PRESS RELEASE 21 May 2025

National Association for Plant Breeding Honors Five Scientists

The National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB) has announced its awardees for outstanding accomplishments in five categories: Early Career Scientist, Lifetime Achievement, Public Sector Impact, Private Sector Impact, and Plant Breeding Educator.

The 2025 NAPB awardees exemplify the very best in plant breeding research, education, outreach, and leadership. They model persistent dedication and a passionate devotion to applying their plant breeding skills and technical excellence to promote food security, quality of life, and economic resiliency for a sustainable future. They are committed to supporting the next generation of the plant breeding discipline. These outstanding professionals inspire plant breeders and scientists everywhere. The awardees are as follows:

Early Career Scientist Award: Dr. Zachary Jones, Corteva Agriscience
Lifetime Achievement Award: Dr. Mark E. Sorrells, Cornell University
Public Sector Impact Award: Dr. Istvan Rajcan, University of Guelph
Private Sector Impact Award: Dr. Mark J. Messmer, CoverCress Inc.
Plant Breeding Educator Award: Dr. Tabare Abadie, Corteva Agriscience

Awards were announced at the NAPB annual conference, hosted by the University of Hawaii 19-22 May, Kona, Hawaii. The meeting attracted around 340 participants, including 150 students, and featured technical and scientific presentations, interactive workshops, and local tours. It also included a meeting of the Plant Breeding Coordinating Committee (PBCC). All five awardees are invited to deliver talks at the next annual NAPB meeting, 8-13 June 2026, hosted by Texas A&M University, College Station TX.

About the NAPB and PBCC

Plant breeders develop new crop varieties to promote food security, quality of life, and economic resiliency for a sustainable future. The NAPB [http://www.plantbreeding.org] is a unique organization in the U.S., bringing together public and private sector plant breeders to share technical information, improve efficiency and effectiveness in their programs, develop the next generation of scientists, disseminate information about plant breeding, and advocate for a cohesive national plant breeding agenda. The PBCC is a national public sector group of scientists that provides a forum for discussion and outreach on plant breeding. [https://www.nrsp10.org/PBCC]

For more information:
Neha Kothari
President, NAPB
806-392-0930
neha888@gmail.com

Jim McFerson
Chair, NAPB Awards Committee
509-669-3900
jim.mcferson@gmail.com

National Association for Plant Breeding
EARLY CAREER SCIENTIST AWARD 2025

ZACHARY JONES
Corteva Agriscience
Memphis, TN

The 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB) Early Career Scientist Award is Dr. Zachary Jones, Associate Laureate, Corteva Agriscience. This award recognizes an early career individual in the plant breeding field who has exhibited the ability to establish strong research foundations (e.g., technological innovations, experimental techniques, publications, etc.), interact with multidisciplinary teams, demonstrate leadership, and participate in relevant professional societies.

As his nomination package highlights: *"Zach sets the example on how to be a successful professional in the ag industry and serves as a successful model on how to start your career."*

Jones began his corn breeding career with Corteva Agriscience in 2018 at the Union City, TN Research Center, where he conducted a 115-118 RM yellow corn breeding program and a 113-115 RM white corn breeding program. During this time, he made significant contributions to improved breeding methods and technology in both white and yellow corn breeding, in addition to running two successful breeding programs.

Since 2024, Jones has been Evaluation Zone Lead for Corteva's North America South Evaluation Zone, based in the Memphis, TN area, where he directs a team of breeders responsible for full season product development.

As one colleague commented: "*Zach is a already a leader in technology development and deployment. His accomplishments include redesigning the breeding pipeline to implement automated kernel sorting, development of markers for key loci, aggressive implementation of genomic selection and implementation of team testing. This model resulted in a filed patent and work to expand this model to other areas."*

In 2020 Jones was named North America White Corn Evaluation Zone Lead, and relocated to the Windfall, IN Research Center, where he directed breeding strategy for all US-based white

corn breeding programs, as well as running both white and yellow corn breeding programs. he was named a Corteva Agriscience Associate Laureate in 2022 in recognition of his contributions.

Another colleague indicated: *"Zach is known by others in the organization for his expertise and is highly sought after on topics around genomic selection and aggressive breeding methods. He is a good mentor and co-led the introduction to plant breeding mentoring circle in 2022 and co-led the advanced plant breeding circle in 2023."*

Jones is currently serving as the NAPB Membership Committee Chair and previously served as Chair of the NAPB Communications Committee. He has been recognized as one of Auburn University Alumni Association's Inaugural Twenty Under Forty class for his professional achievements He holds degrees from Auburn University (B.S. in Agronomy and Soils) and North Carolina State University (M.S. & Ph.D. in Plant Breeding and Genetics).

