Post harvest research gets big facilities booster

The Institute of Post Harvest Technologies — an offshoot of the SAES — is under construction at the new North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis, and is scheduled to begin conducting research in January, 2008, according to Dr. Ramu M. Rao, interim director.

The institute will employ approximately 18 scientists who will research food processing to enhance nutritional quality, safety and value.

The institute is part of the $1 billion, 350-acre North Carolina Research Campus which was formed last year though a partnership between David Murdock, owner of Dole Food Co., and six private and public universities. The research focus at the campus will be on exploring the links between nutrition and health.

“We are both proud and honored to be a part of this visionary project,” said Dr. Carolyn Turner, associate dean for research at SAES.

“We know that many of the most common diseases today have a strong link to poor diet, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and many cancers. This campus will make it possible for us to collaborate with other researchers toward finding new approaches to disease prevention.”

The Institute of Post Harvest Technologies will be interested in all plant-based foods, with a special focus on many of North Carolina’s major food crops, including sweet potatoes, strawberries, blueberries and peanuts. Rao is seeking input from growers, packers and processors, as well as research partners at other universities and other departments at N.C. A&T.

“We don’t want to conduct research just so we can publish it and put it on a bookshelf. We want research that answers an industry problem, or creates new jobs, or expands the economy in some way,” Rao said.

For instance, close to 30 percent of food crops spoil before they can reach the consumer, so one productive avenue could be to find ways to reduce such losses, he observed. Other avenues might include seeking new ways to destroy food borne pathogens while preserving taste and nutrition, identifying and isolating components in food that provide specific health-promoting properties, and even developing non-food products from agricultural byproducts, such as biofuels or biodegradable plastics.

The research campus is expected to add fuel to the “value-added” trend in agricultural sciences. Whereas traditionally the emphasis has been placed on higher yields or cultivars that hold up to storage and transport, the research campus will be geared toward enhancing nutritional quality. The benefits will accrue to consumers, farmers and the agricultural sector as a whole, which will find new profitability in new crops, according to Rao.

“The outlook for North Carolina agriculture as it relates to this project is definitely optimistic,” he said.

To find out more about the Institute of Post Harvest Technologies, contact Rao at (336) 256-1268, or ramy_rao@ncat.edu.

Dr. Ramu Rao, left, and Dean Alton Thompson watch a crane place a steel beam at the UNC Center for Excellence in Nutrition at the North Carolina Research Campus. The building will house the Institute for Post Harvest Technologies.
Work of Worku gets three awards

Dr. Mulunebet Worku, an associate professor in the Department of Animal Sciences, is the recipient of three awards in recognition of excellence in teaching and research.

The SAES chapter of Gamma Sigma Delta presented her with its Excellence in Teaching, as well as its Excellence in Research award to Natural Resources Management Specialist.

Dr. Robert Williamson, The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T’s natural resources management specialist, was honored as the Gamma Sigma Delta chapter of Gamma Sigma Delta with its 2006-07 Award of Excellence in Extension.

Dr. Mohamed Ahmedna, associate professor of food sciences, is one of the two recipients of the University’s Senior Researcher Award for 2006-07, in recognition of his outstanding contributions to science and to A&T’s research program.

Ahmedna is a prolific researcher and writer. During his seven-year tenure in the SAES, he has been awarded 15 research grants totalling more than $4 million. He is the author or coauthor of two book chapters, more than 100 papers and presentations, and editor of a proctitis textbook. He has also secured a patent on one of his inventions, a portable biosensor for detecting salmonella in poultry, and has submitted applications for two others.

Ahmedna has numerous other awards to his credit. Among these, in 2002, he received the University’s Outstanding Young Investigator Award, and in 2006, he presented the George Washington Carver Award from the U.S. Agency for International Development at a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

Williamson’s research includes 16 committee assignments at the national, state and local levels, and 16 publications. He has received more than 25 professional recognitions in his career.

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on the move

North Carolina A&T State University School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences Newsletter
Produced by the Agricultural Communications and Technology Unit

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