



National Association for Plant Breeding EARLY CAREER SCIENTIST AWARD 2026

ESTEBAN RIOS
University of Florida
Gainesville FL

This National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB) award recognizes an early career individual in the plant breeding field who has exhibited the ability to establish strong research foundations (technological innovations, experimental techniques, publications, etc.), interact with multidisciplinary teams, demonstrate leadership and participate in relevant professional societies.

The 2026 recipient of the Early Career Scientist Award is Dr. Esteban Rios, Associate Professor of Forage Breeding and Genetics in the Agronomy Department of the University of Florida (UF)/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS).

Since Rios joined UF/IFAS in 2017, he has focused on the development of improved forage and cover crop cultivars for subtropical and tropical agricultural systems through the integration of plant breeding, quantitative genetics, genomics, phenomics and predictive breeding approaches to address critical challenges related to forage productivity, adaptation, resilience, and livestock sustainability. His research spans multiple forage and turfgrass species: alfalfa, bermudagrass, annual ryegrass, clovers, cowpea, and bahiagrass.

Although still early in his career, Rios has secured millions of dollars of competitive grant funding for his forage breeding program. He has numerous peer-reviewed publications, invited presentations and developed advanced germplasm and released new and improved cultivars. Several of his publications have been recognized for their high impact by his peers via specific awards.

As a colleague observed: “I don’t need to belabor numbers of papers and so forth; these are easily seen on his CV. What I want to emphasize is that Dr. Rios is a thoughtful, highly talented, resourceful, driven, and passionate scientist. He cares for his research projects because he knows his work impacts his students and the agricultural community in Florida and well beyond. He is not pursuing his scientific career as a plant breeder because he wants the glory; he’s in it because he wants to make a difference”.

Rios has successfully obtained over \$25 million in competitive funding as principal investigator or co-principal investigator from USDA, the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research, USAID, the Gates Foundation, the Department of Energy and producer organizations, with more than \$2.3 million supporting his breeding program. His program has already released 12 cultivars across forage and turfgrass species. He has over 100 publications, including 69 refereed journal articles.



A strong advocate for training the next generation of plant breeders, Rios teaches graduate courses in plant breeding, experimental design and field research methods. In addition, he is currently the Director of the UF/IFAS Plant Breeding Graduate Program and has mentored more than 50 students, postdoctoral researchers, and international scientists, many of whom have advanced to careers in academia, industry and government. His contributions to research, education and international collaboration are recognized through multiple awards, including the 2026 UF/IFAS Early Career International Research Fellow Award and the 2025 UF/IFAS Plant Breeding Innovation Award.

Another colleague commented: “Esteban’s progress as a scientist is simply outstanding, but while achieving this research success, Dr. Rios has trained and mentored numerous students (54 in total) and scientists/postdoctoral associates (23 in total). He teaches popular courses, including ‘Field Plot Techniques’, ‘Advanced Plant Breeding’ and ‘Plant Chromosomes and Genomes’” His course evaluations for his teaching speak highly off him with a mean score of 4.8 out of 5.”

Rios obtained a B.S. in Agronomy from the Universidad Nacional del Nordeste (UNNE), Argentina in 2013. He received his MS in Agronomy (Forage and Turfgrass Breeding) from UF in 2013 and a Ph.D. in Agronomy (Forage Breeding) in 2016.



Dr. Esteban Rios, University of Florida, is the 2026 recipient of the Early Career Scientist Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding.



Dr. Esteban Rios, University of Florida, the 2026 recipient of the Early Career Scientist Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding in a crimson clover plot.



Dr. Esteban Rios, University of Florida, the 2026 recipient of the Early Career Scientist Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding, and his Ph.D. student Pablo Sipowicz (2024 NAPB Borlaug Scholar) assessing research plots with a drone.



Dr. Esteban Rios, University of Florida, the 2026 recipient of the Early Career Scientist Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding, during a student field trip.



Dr. Esteban Rios, University of Florida, the 2026 recipient of the Early Career Scientist Award of the National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB), with his lab group at the 2025 NAPB conference in Kona, Hawaii.