A Big Thank You to the Tennessee Pest Control Industry!

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Last year the East Tennessee Pest Control Association (ETPCA) approached me about developing a scholarship fund that would support Urban Entomology at the University of Tennessee. The ETPCA scholarship committee met several times with Keith Barber, Vice Chancellor for Development for the UT Institute of Agriculture and the UT Foundation, and decided to establish two funds:

1. East Tennessee Pest Control Association Endowment Award in Urban Entomology, hereafter referred to as the endowment and
2. Urban Entomology Fund in honor of Dr. Karen Vail, hereafter referred to as the gift.

The ETPCA has promised to make five $5000 donations to the endowment fund for a total of $25000. Once this obligation is met and the fund matures, it is estimated that a $1000 award will be presented annually to a student pursuing a career in urban (household and structural) entomology and mentored by faculty in the Entomology and Plant Pathology Department. In creating the endowment fund, ETPCA has established a legacy for itself and will provide a monetary award to deserving students who will support your industry.

The name of the second award was a bit contentious. I tried to discourage the chosen title because the person named in an award title is often dead; it’s usually done as a memorial tribute. I tried to convince the committee that they were putting me in an early grave, but after several “discussions,” I realized that if I didn’t compromise, we would spend too much time worrying about titles and not go forth with the important mission of providing funds to graduate students who can serve this industry with their research.

The UTIA Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology shall use this gift fund in accordance with University policy for the following purposes:

1. Graduate student salary, benefits, tuition, and fees and/or
2. Urban entomology research, extension and teaching activities including the purchase of materials and supplies and travel.
3. Preference is given to students who are pursuing a career in urban (household and structural) entomology.

A minimum of $25,000 has been committed to this fund, but a time limit to reach this level is not specified. Currently, we estimate that a Master’s student in the Entomology and Plant Pathology Department requires $18,000 stipend (salary) and $11,000 tuition and fees plus $5000 for supplies and travel for a total of $34,000 annually for 2 years. As you can see, the $25,000 falls short of completely funding a student by $43,000.
We are hoping to find an excellent student that will qualify for one of seven of EPP’s highly competitive ¾-time assistantships. Under this scenario, the department provides a $6,250 stipend per year and tuition and fees of $11,000 per year. This requires a faculty member to provide $11,750 per year or $23,500 plus travel and supply funds (about $10,000) for a Master’s student to complete a degree. We’ll still fall short with the $25,000 gift but I’m hoping the fund will grow beyond the initial commitment.

The gift fund gives us an opportunity to direct research towards the needs of Tennessee’s pest management industry. I currently support one full-time and up to two part-time staff through contracts from manufacturers or from competitive grant awards. Most manufacturers are trying to obtain data to support product registration with EPA or support marketing of their product and therefore have certain objectives that must be met as part of the contract. The proposals awarded from government agencies need to support the agency’s mission. With no direct support from UT for research, it’s difficult to find a way to fund very specific technical problems experienced by Tennessee’s PMPs.

I’m not the only one in this boat. Anne Nagro cites urban entomology researchers across the nation discussing this very problem in an article, [Market Watch] No Funding, No Future (http://www.pctonline.com/pct0315-urban-pests-funding-challenges.aspx), in the March 2015 issue of PCT magazine. I think we should all thank Tammy Johnson and other members of the scholarship committee for their foresight in addressing a problem before the national conversation started.

Urban entomology research supporters are rallying and I’m optimistic that gift fund will surpass its financial goal. Donations have been received from a Tennessee pest management company and promised from a manufacturer. The Tennessee Pest Control Association Board approved a $5000 donation and decided to vote each year whether to continue this donation. In addition, the board decided to donate the profits from the TPCA-sponsored golf tournament at the 2015 NPMA Pestworld meeting in Nashville and to create a tiered registration at TPCA meetings to allow vendors to donate to this fund. On July 23rd, ETPCA is sponsoring a Hands-on Academy in which participants will learn about maintenance and repair of a B&G and Birchmeier sprayer. Proceeds from this meeting will be donated to the gift fund too.

While we are waiting for the funds to amass, please think about and prioritize pest management issues that need to be addressed. These don’t need to be issues that your company is personally experiencing. They could be problems that companies in your area need resolved or they could be issues that the industry as a whole needs a solution. Typically a master’s project will have two to three objectives. It’s nice if these are somewhat related, but they don’t need to be as long as the projects can be completed within two years. For example, a student could compare brown recluse treatments in single family homes and conduct a survey of the state’s pest management professionals to determine why PMPs aren’t more involved with local, regional and national pest management associations.

We are developing a form to use when making donations to the gift fund and intend it to be linked at advanceUTIA.com/UrbanEntomology. Until the form is completed, if you want to make a donation, checks should be addressed to the “UT Foundation” and the fund name, “Urban Entomology Fund in honor of Dr. Karen Vail”, placed in the check’s memo line. You can send the check to me at the address listed under my byline for this article.

I am overwhelmed by the Tennessee pest control industry’s generosity and want to thank you for recognizing the importance of supporting our program and the graduate student(s) who will be able to research pest problems facing Tennessee’s pest management professionals.