

July 12, 2016

Dr. K. Ramesh Reddy
Chair, Search and Screen Committee
Soil and Water Science Department
2181 McCarty Hall, PO Box 110290
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611

Dear Dr. Reddy:

Please accept this letter as an expression of my interest in applying for the position of Professor and Director of the School of Forest Resources and Conservation (SFRC) at the University of Florida (Position # 00012897). I believe that my background and experiences have prepared me well for the challenges and opportunities inherent in such a leadership role. My current responsibilities as department head for the Department of Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries at the University of Tennessee include leadership of all departmental programs and administrative responsibility for planning, fiscal management, human resources, and facilities.

I came to the University of Tennessee in part because I was seeking a professional challenge, and in part because I was very interested in leading a diverse department, one that spanned disciplines from forestry to fisheries, and wildlife to wood science. I see the increased responsibilities of a director as the next challenge in my career; moreover, the SFRC mirrors the diversity of programs within my current department that I find so rewarding. What follows are several examples of my activities and accomplishments as an administrator, both at the University of Tennessee (UT), and before that at Mississippi State University (MSU), that are relevant to the qualifications and characteristics noted as important for the position of director.

Throughout my administrative career I have been heavily involved with the National Association of University Forest Resources programs (NAUFRP), including serving in several leadership positions – Chair of the Southern Region, National Research Chair, and currently President-Elect. In my capacity as NAUFRP Research Chair I was directly responsible for the institution of biannual visits by NAUFRP representatives to the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to meet with administrators and National Program Leaders. These discussions have allowed NAUFRP to provide stakeholder input used by NIFA for program development, and have helped us learn how to become better engaged with NIFA's competitive grants programs. Insight from these visits has been disseminated to faculty members and administrators within our member institutions, increasing their competitiveness for NIFA funding. When we began this program, forestry and natural resources projects under NIFA's competitive grants programs (originally NRI, now AFRI) accounted for only 2-3% of the total competitive grants awards on an annual basis. After a several years of effort and encouragement by many NAUFRP members, the hard work of their faculty researchers has begun to pay off. On average, forestry and natural resources-related projects currently account for about 10-15% of AFRI awards.

Within my department, I have encouraged the establishment, and supported the function, of virtual "centers" to enhance research collaboration. The existence of two such centers, the Center for Native Grassland Management (CNGM) and the Eastern Native Grasslands Alliance (ENGA) was instrumental in our successful bid to become the host institution for the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (<http://bringbackbobwhites.org/>) in 2008. As host, we

immediately became the recognized center for quail restoration in the U.S. The combination of hosting the NBCI, and our coordination of the CNGM and the ENGA, in turn led to our recognition by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) as a "keystone initiative." This designation provided us with an opportunity to receive capacity-building research and Extension support from NFWF, and eventually helped us secure additional state funding from our 25 cooperating state fish and wildlife agencies. Today, the NBCI has grown into a nationally recognized organization, leading efforts to restore wild populations of bobwhite quail in this country to levels comparable to 1980. The Initiative employs a director, and five full-time coordinators, supported by nearly \$1 million in annual contributions from 25 state partner agencies across the range of bobwhite quail.

The achievements of NBCI have been a significant factor in our recently successful bid to host the new Shortleaf Pine Initiative (<http://shortleafpine.net/>). This initiative, launched in 2013, is an effort to restore a much-diminished shortleaf pine ecosystem to its natural range across 22 states. Through the strong support of the USDA Forest Service, we have hired the initiative's first director, and have completed a comprehensive, five-year plan to reverse the decline of this important natural resource. The plan, a result of a two-year effort by scientists, landowners, government agencies, conservation experts, and nonprofit organizations was formally released on June 16, 2016 at the annual meeting of the Southern Group of State Foresters in Mobile, Alabama.