In conclusion, another colleague observed: *"Dr. Jones is extremely passionate, results driven, and fully comprehends plant breeding He is a key leader who has mastered quickly, combining the right pieces of technology to push breeding forward today and in the future. Zach is a proven leader on multiple science teams at Corteva and is highly active in external organizations such as NAPB, ASTA, and FFA."*

Dr. Zachary Jones, Corteva Agriscience, is the 2025 recipient of the Early Career Scientist Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding.

Dr. Zachary Jones, the 2025 recipient of the Early Career Scientist Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding, at a recent Pioneer Research Center End User Field Day, Champaign, IL.

National Association for Plant Breeding
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD 2025

MARK E. SORRELLS
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY

The 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB) Lifetime Achievement Award is Dr. Mark E. Sorrells, Professor of Plant Breeding and Genetics in the Plant Breeding and Genetics Section at Cornell University. The NAPB Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes an individual who has given distinguished long-term service to the plant breeding discipline in areas such as breeding/genetics research and publication, education (graduate or undergraduate training), extension outreach, and regional, national, and/or international leadership.

In his nomination letter, one colleague observed: *"Mark is one of the most accomplished cereal breeders and geneticists in the world and deserves to be recognized among the group of accomplished plant breeders who have received this honor."* Another commented: *"Dr. Sorrells exemplifies the mission and core values of the NAPB: excellence in research, education, and outreach, fostering diversity, and treating all people with dignity and respect."*

Sorrells has specialized in plant breeding methodologies and strategies, releasing 15 varieties of winter wheat, six spring oats, three winter barleys and two spring barleys. Recent research topics include genomic selection, hyperspectral imaging to predict wheat grain yield and intergenomic gene interactions in wheat.

Sorrells has been recognized as a highly cited researcher by the Clarivate Web of Science each year since 2017 and has authored or co-authored more than 350 peer reviewed publications. He has served as major advisor for 62 graduate students and 27 postdoctoral fellows.

As another colleague noted: *"What I find most impressive about Mark's career is his ability to evolve with changing technology and research priorities while remaining focused on sound science and cultivar development."*

Sorrells has received the Crop Science Society of America Outstanding Research Award and the Cornell College of Agriculture Outstanding Accomplishments in Applied Research award. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He is also a Fellow and 2025 President of the Crop Science Society of America.

After earning his M.S. in Botany in 1975 at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale and his Ph.D. in Plant Breeding and Plant Genetics in 1978 at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Sorrells joined the Cornell Department of Plant Breeding and Biometry in 1978 and has been full professor of plant breeding since 1991.

In sum, as one of his colleagues wrote: *"I know that I speak for many of my colleagues when I congratulate Dr. Sorrells for his tremendous contributions to crop breeding. I recommend without reservation that NAPB recognize his contributions with its Lifetime Achievement Award. Dr. Sorrells continues to represent our profession and inspire future generations to use their talents for good of society."*

Dr. Mark E. Sorrells is the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Lifetime Achievement Award and Professor of Plant Breeding and Genetics in the Plant Breeding and Genetics Section at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Dr. Mark E. Sorrells, the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Lifetime Achievement Award at a Field Day, Cornell University Musgrave Research Farm, Aurora NY

Dr. Mark E. Sorrells, the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Lifetime Achievement Award, at one of his breeding nurseries near the Cornell University campus, Ithaca NY.

National Association for Plant Breeding

PUBLIC SECTOR PLANT BREEDING IMPACT AWARD 2025

ISTVAN RAJCAN
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada

The 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB) Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award is Dr. Istvan Rajcan, Professor in the Department of Plant Agriculture, University of Guelph, Canada. This award recognizes an individual whose accomplishments as a scientist in the public sector have had extraordinary impact in the field of plant breeding in areas such as research, technological innovation, germplasm development, cultivar release, education, and leadership.

As one of his colleagues commented in his nomination letter: *"Dr. Istvan Rajcan's work demonstrates his concern for and his focus on the areas recognized by the Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award. His innovative research, prolific cultivar development, demonstrated mentorship, and his public service nationally and internationally, have greatly impacted the field of plant breeding. His work delivers benefits to students, soybean growers and the soybean sector."*

Rajcan has been leading a soybean breeding and genetics program at the University of Guelph since 1998, where he focuses on seed compositional traits (fatty acids, isoflavones, etc.) for food, nutraceutical/functional food, and industrial uses. He has also pursued research in soybean genetics, genomics and phenomics, exploring genetic variation for yield and disease resistance traits and adaptation to mega environments using exotic germplasm, especially from China, the center of origin for soybean.

