

MIKE WINGFIELD WINS NSTF AWARD

FABI congratulates Prof. Mike Wingfield on winning the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) Annual Theme Award: Plant Health. This Special Annual Theme Award, recognising the 2020 United Nations International Year of Plant Health (IYPH-2020), is one of 13 awards conferred at the NSTF-South32 Awards ceremony on 30 July. It acknowledges Mike as being a globally-recognised South African plant pathologist and recognises his lifetime of contributions to the identification and management of plant diseases, as well as the education and mentorship of large numbers of plant pathologists and entomologists globally.” He is also the Immediate Past President of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO), having served a five-year term as the Organization's President from 2014-2019.



FABlan Prof. Kerstin Kruger was also a finalist in the same category; while there could only be one winner, the audience were regularly reminded that all the finalists should be seen as winners. The awards ceremony, also known as the ‘South African Science Oscars’, was streamed online due to COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings. The special theme award for the IYPH 2020 recognises the urgent need for greater global collaboration to protect plant health. The IYPH also provides an opportunity to raise awareness on how protecting plant health can help end hunger, reduce poverty, protect the environment and boost economic development.

In accepting his award, Mike said that “it is a great honour to be recognised by one’s peers. I do so with humility but also wish to note that other finalists for this award are amongst some of my colleagues that I admire most. Any one of them was deserving of this award”. He also

made the point that “while awards usually come to individual people, they typically represent the efforts of many others”. He thanked his colleagues and students from around the globe for their contributions as well as the University of Pretoria and FABI for “providing a fertile environment from which to conduct research and to promote scientific excellence”.

Mike explained that “receiving the award in the United Nations International Year of Plant Health (IYPH-2020) is particularly gratifying. I have spent my entire career working as a plant pathologist/entomologist, I am increasingly concerned about the health of plants globally. The world’s plants are deeply threatened by pests and pathogens and also by human activities including those that are leading to climate change. We easily forget that we depend deeply on plants, not only for the food that we eat but for our water supplies and the air that we breathe”. He drew parallels between the SARS CoV-2 pandemic ravaging the world as a vivid example of the havoc that an invasive alien pathogen can do and how plants are affected in a similar way. “We must heed this warning,” he concluded.