I have long been involved in, and passionate about, teaching, having taught a variety of courses as a faculty member at three different institutions (University of Toronto, Mississippi State University, and University of Tennessee). As researchers, we are driven by the desire to discover – as a teacher I thrive on the “discovery” made by a student who suddenly understands a concept they thought was beyond them, or who masters a skill for the first time. Since shifting to administrative duties my opportunities for formal instruction have been limited, yet I have learned to enjoy “teaching” as a mentor to many young faculty members, graduate students and staff. I have also been active, nationally, with issues related to teaching through my involvement in NAUFRP. In 2011, I was fortunate to be able to help develop the NAUFRP Undergraduate Educational Enhancement Strategy which outlines a number of strategic goals, objectives and action items that have formed the roadmap for NAUFRP activities over the past four years. As President-Elect (2015-2016) and then as President (2017-2018) I will be heavily involved in moving these initiatives forward, as well as in drafting an updated strategy.

Although the specifics of curriculum issues are inherently the purview of faculty, I do have strong feelings about forestry and related natural resource curricula in general. I believe curricula must remain relevant to changing professional and market demands in terms of expected outcomes. The knowledge and skills that pertain to natural resource-related professions must match the expectations of a wide range of potential employers. Perhaps more importantly, the success of students is measured by their ability to read, listen, think, write, and speak. Therefore, it is imperative to emphasize the fundamental skills that relate to communication, critical thinking, and problem solving across natural resource curricula. It is not enough to have single, stand-alone courses in speech, or technical writing. Rather, each course should include

some expectation for students to communicate, think, and solve problems. The end result will be the intellectual and professional development of the individual as a whole.

Throughout my career I have been interested in undergraduate recruiting and retention issues, sometimes with the goal of simply increasing enrollment numbers, more often as a way to improve student quality and diversity. For example, while at Mississippi State University I instituted, in collaboration with the Mississippi Forestry Commission, an annual Natural Resources Summer Camp for high school students. These students were exposed to the opportunities for careers in natural resources and provided with the chance to interact with MSU faculty and students within our college. The camp was supported by grants from the Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation and from the International Paper Foundation. Most of the students that attended were also sponsored by their local county forestry associations or professional chapters. This camp continues to be held annually and contributes a steady stream of freshmen for MSU's academic programs.

While at MSU I also first became involved in efforts to improve diversity and inclusiveness. I was able to institute a college-wide Diversity Council in 2004 to provide recommendations for actions to create a more inclusive environment for faculty, staff and students. The Council served as a forum to promote understanding and management of diversity and sensitivity concerns, and provided a vehicle to develop and implement plans for increasing sensitivity to diversity issues. In cooperation with Alcorn State University, I also developed the first undergraduate degree program in the southeastern U.S. to result in a true *joint* bachelor's degree. Students could take courses at both institutions leading to the award of a bachelor's degree in one of three majors (forestry, forest products, or wildlife and fisheries) issued jointly by the two universities.

My recent efforts as department head at UT have been focused on improving the diversity of our faculty, to provide both mentors and role models for our undergraduates and graduates. Through the university's "opportunity hires" program, and through aggressive staffing proposals, I have been able to hire three new tenure-track faculty members, all three women, one of whom is a minority. I have also been successful in implementing a new *Urban Forestry* concentration within our forestry major, partly in response to the steady requests of in-state constituent groups, and partly to help improve the enrollment of non-traditional forestry students. We have also recently added another new concentration, *Restoration and Conservation Science* (fall, 2015). We expect this new concentration will continue to broaden the diversity of our undergraduate population, appealing to an additional sector of non-traditional students with a passion for natural resource conservation.

As department head I have been actively involved with development activities, including stewardship of current donors, as well as efforts to develop and sustain the relationships with alumni and other departmental supporters that lead to new donations. As part of this effort I have established an Advocacy Committee within my departmental Advisory Board to assist with the identification of potential donors, as well as help with initial contacts. Through this committee we have recently received a tentative commitment for our first large donation

(approximately \$250,000) to support our scholarship program, as well as the possible donation of a significant acreage of forested property. I have also worked closely with the Director of our National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative to create a *Bobwhite Foundation* that will provide funding stability for the Initiative's staff. Finally, we are beginning a campaign to establish an "Adopt-A-Course" effort to help relieve our students from the burden of additional course fees that have been used to cover the increasing operating costs of our field-based laboratory courses.

