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## NSTF-South32 award for Plant Health: Honouring excellence and celebrating Professor Mike Wingfield

Professor Michael (Mike) Wingfield received the 2019/2020 NSTF-South32 Special Annual Theme Award: Plant Health on 30 July 2020 for his commitment to fostering a collaborative and innovative environment in this field of science. I had the privilege of interviewing him shortly after the award ceremony, and he was gracious and friendly in answering my questions.

Wingfield was responsible for establishing the first integrated forest pathology programme in South Africa, providing laboratory facilities and a working environment for many postgraduate candidates. In his 20 years as Director of the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI) at the University of Pretoria, he conducted research that led to the identification and diagnosis of many organisms causing diseases of plants. Wingfield has studied their pathways of movement to understand their global impact and the management of plant health problems caused by harmful organisms. He has partnered with industries, both locally and worldwide, to resolve plant disease problems, and has fostered collaborations with distinguished scientists internationally, particularly championing the development of new technologies. Together with students and colleagues, his work has led to the successful identification of pathogens and pests, leading to improved quarantine strategies and the development of disease and pest-tolerant planting stock. From these research activities, he has published over 1000 scientific articles in collaboration with other researchers, locally and globally, and is listed as one of South Africa's most highly cited researchers. He has an A1 rating from the National Research Foundation.

Wingfield has held many distinguished positions and has received many awards. In 2014, the tree health team at FABI was recognised by the Department of Science and Technology, now the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI), as one of the first government-supported Centres of Excellence. This became known as the DSI/NRF Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnology (CTHB) at FABI and contributed substantially to the expansion of the research team. Establishment of the CTHB alongside the South African Forestry Industry supported Tree Protection Co-operative Programme – which Wingfield established in 1990 and which was already successful and highly recognised – led to a fundamental expansion of the tree health research being conducted at FABI. Wingfield was awarded honorary doctorates by the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada) and North Carolina State University (USA). He is the Immediate Past President of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations, having served a 5-year term as President from 2014 to 2019 – a tremendous accolade for a South African scientist.

He is a Fellow of several scientific societies, including the Academy of Science of South Africa, the Royal Society of South Africa, the Southern African Society for Plant Pathology, and the American Phytopathological Society, and is one of few honorary members of the Mycological Society of America. He received the prestigious African Union Kwame Nkrumah Scientific Award in the Life and Earth Sciences category in 2013, and the Distinguished Leadership Award for International Scientists for 2016 from the University of Minnesota, his alma mater. In 2017, he received the esteemed Royal Society of South Africa John FW Herschel medal – this medal is the highest honour that can be bestowed on a Fellow and is awarded to an outstanding scientist whose work straddles a number of disciplines.

In his general approach to life and his research, Wingfield is committed not only to delivering quality research, but also to enhancing people's lives. As well as being a specialist laboratory scientist, he has a holistic philosophy that emphasises the role that research can play in improving ecosystem function that provides a better quality of life for humans and the beneficial organisms with which we interact. The *South African Journal of Science*, to which Wingfield and his team have contributed over the years, congratulates Prof. Wingfield on his award and is sincerely proud of his outstanding leadership in his field of science.



Professor Mike Wingfield with his trophy for the 2019/2020 NSTF-South32 Special Annual Theme Award: Plant Health