



Message from the NSTF Executive Director

Outbreaks of plant, animal and human diseases; and what to do about the plastic plague?

Here we are, a mere month since my last editorial, when the virus was still called nCoV and I still felt free to call it the Wuhan virus. ([February NSTF Newsletter: Communicating and modelling the spread of the Wuhan virus](#)). No more. The virus is now called COVID-19 and can no longer be associated only with China. A month ago, the number of infected people was a mere 17 500. Now it has shot up past five times as much, to more than 90 000. In this short space of time, it has become the world's problem, and our government has been putting measures in place to deal with its arrival. Today (3 March) the [UKZN has launched a 'war room'](#) and will start "instituting large-scale high level surveillance, prevention and response measures". COVID-19 has not yet hit us, but it is accepted that it is only a matter of time before it does.

It is because of this destructive sub-microscopic glob of molecules that the NSTF Sub-committee of [Science Councils and Statutory Bodies](#) has decided on the topic of their annual NSTF discussion forum as: **Preparedness for Outbreaks**. This will be held in November/December this year. The themes of this discussion forum will include both human and animal communicable diseases. We will learn about government policies to handle human health and livestock emergencies (including wildlife, which recently came to be regarded as livestock too). We will share knowledge on what research has been done (and is being done) in South Africa. We'll take a closer look at corona viruses, listeriosis, Ebola, water borne diseases, and foot-and-mouth disease, among others. What has been done to deal with outbreaks in the past? What is currently in place to handle them? What lessons were learnt? Inevitably, looking back over nine months of 2020, we'll discuss the progress of the COVID-19, and whether South Africa was handling it well enough.

I am looking forward to recommendations for the Department of Health, the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD), the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF), as well as innovative suggestions for school curricula and public engagement.

Plant Health

This being the [International Year of Plant Health](#) (declared by the United Nations), NSTF has adopted this as its theme for the year. Addressing problems with agricultural crops and food security has therefore been in our planning since last year, as has the health of other plants with various uses, and the health of indigenous plants. As always, we have been preparing a two-day discussion forum on the theme, which is scheduled for 6-7 May in Pretoria. A small group of subject experts has conceptualised the event and its sub-themes.

We will be discussing threats to plants including pests and pathogens, habitat loss and climate change, and how to fight and prevent outbreaks. All kinds of plants will be part of the discussion – crops, plantations, indigenous plants, fungi, grasslands, wetlands, invasive plants, etc. How should outbreaks of pests and pathogens be handled? How do sound ecosystems contribute to plant health? How to defeat threats to pollinators, like the honey bee? What's to be done, if anything, about the polyphagous shot hole borer beetle?

Recommendations flowing from these two days will be made to the DALRRD, the DEFF, and the Provincial counterparts of these departments.

Plastic waste

The NSTF 2019 AGM seminar in November on [Plastics – substitutes vs recycling](#) – proved to be very popular. Read the [media release](#). It is a topic that dominates many people's thoughts and discussions when there isn't a global epidemic to occupy them. The NSTF [proSET* Committee](#) therefore decided to hold a full two-day discussion forum on a similar topic. This time we will include a wider range of themes, and delve deeply into them.

Themes will include: the circular economy, job creation, making recycling more efficient, strategies for reducing and recycling plastic packaging, how to separate the waste streams for biobased plastic and ordinary plastic, and industries that are plastic-waste-related. I am hoping to find answers to the following questions: Where can I return my plastic bottles for a refund? How to deal with the plastic casing of electronic equipment when the electronics are no longer in top shape? Do 'eco-bricks' work? How to improve waste management in rural towns and informal settlements (e.g.)?

We will learn about government policies on waste management related to plastics, and learn from researchers about cutting-edge research and innovations. We'll hear from industry players about the hard realities of making plastic less harmful, and of making recycling profitable. We'll invite recyclers and artists who create art from plastic waste.

Look out for the event in September in Gauteng. Its invitation will go out in August. At the end of September we will host a few sessions on this topic at the South African Innovation Summit (SAIS).

It promises to be a full and fascinating year. It is often said: "Never let a good crisis go to waste" (attributed to Winston Churchill), or some variation on this quotation. We'll be looking for solutions to a myriad of crises.

The opinions expressed above are those of the Executive Director, Ms Jansie Niehaus, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the [Executive Committee](#) or [members](#) of the NSTF.

* proSET is the professional bodies' membership sector of the NSTF.