The Extension component of my current department is relatively small (3.4 faculty FTEs plus two non-faculty specialists), yet our Extension programs are critical in "closing the loop" in the department's research and teaching programs. Research does not end with the publication of a refereed journal article, or the graduation of a Master's or Ph.D. student. The research outcomes must be communicated to members of the profession, and to the general public through the technical transfer mission of Extension. Similarly, teaching does not end with the award of a bachelor's degree. Since a graduating student should be well prepared to be a lifelong learner, the department has the responsibility to provide continuing education to such professionals. Moreover, the flow of information should also move in the opposite direction. Extension faculty have the responsibility to solicit and recognize problems that are important to natural resource professionals, and to the general public, that may be addressed by research or changes in curricula. This bidirectional information flow represents true "engagement" by the department. I have taken this need for engagement one step further within my department by encouraging my Extension faculty to become engaged with applied research and both our undergraduate and graduate teaching programs, even though only one of these faculty members has a formal research appointment, and none have teaching appointments. I believe this has made our teaching and research programs that much richer for our students and non-Extension faculty.

As a department head, I have worked diligently toward the improvement of my department's productivity as well as its growth. As part of my duties, I take very seriously the role of departmental "advocate" as I strive to secure additional resources and faculty lines. My success in this area (addition of three new tenure-track faculty lines, conversion of four non-tenure track faculty lines to tenure-track, and addition of two non-tenure track lines), however, has been accomplished in an atmosphere of collaboration with my fellow department heads within the UT Institute of Agriculture. As a group, we have often pooled resources to advance the institute as a whole, and agreed on institute-wide faculty hiring priorities regardless of which department the eventual faculty lines were to be added. This environment of collaboration, with good-natured competition, has been promoted by our deans and embraced by all of our academic department heads. The end result has been to advance the mission of our institute as well as our individual departments. At the same time we have made significant strides toward eliminating the "us versus them" attitude between departments, or between faculty and administration, that can poison our best efforts to accomplish our mission and goals. As director, this collaborative attitude is something that I would pursue, and support, vigorously.

My administrative and management philosophy can be characterized as a steady, relentless effort to improve the organization. I see myself as one part strategist, one part mentor, one part

bureaucrat, and one part politician. As a strategist I would keep an eye on a shared vision as I work toward achieving the goals set out and agreed to by the school; as a mentor I would provide simplicity and clarity in expectations, enthusiasm for what we do, and encouragement to shoot for greatness; as a bureaucrat I would take care of the “administrivia” thereby sheltering the faculty, staff and students so they can do their jobs; and as a politician I would work toward the relationships, compromises, and unconventional avenues that eventually lead to the accomplishment of organizational goals.

As an “outsider” my perception of the School of Forest Resources and Conservation is of an organization with a culture that already values scholarship, instruction, engagement and diversity. The various individual programs within the school are well-respected, leading to an overall reputation that positions the school to take its place within a handful of “top-tier” programs in the nation. As director I would follow a general strategy to sustain and grow the SFRC that employs four major components: people, partners, resources and recognition. First, and most important, would be a focus on the *people* within the school and the people that the school produces. Recruiting, retaining, and developing excellent faculty, staff and students to be successful, to be leaders, and to make a difference in their chosen professions is critical to the overall success of the SFRC. The second component, *partners*, refers to both internal and external collaborators and constituents. Robust ties to other academic units (within the university, or at other universities), employers of our graduates, external research partners, alumni, friends, and the citizens of Florida will provide strength to the school’s efforts to grow its programs and generate support. The third component is the *resources* that come from enhancing success in securing extramural research funds, making compelling cases for additional internal support, or encouraging the generosity of donors who believe in the vision and mission of the school. The fourth component is *recognition*, which can be accomplished in a variety of ways but is most effectively attained (and maintained) through a marketing and communication plan. All four components support each other, and are in turn supported by the others, in an overall effort to achieve excellence.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss this vision with members of the search committee, as well as the faculty, administration, staff, students and friends of the School of Forest Resources and Conservation.

Sincerely,



Keith L. Belli
Professor and Department Head
Department of Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries
University of Tennessee