aldridge, who died from a brain tumor in 1952, two years after graduating from Auburn with a degree in horticulture.

Besides teaching and conducting research and outreach, the person selected for the eminent scholar chair will oversee an AU internship program at Aldridge Botanical Gardens, a 30-acre botanical showcase that the Aldridges developed over two decades and donated to the city of Hoover in 1997 for use as public gardens.

Eddie Aldridge attended Auburn in the 1970s and entered his family’s nursery business in Birmingham after military service.

Aldridge later took over the family business and built it into one of the most successful garden centers in the South. He served as president of the Alabama Nurserymen’s Association and in 1999 received the W. Kelly Mosley Environmental Award from Auburn in recognition of a lifetime of service to the care and protection of Alabama’s natural resources.
Editors to discuss book honoring work of AU historian Wayne Flynt

The influence of Emeritus Professor Wayne Flynt on the social and political history of the South will be the focus Thursday of a program in Draughon Library.

The editors of History and Hope in the Heart of Dixie: Scholarship, Activism and Wayne Flynt in the Modern South will discuss the book at the 4 p.m. program in the library’s Special Collections and Archives Department.

Flynt, who retired from AU in 2005, is the author of several critically acclaimed books on Alabama and Southern history, and he is widely recognized among historians as one of a leading authority on the history, culture, religion and politics of the region. Flynt’s published works include Poor But Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites and Alabama in the 20th Century, and he is editor-in-chief of the online Encyclopedia of Alabama.

History and Hope, recently published by the University of Alabama Press, explores themes espoused by Flynt in his books and frequent public presentations. Those themes include inequalities between the races and between economic classes across the region.

The book’s editors are Gordon Earl Harvey of the University of Louisiana at Monroe, Richard D. Starnes of Western Carolina University and Glenn Feldman of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. In addition to essays from the editors and others, the book includes assessments by two of the nation’s best-known historians, John Shelton Reed and Dan T. Carter, on Flynt’s influence on the South and on the work of other scholars in history.

Copies of History and Hope will be available for purchase, and a reception will follow the program. For more information, call 844-4948.

Vet Professor Macintire wins national award

College of Veterinary Medicine Professor Douglas Macintire recently received the national 2006 Ira M. Zaslow Distinguished Service Award from the Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Society.

The award is named for Ira M. Zaslow, one of the founders of the Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Society and the American College of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care.

Macintire, an AU faculty member since 1990, teaches emergency medicine and is co-director of the college’s Critical Care Service.

She was president of the Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Society from 1996-98 and served eight years on the board of directors. Since 1996 she has been the small animal medicine editor of The Compendium for Continuing Education for the Practicing Veterinarian.

She was board certified in internal medicine by the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine in 1986, and in 1990 she became the first person to pass the certification examination of the American College of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care.

Macintire earned her veterinary degree from Texas A&M in 1980, did an internship at Louisiana State University, and earning her master’s degree at Auburn in 1984. Before moving to Auburn, she served on the University of Pennsylvania faculty for six years.

Autumn skies
Cooler temperatures usually bring colorful sunsets to the Plains. East Alabama cannot match the colorful fall foliage of our northern neighbors, but the skies are another matter. One of the main signs that fall has finally come to this area is the appearance of bright orange skies at dusk, such as this scene looking west on Samford Avenue on a recent evening.

NSF honors AU faculty member for leadership of program

A Ginn College of Engineering faculty member, N. Hari Narayanan, is among this year’s recipients of the National Science Foundation Director’s Awards for Collaborative Integration.

Narayanan, an associate professor in the Department of Computer Science and Software Engineering, received the award for his contributions toward collaboratively developing and managing an NSF advanced learning technologies research program.

Narayanan returned to Auburn for fall semester after serving the NSF as a program director during 2005-06. While there, he co-directed three major research grant programs with a combined annual funding level of $14 million.

How Auburn Stacks Up
Sources of graduate students at Auburn, fall semester 2006