

Natural resource programs join forces

By Amy Dalmont, Indianola, Okla.

For two years, three Oklahoma State University academic departments have searched for a way to integrate teaching, research and extension activities into the natural resource management area. Now, their struggles have made their desires a reality.

In Fall 2005, an 11-person task force made recommendations to accomplish this goal. A report from this team, along with additional input from administrators, faculty and outside constituents recommended forming a new department.

On July 12, 2006, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education approved the formation of the OSU Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. The faculty and staff from forestry, rangeland ecology, wildlife and fisheries then began the transition to the new department.

Tom Hennessey, interim department head and professor, said the formation of NREM is expected to increase the interdisciplinary research in natural resources related to the sustainable management of fisheries, wildlife, rangelands and forests for a wide variety of uses.

"This formation will realign faculty, curricula and research initiatives related to natural resources, ecology and conservation," Hennessey said.

In total, NREM will have 25 faculty members, making it one of the largest departments in the OSU Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. Staff numbers also will increase to ensure successful creation and operation of the new department, Hennessey said.

"We are very optimistic that our new curricula will stimulate student retention and foster student recruitment," Hennessey said.

The new department will consist of 14 forestry faculty members, four faculty members from rangeland ecology, five faculty members from zoology, and two scientists from the Oklahoma Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit.

Initially, the department will include approximately 175 undergraduates and a broader graduate program.

The department will house one major: natural resource ecology and management. However, students can choose among eight degree options within the major.

Karen Hickman, associate professor, said incoming freshmen and transfer students for Fall 2006 already are enrolled in the new department.

"The remaining students who have begun work on their degrees will be allowed to continue their original degree programs and options as they were," Hennessey said. "No addition-

al course requirements will delay their graduation dates."

Hickman said continuing students may even keep their original adviser.

"We want to make it easy for the students to transition," Hickman said.

Hickman said as the year progresses, there is potential for new curricula to be created. Ultimately, students will have the choice of electing new programs that may emerge without an increase in credit hours.

Ed Miller, CASNR associate dean, said the new department is just one more feature that sets OSU apart.

"OSU is the only Oklahoma university that offers a four-year degree in these areas," Miller said. "It only makes sense to bring them together."

Hickman said the goal is to integrate the curriculum so students will continue to specialize in their own areas but will have a basic understanding of all four. This merging is to help make the students more marketable, she said.

"The unifying thing for the students is the connection of land management to biology," said Tim O'Connell, assistant professor.

Student clubs within each of the original departments will remain separate and intact: the Wildlife Society, Forestry Club, Range Club, American Fisheries Society and the Society of American Foresters Student Chapter.

On Oct. 12, 2006, the OSU Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management held a ribbon-cutting ceremony: Oklahoma Sen. Daisy Lawler (left); OSU President David Schmidly; Tom Hennessey, interim NREM department head and professor; Oklahoma Rep. Dale DeWitt; Robert Whitson, vice president, dean and director of the OSU Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources; and Peter Sherwood, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. (Photo by Todd Johnson)





OSU President and system chief executive officer David Schmidly (right) speaks with faculty members and various guests at the ribbon-cutting ceremony held at the Kerr Auditorium in the Food and Agricultural Products Center on Oct. 12. (Photo by Todd Johnson)

"It's been an easy change," said Derek Matz, Range Club president. "With this degree, there are many more options to choose from."

On Oct. 12, 2006, the department

held a ribbon-cutting ceremony in the Kerr Auditorium located in the Food and Agricultural Products Center.

Robert Whitson, vice president, dean and director of the OSU Divi-

sion of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, was the master of ceremonies. Guest speakers included David Schmidly, president and OSU system chief executive officer; Marlene Strathe, provost and senior vice president; and Hennessey. Oklahoma Rep. Dale DeWitt and Oklahoma Sen. Daisy Lawler also spoke at the event.

"We now have an academic program with faculty across interdisciplinary areas within one unit that have the ability to do the kind of research, teaching and outreach to maximize the development of natural resources in Oklahoma," Schmidly said.

Hennessey said the new department will provide graduates with a broader understanding of resource management and conservation.

"Having four core areas of fisheries, forestry, rangeland and wildlife in one department provides a framework to undertake the collaborative work that needs to be done to address critical natural resources issues in Oklahoma and beyond," Hennessey said. ☺