

THE OPENING OF A WORLD CLASS BIOCONTROL CENTRE FOR FOREST PESTS AT FABI

The number of insect pests that threaten trees in forests and plantations are increasing at an alarming rate internationally. For many of these pests biological control is the best, if not the only, option for control. However, biological control needs extensive and specialist research to develop and typically takes years. The rate of arrival of new pests means that the forestry industry needs significant capacity in this field. The TPCP provides the industry with support for the biological control of forest pests, including developing human capacity, doing the basic research, engaging with authorities and in some cases producing biological control agents.



Introducing new CTHB students and Core Members to the Biological Control Centre. Right to left - Dr Alex Valentine (University of Stellenbosch), Prof Bernard Slippers (University of Pretoria), and Vincent van der Merwe (Rhodes University) and Lydia Landman (University of Free State).

The biological control program of the TPCP has been hampered by two major constraints in terms of facilities. Firstly, the production of biological control nematodes to support the industry programmes to control the Sirex woodwasp has put serious strains on the facilities and activities of FABI. Secondly, no dedicated facility existed to import and study quarantine organisms needed for the development of biological control programmes of a number of newly arrived forestry pests. This left the industry in a seriously vulnerable position given the increasing pressure from insect pests.

During the past five years, various avenues have been explored to fund the required specialized facilities to enable the production and study of biological control agents. Options have included seeking industry support and exploring avenues to develop an independent business model to run such a facility. The academic excellence delivered by researchers in FABI enabled us to convince the University of Pretoria that it was worth further investing in this research. With investment from UP and with leveraged funding from other sources, the required facilities and equipment were eventually secured.

The facilities at the new FABI Biocontrol Centre at the UP Experimental farm include a certified quarantine building and greenhouse, three laboratories, numerous growth rooms and walk-in cold storage facilities. In addition they include outside insect rearing cages, office space for key staff that will run the facility, and specialised equipment that will allow controlled fungal and insect handling, chemical ecology and physiological research. The greater facility, together with the nursery environment that is connected to it, is amongst the most modern in the world where forest biological control work can be undertaken. It is sure to serve the industry's increasing needs for biological control well into the future.

The inauguration of the FABI Biological Control Centre took place on 9 May 2011 and was attended by FABIans, invited guests and stakeholders who had provided the funding and support to make the building of the Centre possible. Guests were taken on a tour of the Control Centre before the official part of the proceedings began.



Inauguration of the Biological Centre for Forest Pests. Left: Prof. Robin Crewe in front of the new Biological Control Centre. Right: Osmond Mlonyeni at one of the beautiful cycads planted at the entrance gate to the new centre.

Guest speakers included Professor Anton Ströh (Dean of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, University of Pretoria, UP), Ms Viv McMenemy (Director, Mondi Forestry) and Prof Robin Crewe (Deputy Vice-Principal of the University of Pretoria). Prof Mike Wingfield (Director of FABI) thanked the speakers and led the guests to an area in front of the new Centre for a 'tree' planting ceremony to symbolise the pivotal roles that stakeholders and their organisations had played in promoting forestry protection and research in South Africa. The 'trees' (Cycads donated by the Department of Plant Sciences at UP) were planted by Dr Ronald Heath (on behalf of Dr Moshibudi Rampedi, Deputy Director General, Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries), Ms Viv McMenemy (whose organisation, Mondi, had initiated and funded the Mondi Chair in Forest Pathology since 1994), Prof Robin Crewe (who played a leading role at the University in supporting forestry research at FABI both in the CTHB/TPCP programme) Mr Michael Peter (Executive Director of Forestry South Africa, representing the forestry industry that has supported the TPCP and FABI for more than 21 years) and Mr Osmond Mlonyeni (a PhD student representing the FABI research team and the postgraduate student association of the Faculty).

The evening ended with an informal dinner at the UP Recreation Centre.