



FOREST SCIENCE SYMPOSIUM

Panel discussion led by Dr Andrew Morris (ICFR, far left) and panel participants seated from left: Dr Kitt Payn (Mondi), Dr Arnulf Kanzler (Sappi), Dr Steve Verryn (Creative Breeding), Prof Zander Myburg (FMG, University of Pretoria), Prof Mike Wingfield (FABI) and Prof Gary Hodge (CAMCORE).

Forest Science Symposium underlines need for transformation

The Institute for Commercial Forestry Research (ICFR) staged its seventh Forest Science Symposium in Pietermaritzburg in July. It was co-hosted by the International Union of Forest Research Organisations (IUFRO), the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) and other research partners.

The gathering drew more than 250 delegates, including public and private sector researchers, forestry managers, academics, students and industry participants, from 15 countries. No fewer than 50 attendees were African students sponsored by the IUFRO. "Generous sponsorship from both public and private sectors contributed to what was universally judged to be an extremely useful event," said Sidhika Naidoo, communications assistant at the ICFR.

The central theme 'Research Underpinning the Sustainability of a Diverse Forestry Sector' was addressed in a keynote speech delivered by Pumeza Nodada, chief director of forestry and regulations from DAFF.

She referred to the Integrated Forest Protection Strategy of 2015, which seeks to protect South African forests. It also recognises that timber plantations are a major national economic asset and that the sustained production of wood and fibre is threatened by a number of factors, including pests, disease and fire.

Naidoo noted, "A departure from the traditional format was the introduction of panel discussions which accelerated knowledge sharing and the dissemination of valuable lessons learned by contributors as a result of their own research."

Presentations dealt with a variety of associated subjects, including silviculture and forest management, productivity, risk mitigation, tree breeding, emerging technologies and social developments affecting the forestry industry.

"DAFF supports a number of these research initiatives and it is encouraging to note that it has recognised the need to protect forestry as a vital sustainable resource and is taking steps to ensure its protection," said TAPPSA chairman Iain Kerr.

The much-coveted award for the best paper went to Mondi's Dr Kitt Payn and runner up to exciting new researcher Tatenda Mapeta from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

In the speed paper sessions, the ICFR took home both first and second prizes – Dr Benice Sivparsad and Dr Kabir Peerbhay, respectively. The prize for the best poster was awarded to NMMU postgraduate student Kyle Schwegman while the ICFR's Nkosinathi Kaptein was the runner up.

Looking back to go forward

The symposium coincided with the ICFR's 70th anniversary. Dr Colin Dyer, recently retired director of the ICFR, explained how the institute began in 1947 as Wattle Research Institute before being changed to the ICFR in 1984 as a partnership between growers, government and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. "Back in 1947, the AK47 had just been developed by Mikhail Kalashnikov with holography and the Dead Sea scrolls being discovered. During the same year, Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier and India gained its independence from England. I suspect that there very few attendees, if any, who were alive at that time," shares Kerr.

"The industry has to adapt and transform which requires a distinct research strategy. The decline in the consumption of printing and writing paper grades has seen a situation where mills have now converted to producing specialty packaging grades. Packaging paper demand continues to rise globally as does demand for other products which can be extracted from wood."

"Xylitol is just one example," said Kerr who read recently that xylitol prevents tooth decay and the reason why Finnish parents have for decades encouraged their children to chew sweets containing xylitol after a meal. "Why has it only appeared in our grocery stores in recent years? At R150/kg, there must be sweet profits in that."

The symposium programme book containing abstracts for papers, speed papers and posters is available on www.icfr.ukzn.ac.za along with selected presentations.