Rajcan has advised 46 graduate students at the M.Sc. or Ph.D. level who work in industry, government and universities and currently advises five students and has active collaborations with Canadian, Chinese, US, and European scientists. In fact, as one of those collaborators noted in the nomination package: *"Dr. Rajcan is the most open and generous breeder I know of, always*

willing to engage in a germplasm exchange in the spirit of public collaboration. His open and collaborative spirit helps to infect the rest of the public soybean breeding community.

Rajcan is the recipient of several awards: the 2022 Canadian Plant Breeding and Genetics award, the 2022 Canadian Seed Growers Association (CSGA) Lifetime Achievement Award, the 2008 "Seed of the Year" Award (for the soybean cultivar OAC Kent), and the University of Guelph Ontario Agricultural College Alumni Distinguished Researcher Award. Since 2023, he served as Chair of the Continuing Committee of the World Soybean Research Conference.

Rajcan has co-edited two books, published 10 book chapters and 139 peer-reviewed journal articles, and developed more than 87 soybean cultivars that have been grown in Canada and Europe. He received his B.Sc. degree from the University of Novi Sad, Serbia and his Ph.D. in canola breeding and genetics from the University of Guelph, Canada.

In summary, according to his nomination letter: *"Dr. Rajcan embodies the ideal candidate for the NAPB Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award. His career demonstrates excellence across all evaluation criteria - mentoring future scientists, developing economically important crop varieties, advancing scientific knowledge through innovative research, and fostering international collaboration to address global agricultural challenges."*

The 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB) Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award is Dr. Istvan Rajcan, Professor in the Department of Plant Agriculture, University of Guelph, Canada.

Dr. Istvan Rajcan, Professor in the Department of Plant Agriculture, University of Guelph, Canada and the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award at a soybean field trial.

National Association for Plant Breeding

PRIVATE SECTOR PLANT BREEDING IMPACT AWARD 2025

MARK J. MESSMER
CoverCress Inc.
Lake Saint Louis, MO

The 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB) Private Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award is Dr. Mark J. Messmer of CoverCress Inc. This Award recognizes an individual whose accomplishments as a scientist in the private sector have had extraordinary impact in the field of plant breeding in areas such as germplasm development, cultivar release, technological innovation, and leadership.

As stated in his nomination package: *"Mark Messmer's career and contributions to plant breeding are truly extraordinary, embodying the criteria for the NAPB Plant Breeding Impact Award through his advancements in germplasm development, cultivar release, technological innovation, and leadership. His work has not only propelled our field forward but has also made a significant positive impact on the planet and its people."*

Messmer's first exposure to plant breeding was as a student hourly worker in Dr. Herb Ohm's wheat and oat breeding programs at Purdue University. After graduating with a BS in Agronomy in 1979, he completed his MS and PhD degrees in in Plant Breeding and Genetics at the University of Illinois under Dr. Bob Lambert in 1983.

Messmer quickly started his industry career in 1983 at Garst Seed Company as a corn breeder, opening a new breeding station in Wood River, Nebraska. He led the development of many of Garst's initial proprietary hybrid parent inbreds while in Nebraska and subsequently at Slater Iowa.

As one colleague observed: "Mark's technical achievements are matched by his exceptional leadership and vision for organizational culture. He has fostered an environment of collaboration, transparency, innovation, and respect, significantly impacting the professional development and growth of countless individuals within our organization. Personally, Mark's mentorship has been a

cornerstone of my own professional journey, guiding me through challenges and encouraging the exploration and application of my strengths."

Messmer rose to Research Director at Garst, and after 14 years with the company, left in 1997 to join Monsanto as Global Hybrid Wheat Research Director with their HybriTech operating unit. After 18 months in this position, Messmer was asked to lead the integration of Monsanto's North American Corn Breeding program acquisitions into a single team.

From early 1999 until his retirement from Monsanto in mid-2014, Messmer led or co-led Monsanto's North America Corn Breeding program. After his initial retirement, along with some Monsanto colleagues, Messmer began a program in 2015 to develop Field Pennycress as a winter oilseed crop with a small startup company called Arvegenix.

Arvegenix evolved to become the company that is now CoverCress Inc., where Messmer has focused on establishing a sustainable and successful CoverCress® field breeding and testing program, starting with broadly collected wild accessions of Field Pennycress. He has spent extensive time in the field doing observations and agronomic learning to advance the viability of CoverCress® as a commercial crop.

