

Media Statement

GOVERNMENT LAUNCHES RESEARCH CHAIRS FOCUSED ON WASTE MANAGEMENT

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Government has launched South Africa's first ever research chairs on waste management, aimed at transforming the sector while contributing to the country's socio-economic development.

The new chairs under the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) – the South African Research Chair in Waste and Climate, and in Waste and Society – were launched in Pretoria today.

An estimated 65% of municipal organic waste, and nearly 100% of commercially exploitable biomass from the agricultural and food processing sectors, is still disposed of on land, resulting in significant potential for greenhouse gas emissions.

In 2010, the waste sector was the second largest contributor to the country's total methane emissions. Yet organic waste presents considerable opportunity as a resource, whether as compost, bioenergy or high-value product recovery through a bio-refinery.

The Research Chair in Waste and Climate has been awarded to Prof. Cristina Trois from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and the Research Chair in Waste and Society to Prof. Catherina Schenck from the University of the Western Cape.

The special focus on waste and climate and waste and society are two key elements of South Africa's Waste Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) Roadmap. The roadmap was implemented by national government to support more effective decision-making, faster insertion of context-appropriate technology, and strengthened capability and capacity.

According to Prof. Linda Godfrey, Manager of the Waste RDI Roadmap Implementation Unit at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the waste sector is in desperate need of change.

"If mismanaged, waste directly impacts the health of communities, yet it also provides opportunities for improved livelihoods and reducing poverty – simply by changing the way we think about waste as a resource," said Prof. Godfrey.

She said this change required a deep understanding of waste behaviour and appropriate behaviour change interventions; appropriate business models to support small business development; and opportunities to create jobs and improve livelihoods in South Africa's formal and informal sectors.

Prof. Godfrey also welcomed the appointment of women to lead the research chairs. "It is also opportune that these two new chairs are being launched in August, Women's Month – a celebration of women who have been instrumental in rewriting South Africa's story. And now we have the opportunity to do the same in the waste sector, with the new chairs having been awarded to two extremely capable and well respected women in the sector."

Speaking at the launch, Director for Environmental Services and Technologies at the Department Science and Technology (DST), Dr Henry Roman, said there was a need for targeted research on the potential impact of waste on the climate, on appropriate mitigation technologies for South Africa, and on the impacts of climate change on the sector.

"Given the challenges and opportunities facing South Africa with respect to waste, and the role of research, development and innovation in supporting the sector's transition, the DST is proud to launch the first two research chairs in solid waste management in South Africa, in partnership with the National Research Foundation and Council for Scientific and Industrial Research," said Dr Roman.

The SARCHI initiative is led by the NRF to attract and retain research excellence and innovation at universities, science councils and national research facilities. It aims to improve South Africa's international research and innovation competitiveness in a way that responds to the country's social and economic challenges.

Director for Research Chairs and Centres of Excellence at the NRF, Dr Nana Boaduo, said the two chairs would make a palpable impact in their respective communities and society at large, through human capacity development, including the production of high-quality graduates that can readily be absorbed within the national system of innovation.

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