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Contacts: **Tracy Curlee**, 706/583-5485, tcurlee@uga.edu
Sheila Allen, 706/542-3461, sallen@vet.uga.edu

University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine opens Animal Health Research Center

Athens, Ga. – The College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Georgia has opened its state-of-the-art Animal Health Research Center (AHRC).

The AHRC, located on the corner of East Campus Road and Carlton Street on the UGA Campus, is a three-story, 75,000-square-foot facility where researchers will conduct basic and applied research on vaccines, diagnostic tests and treatments for diseases that infect animals as well as humans.

“This research center will be part of a national effort to defend against naturally emerging diseases, as well as bioterrorism attacks,” said Sheila Allen, dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine. “Because we will have facilities for investigating diseases affecting both animals and people, we can tackle a wide variety of illnesses, including most of the viral diseases — such as avian influenza, SARS and West Nile virus — that are major public health threats in this country and the rest of the world. We can also investigate diseases that are important to food safety and consequently to our economy.”

The research center will also serve as an economic development stimulus to the state, attracting top investigators, students and grants. In addition, it will strengthen partnerships with state, federal and private research institutions, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Southeast Regional Center for Excellence for Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Diseases (funded by the National Institutes of Health) and the Southeastern Center for Emerging Biologic Threats at Emory University.

The AHRC has office space and dedicated lab space for 50 investigators and staff, and researchers throughout campus as well as federal and industry scientists will have access to the center’s labs. The labs have been specifically designed to protect researchers working within the building as well as the community at large.

At the AHRC, UGA Eminent Scholar Ralph Tripp will lead the vaccine development laboratory. He and his colleagues are studying potential vaccines for infectious diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian influenza.

“Essentially, the AHRC provides a mechanism to bridge basic research with translational studies that involve vaccine development,” Tripp said. “It also serves as a training component for both graduate students and veterinary professionals who have an interest in emerging and infectious diseases.”

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AHRC quality assurance manager Michael Mispagel said that because researchers will be working with infectious diseases, several safety features that meet strict federal standards have been incorporated into the building's design.

The biocontainment labs are airtight, and air is sterilized as it enters and leaves the building. Fingerprint readers at the building's main lobby and at individual labs ensure that only authorized and trained personnel enter, and security cameras are placed throughout the building.

Scientists change clothing and shower after leaving animal rooms, and waste products are incinerated at 1800 degrees Fahrenheit, chemically dissolved or treated to render them sterile.

The \$63 million facility has redundant features – three tanks for processing wastewater, paired exhaust fans and dual electrical systems, for example – so that safety won't be compromised if a system fails.

“It's a facility where people can work safely and where the community can be assured that nothing can escape that would be harmful,” Mispagel said.

Federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the United States Department of Agriculture operate similar facilities, and some universities incorporate biocontainment labs into existing buildings.

What makes the AHRC unique, Mispagel said, is that it's the only university operated facility in the nation with labs that meet federal biosafety level 3 agricultural (BSL-3-Ag) requirements. BSL-3-Ag labs allow researchers to safely work with agents such as avian influenza.

“Because it allows us to work in a safe environment on disease organisms that we would not be able to work with in a conventional laboratory setting, the Animal Health Research Center will help us attract research from industry and the government as well as from other academic research institutions,” Mispagel said.

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Note to editors: Additional resources are available at the following links:

AHRC Fact Sheet, Faculty Bios, PowerPoint Overview: www.vet.uga.edu/ahrc

UGA College of Veterinary Medicine Fact Sheet:
www.vet.uga.edu/communications/archive/Facts&Figures.pdf

Photos for Reproduction: www.vet.uga.edu/communications/photos.php