Fathers of the Global Seed Vault Named 2024 World Food Prize Laureates

Dr. Geoffrey Hawtin OBE (U.K. and Canada) and Dr. Cary Fowler (U.S.) will share the $500,000 award for their work to preserve the world's heritage of seeds.

World Food Prize Foundation logo

Drs. Hawtin and Fowler meeting at the Svalbard Global Seed Vault's growing facility

WASHINGTON, D.C., UNITED STATES, May 9, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Two scientists who were instrumental in creating a back-up vault of the world's crop seeds to protect global food security have been named the 2024 World Food Prize Laureates.

Dr. Geoffrey Hawtin OBE, Founding Director and Executive Board member at the Global Crop Diversity Trust, and Dr. Cary Fowler, currently the U.S. Special Envoy for Global Food Security, were chosen by the World Food Prize Laureate Selection Committee for their longstanding contribution to seed conservation and crop biodiversity.

The two men played key roles in establishing the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, which today holds 1.25 million seed samples of more than 6,000 plant species in an underground facility in the Arctic Circle. The repository, often referred to as the "Doomsday Vault," opened in 2008 and stands as the last line of defense against threats to global food security, including pandemics and climate catastrophes.

The announcement was made at a ceremony in the U.S. Department of State hosted and presided over by Secretary of State Antony Blinken. World Food Prize Foundation Board Chair Paul Schickler and Chief Operating Officer Mashal Husain gave remarks. Ambassador Terry Branstad, Foundation President, announced the names of the Laureates.

“The World Food Prize is bestowed to individuals for recognition of their achievements in the fight against hunger and food insecurity – one of the most pressing issues of our time,” said Secretary Blinken. “This year’s awardees, Dr. Geoffrey Hawtin and the State Department’s very own Dr. Cary Fowler, have made extraordinary contributions towards this cause. They have done critical work to advance global crop biodiversity and conserve over 6,000 varieties of crops and culturally important plants which has had a direct impact in addressing hunger around the world. This is the 20th year the Department of State has played a role in this announcement and we are honored to be able to support the World Food Prize Foundation’s recognition of Dr. Fowler’s and Dr. Hawtin’s work.”

Drs. Fowler and Hawtin also played pivotal roles in the development of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, or Plant Treaty, which was adopted in 2001, to facilitate the global movement of plant genetic resources. By codifying international agreements and mechanisms for the sharing of seeds, the treaty laid the foundations for the Svalbard seed vault.

The vault was the brainchild of Dr. Fowler, who wrote to Norway’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ask them to consider establishing such a facility during his time at CGIAR, the world’s largest publicly funded agricultural research organization. He was later invited to chair a committee to assess the feasibility of such a project and served as the first Chair of the Vault’s International Advisory Council.

“Dr. Fowler's many contributions to food security are truly global and entrepreneurial in scale, scope and design - changing peoples’ lives. One of his many legacies, the global seed vault at Svalbard in Norway, will benefit generations to come and his name will linger on,” said Anne Beathe Kristiansen Tvinnereim, Minister of International Development and Minister of Nordic Cooperation, Norway.

Meanwhile, Dr. Hawtin served as a member of the original study team, scoping the viability of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and drew up its technical specifications. In 2004, Dr. Hawtin created the Global Crop Diversity Trust, or Crop Trust, which now finances the vault alongside the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the Nordic Genetic Resource Center, NordGen.

“Dr. Hawtin has helped shape the global work of the Crop Trust in many ways, and today, as a member of its Executive Board, he is at the forefront of shaping the future of this international organization and its role in the transformation of our agri-food systems,” said Dr. Stefan Schmitz, Executive Director, Global Crop Diversity Trust. “The Svalbard Global Seed Vault is not only the icon, but also the backbone of a growing global network of genebanks. Drs. Hawtin and Fowler have been instrumental in ensuring that all these genebanks, the treasure troves of plant genetic resources, have an ultimate backup in the Seed Vault on Svalbard, and have also paved the way for the diversity of crops in these genebanks to be utilized by researchers, plant breeders and farmers.”

Genebanks, including the Svalbard Vault, are crucial resources for crop scientists, who breed and develop improved varieties of the world's most important food crops. Material held in genebanks contains beneficial traits with the potential to improve crops' climate resilience, disease resistance, nutritional value and tolerance to increased salinity, which is increasingly valuable in the face of climate change.

"While creating a global seed vault might seem logical now, people told me at the time that the idea was crazy," said Dr. Fowler, who began his career in 1978 as program director at the National Sharecroppers Fund in North Carolina. "We've since managed to collect and preserve the diversity of all of the major crops, including, for example, 150,000 types of wheat now in storage. But we need more collections, particularly of indigenous crops from regions such as Africa, because the diversity of these hardy crops is the raw material for plant breeding improvements. I'm hoping the World Food Prize will inspire investments in this kind of transformational R&D which is going to be necessary for food and nutrition security for 10 billion people by 2050."

Dr. Hawtin spent much of his early career and risked his life collecting, preserving and protecting species of legumes such as chickpeas and faba beans from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. These collections helped to establish the genebank managed by the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA). When civil war broke out in 1975, he was responsible for moving collections of plant genetic material six times, across a mined road and under weapons fire, from Lebanon to Syria.

Dr. Hawtin, former Director General of the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI), now part of the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, said: "The genetic diversity of crops and their relatives is as important to biodiversity as it is to food security, and much of it is as endangered as pandas and rhinos. In receiving this honor, I would like to make a call to arms for urgent and sustained funding for the more than 1,700 genebanks around the world that are working tirelessly to make sure the material that farmers and plant breeders need is conserved and remains available. The work of crop genebanks underpins our ability to feed the world today and will do so long into the future."

The Laureates' efforts to protect food security through seed conservation have already been called upon. The first ever withdrawal from the Svalbard vault was in 2015 in the wake of the Syrian civil war, which resulted in the loss of ICARDA's genebank. The withdrawals were used to repopulate collections held in Morocco and Lebanon, and included seeds of legumes that had first been collected by Dr. Hawtin and his team decades before.

"Early in their careers, Drs. Hawtin and Fowler realized the immense value and heritage of our crop genetic resources and dedicated their professional life to its safeguarding to secure the future of food and agriculture for the next hundred years and more," said Gebisa Ejeta, Chair, World Food Prize Laureate Selection Committee. "In choosing these two visionaries, the Selection

Committee recognized the importance of this long-term thinking and planning for facing climate change and other existential threats, and for the example it sets and the wisdom it imparts in all of us on how we may collectively mobilize the equitable use of the rest of our global endowments to ensure food security for all."

About the World Food Prize: The World Food Prize is an international award that honors individuals who have improved the quality, quantity or availability of food worldwide. The Prize was founded by Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, recipient of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize, for his work that contributed to increases in agricultural outputs which was termed the Green Revolution. Since then, the Prize has been awarded to 53 distinguished individuals during the Norman E. Borlaug International Dialogue. The Dialogue, also known as the Borlaug Dialogue, is a week of events dedicated to an issue surrounding food insecurity or hunger each year.

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