The basic breeding program Messmer started at CoverCress Inc. ten years ago has now, with the help of gene editing, grown into an effective modern breeding operation that has supplied products supporting initial and ongoing commercialization efforts. Over the past two years, Messmer has transitioned to an advisor role for CoverCress Inc. on their Scientific Advisory Committee.

In summary, another colleague concluded: *"When you look at Marl's career spanning 40 years with expertise in two crops and countless encounters with colleagues and mentees who have branched out to other companies, it's truly comparable to a stone that is thrown in a river and causes ripples through the water-he's touched many lives all the way from a first-year researcher to farmers in their tractors in their fields."*

Dr. Mark J. Messmer, CoverCress Inc., the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award.

Dr. Mark J. Messmer, CoverCress Inc., the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award at a Field Pennycress trial.

Dr. Mark J. Messmer, CoverCress Inc., the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award at a Field Pennycress trial.

National Association for Plant Breeding
PLANT BREEDING EDUCATOR AWARD 2025

TABARE ABADIE
Corteva Agriscience
Johnston IA

The 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Plant Breeding Educator Award is Dr. Tabare Abadie, Corteva Agriscience, Johnston, IA. Abadie is Sr Research Manager and Distinguished Laureate at Corteva, where he currently serves as Recruiting Lead, Seed Product Development.

The newly-created Plant Breeding Educator Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB), recognizes an individual who has demonstrated an extraordinary impact on students, staff, other plant breeders, the scientific community, or the general public through their exceptional skills, innovation, and commitment to plant breeding education.

In his nomination package, one colleague observed: *Tabaré's dedication to plant breeding education is unparalleled. Through his leadership in professional societies, his advocacy for inclusivity in the field, and his commitment to students' support, he embodies the highest standards of this award. His transformative contributions to education, mentorship, and outreach have left a lasting impact on the plant breeding community and the current and next generation of scientists.*

Over a 46-year career in academia and industry, Tabare has excelled in education, career development, and mentoring, especially in the areas of plant breeding and quantitative genetics. He began his professional career in 1979, reaching the level of Professor of Plant Breeding and member of the Graduate School of the Universidad de la República (UDELAR) and Programa para el Desarrollo de las Ciencias Básicas (PEDECIBA), in Uruguay. In addition to his teaching and graduate student advisor responsibilities, he also served as a wheat and barley breeder, releasing eight widely accepted cultivars, and worked broadly in extension, collaborating directly with agronomists and farmers.

In 2003 Abadie joined DuPont Pioneer, leading a multinational team in molecular breeding and creating educational programs. In 2008, he initiated the Plant Sciences Symposia Series, which reached over 70 universities and centers on five continents, benefiting thousands of graduate students worldwide. This student-led program provides a platform for students to expand their professional network and develop skills that support their academic training.

During his career mentoring numerous students and young professionals through various programs, he has been especially involved over the past 20 years coordinating the Pioneer/Corteva internships. In this program Abadie has provided guidance and coaching for several hundred students yearly. In addition, he has served in the Golden Opportunity Scholars Program, chairing it three times, and actively participated in several minority-serving organizations and initiatives.

As one colleague highlighted: *"Tabare launched an initiative that ended up on the globally recognized Plant Sciences Symposia Series – PSSS, a transformative model of public private engagement, reaching out >16 countries across 6 continents, >70 universities and >40,000 students, and counting. Tabare has been instrumental on Corteva's DELTA symposium (Developing Emerging Leaders and Talent in Agriculture), which is a strategic venue to bring and hire scientific talent from underrepresented minorities."*

Abadie has served on several boards and is currently at the Integrated Breeding Platform and the American Society of Agronomy. He holds an Ing. Agr. degree from the University of Uruguay, MSc and PhD degrees in Plant Breeding from the University of Minnesota and did a postdoc at UCDavis. He is a 2021 Fellow of the Crop Science Society of America and was named a Distinguished Corteva Laureate in 2022.

As one colleague concluded: *"Dr. Abadie's career is distinguished by his exceptional mentorship and dedication to education, shaping the careers of countless individuals in both academia and industry. As an educator, he has not only fostered scientific innovation but also cultivated professional relationships and established enduring public-private collaborations that have significantly advanced the field."*

Dr. Tabare Abadie, Corteva Agriscience, is the 2025 recipient of the new Plant Breeding Educator Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding.

Dr. Tabare Abadie, Corteva Agriscience, the 2025 recipient of the new Plant Breeding Educator Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding for his long lasting contributions to the Plant Breeding Pioneer/Corteva internship program and Plant Sciences Symposium Series."