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MEDIA RELEASE

Answering fresh produce export questions

What are we doing to feed the world? On 21 and 22 November, fresh produce researchers and industry representatives gathered to answer this question by looking at research currently being done into the post-harvest life of fresh fruit, certain vegetables and protea cut flowers.

The “Competitiveness through Innovation” symposium, which took place at Spier near Stellenbosch, was hosted by the Post-Harvest Innovation (PHI) Programme, a Public-private initiative of the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the Fresh Produce Exporters’ Forum (FPEF).

Mr Anton Kruger, the CEO of FPEF, explains that the 2016 symposium showcased the work being done under the third funding phase of the PHI programme. “PHI’s mandate is to build academic and research capacity, by investigating practices and technologies that can enhance the quality and shelf life of fresh produce after harvesting,” says Anton. “It is a public-private partnership that enjoys solid support from Government. The total state funding we have received to date is R60 million since 2007 when PHI was born.”

In his speech at the symposium, Mr Isaac Maredi, Chief Director: Sector Innovation & Green Economy at the DST, elaborated on the role PHI played in the establishment of the department’s broader Sector Innovation Fund (SIF) programme. “PHI gave us the blueprint for how a public-private investment in research and development can and should work,” he said.

Government measures the success of SIF in three key performance indicators, namely the number of graduate students produced, the number of jobs created or sustained in a sector, and the sector’s contribution to intellectual property portfolios through patents, prototypes and publications.

PHI, which is one of the seven existing SIF programmes, has in its third cycle received funding for 35 projects through which 44 students have either completed or are in the process of completing post-graduate degrees. A significant percentage of the students are from previously disadvantaged groups, as well as women.

“PHI remains a quintessential SIF initiative and the prototype on which it was conceived,” said Mr Maredi. However, he also sounded a note of caution, stating that the pressures National Treasury faces, are threatening the continued funding of SIFs in general, and PHI in particular. “We implore you to help us build a case for PHI’s continuation,” he said. “The way to do this is to demonstrate practical progress and value, including true and demonstrable transformation, and programmes that impact on small and emerging farmers in targeted communities.”

Speaking on the second day of the symposium, Dr John Purchase, CEO of the Agricultural Business Chamber (Agbiz), emphasised the importance of research and development, and innovation, in achieving sustainable agriculture and, importantly, food security.

Management Committee Members

Prof. V. Ayodele, Mr H. Campbell, Ms J. Davids, Dr V. Hattingh, Prof. M. Huysamer, Ms S. Kalan, Mr A. Kruger (Chairman), Prof. M. Laing, Mr I. Maredi, Ms. I. Myburgh-Leendertz, Dr G. Nortjé, Ms N. Shinga, Mr C. Vorster and Ms T. Wettergreen

At 2,7 million tonnes per year, South Africa is the largest fresh fruit exporter in the southern hemisphere. Local produce is sold in 92 countries around the world, ranging from markets just north of its borders, to destinations as far afield as Europe, America, the Middle East and China. Many of South Africa's export partners have strict food safety requirements, while consumers across the world increasingly insist on the highest quality delivered through practices that respect workers and protect the environment.

"PHI's goal is to find scientific solutions to post-harvest problems," says Anton Kruger. "Producer organisations, universities and private research institutions use their own resources and the funding we get from the DST is to do cutting-edge work that results in a more competitive, profitable and sustainable fresh produce export industry."

The projects presented at the symposium covered a broad spectrum of technologies and research questions, and ranged from the most researched crop, which is tomatoes, to new crops, such as pomegranates, for which the body of local knowledge is still in its infancy.

Examples of papers that were presented include pinpointing and quantifying waste and losses in the table grape supply chain; the use of essential oils to combat orchard diseases; an app that puts produce, disease and export requirement information at producers' fingertips; online identification of false codling moth infestation in citrus through the use of automatic grading units; and how to reduce tomato losses through improved handling and transport practices.

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About the Fresh Produce Exporters' Forum (FPEF)

The Fresh Produce Exporters' Forum (FPEF) is a voluntary, non-profit organisation with more than 130 members, accounting for more than 90% of fresh fruit exported from South Africa. It provides leadership and services to its members, the international buying community and the fresh fruit export industry as a whole.

FPEF members consist of fruit exporters, producer-exporters, export and marketing agents, pack houses, logistics and other service providers. While membership is voluntary and open to all South African fruit exporting companies and industry service providers, strict accreditation criteria and a code of conduct apply to ensure that only competent and reliable marketing agents and grower-exporters are admitted to the Forum.

Essentially a service organisation, some of the FPEF's services include generic promotions for new and existing markets, the distribution of information to members, and the publication of a series of trade chain manuals.

The FPEF also manages a number of projects for the benefit of the industry, such as training, mentorship and transformation initiatives; the Top of the Class (TOC) programme, and the Post-Harvest Innovation (PHI) Programme.

As the official Fresh Fruit Export Council in South Africa, the FPEF provides a pivotal link between Government and the industry regarding market access and related matters.

Photograph: Please see attached [group8.jpg]

Caption: From the left Mr Isaac Maredi, Chief Director: Sector Innovation & Green Economy at the DST, Dr Chris Bishop, Head of Post-Harvest Unit, Writtle University College, United Kingdom, Ms Junette Davids, PHI Programme Manager, FPEF, Mr Anton Kruger, Chief Executive Officer, FPEF, Ms Sunita Kalan, Director, Sector and Local Innovation, DST.

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