

AU aims to join Homeland Security mission

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For many it's still the most frightening of possibilities. In an age of terrorism, the potential for an attack on the nation's food supply has shifted from the realm of the Hollywood thriller into what some view as a clear and present danger.

Just five months ago, the deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture said the nation was still vulnerable to an attack on agriculture.

"I go to bed every night and thank the good Lord it hasn't happened today," Jim Moseley said.

These concerns have prompted the U.S. Homeland Security Department to ramp up prevention measures, and Auburn University may well be central to the plan. An AU-led partnership of 11 universities has submitted a proposal to head up a research program that would develop approaches to deal with threats to the food supply. If approved, AU's center would be led by Donald Conner, AU professor and chair of the Department of Poultry Science.

"There are people out there who are going to put a lot of time and effort into killing you and me," Conner said. "We don't like to think about it, but that's a reality."

Michael Tullier, spokesman for AU's Department of Food Safety, said the university would likely receive about \$2 million per year for three years if it were selected. The remainder of the \$15 million in total

funds would be dispersed among the partner universities.

"Auburn would not only be the administrative hub, but would also have the authority to more or less guide the research that's going on in the consortium," Tullier said.

Some of the research that AU would do is already under way in the food safety department. Tests developed to detect Salmonella and E.coli would overlap with tests for potential terror agents like anthrax, Tullier said. The Homeland Security Department is also concerned that food-borne pathogens could be deliberately introduced into the food supply.

"Things like Salmonella and E.coli very easily could be injected into a food supply intentionally," Tullier said.

Detection of such pathogens and other agents would be AU's central focus, but the mission of the center would be five-fold. Tuskegee University, which is among the potential partners, would focus on assessing U.S. vulnerability to attacks. Other partners would look at response and recovery

options as well as education and methods of widespread communication amid a food contamination event.

Communication may be among the most important areas of preparedness in Conner's view. The fear factor that would likely accompany an attack on foods, he said, is a menace unto itself.

"Having mass casualties from food being delivered and tampered with probably isn't likely," Conner said. "But it could destabilize markets."

If AU isn't chosen as the center, it could still conceivably play a role. In a second submission, the university vied to join another consortium under the leadership of Kansas State University. No matter what the outcome, Conner says the U.S. no longer has the luxury of simply crossing its fingers and hoping for the best.

"The rules of the game changed with 9-11," he said. "Things that we didn't think were possible then are now in the realm of possibility, and we need to be prepared."

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President Bush addresses Homeland Security employees at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington Tuesday. AU looks to join in the mission of the Homeland Security department.

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