University unveils merger plan

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By Janet Kubat Willette

Agri News staff writer

ST. PAUL -- The College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences and the College of Natural Resources will become one under a plan presented last week to the Board of Regents.

University of Minnesota President Robert Bruininks formally presented the plan to the Regents on May 13. It is the result of task force reports released in March.

"This plan will be the cornerstone for a stronger, more competitive University of Minnesota," Bruininks said. "Financial, demographic and global challenges will overwhelm us if we don't reduce costs, play to our strengths and rise above the higher education crowd as the destination of choice for the best faculty and students."

COAFES dean Charles Muscoplat is excited about bringing the two colleges together, but emphasized that nothing has been approved yet.

A public hearing was held May 16 and the Regents
are expected to make a decision on the recommendations on June 10.

If the Regents OK the merger, a task force will develop plans on how to execute the consolidation by December, he said.

Students now in the program won't be impacted by the curriculum changes, Muscoplat said, those will be phased in over a few years.

The paired college will include 45 faculty from the College of Natural Resources and 218 from the COAFES. A new name will likely be in place in a year or two. The Board of Regents would also need to approve a name change.

Combining the colleges will save money and increase productivity, Muscoplat said, but stakeholders, be they soybean growers or forest product producers, shouldn't see any changes in service. Their contact will remain the local Extension person.

Students will see a change in their college name and a new list of majors. There will be one website rather than two.

Faculty may also move to new offices in contiguous spaces, but that won't happen quickly, Muscoplat said.

A few people may lose their jobs because of the university-wide shake-up, but it's more likely to be a shuffling of staff. As people retire or quit, positions will be closed or filled with displaced internal employees. The U of M has a 5 percent to 8 percent annual attrition, Muscoplat said.

He's not worried the merger will cost the U of M students.

Enrollment in the COAFES is at a 20-year high, Muscoplat said, and environmental science, applied economics and horticulture are the most popular majors.

Other changes proposed by Bruininks:

• Creation of a new College of Design that would
include the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture and the College of Human Ecology's department of design, housing and apparel.

• The department of food science and nutrition will become part of the new College of Natural Resources and the College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences.

• Academic departments related to education and human development will be integrated into a single college.

Muscoplat welcomes comments on the proposal. He can be reached at college-info@mail.coafes.umn.edu or by calling (612)624-3009.

More information on the plan can be found at www.umn.edu/systemwide/strategic_positioning