

MINISTER'S OPENING ADDRESS  
&  
CRAWFORD FUND MEDAL PRESENTATION

The Hon Pat Conroy MP

Minister for International Development and the Pacific  
& Minister for Defence Industry and Capability Delivery



I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which this conference takes place, the Ngunnawal people. I also recognise any other people with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are attending this event.

I acknowledge the rich and ongoing contribution of First Nations people who for thousands of years have cared for Country. There is much to learn from First Nations people who have been involved in agriculture on this land for thousands of years.

It's a delight to be here and welcome you all to Parliament House.

The Crawford Fund annual conference holds an important position as Australia's key international agricultural development and food security event. I congratulate you on your thirty years of delivering this conference and bringing national attention to critical food and nutrition security issues. I would like to thank the team at the Crawford Fund for putting together a deeply relevant program on transformative partnerships, local leadership and co-design for food security. And I extend my thanks to the Crawford Fund Patrons and Board too.

I would like to acknowledge Dr Line Gordon, Director of the Stockholm Resilience Centre, and Dr Ismahane Elouafi, Executive Managing Director of CGIAR. Very pleased to have you here. And a big welcome to all our international guests from the Pacific, South East Asia and beyond. It's wonderful to have such expertise from around the world. And I also applaud the Crawford Fund NextGen program participants and members of the RAID Network who are attending today.

It's a pleasure to welcome you all on behalf of the Australian Government; and I also have the honour to present the Crawford Fund Medal, which I will come to shortly.

Agriculture and food security continue to be central to the Australian Government's development agenda. With such a high number of people still facing food and nutrition insecurity, locally led solutions will be more important than ever. Alarming figures released just a few weeks ago show we are not making progress on reducing food insecurity like we need to. In 2023, 864 million people suffered from severe food insecurity – around 11 per cent of the world's population. In our region, over half of the Pacific population experienced moderate to severe food insecurity in the 2021 to 2023 period with 44 per cent of Pacific children under 5 experiencing stunting in 2022. That's nearly half of all children in the Pacific have experienced stunting due to food insecurity.

We cannot talk about food security without talking about climate change. Climate change is impacting food insecurity now. From less predictable and longer periods of drought to more intense storm and flood events, agricultural producers need to adapt their practices urgently. The changing climate is accelerating pressure on global food security, threatening access, affordability and nutritional value of food supply. Extreme weather threatens food and water security, with grave implications for global stability. Farmers and producers across the globe and of all sizes are keenly aware of these changing conditions and are concerned about what this means

for their livelihoods. They experience firsthand these changes to their local environment; they see the impacts. And of course, it is not just farmers but also local policy makers, governments, businesses and other members of the community who need to grapple with these challenges now and into the future.

This year's conference theme goes to the heart of Australia's development approach and recognises the importance of locally led solutions: partnerships, local leadership and co-design. It's fantastic to see the focus on these principles at this conference.

Our Australian international development policy champions locally led efforts to drive change. As a development partner, Australia understands that the way we do development matters. We know listening and responding to our partners' priorities matters, as does growing partnerships – be that in research or between governments or with local civil society groups – to deliver outcomes.

The work of ACIAR – the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research – is a great example. I am pleased to acknowledge the CEO of ACIAR, Professor Wendy Umberger, who is with us today. For well over 40 years, partnerships have been the foundation of ACIAR's success. Fostering and implementing research collaborations and partnerships with organisations all over the world has led to stronger and more equitable agriculture, food, forestry and fishery systems; improved food and nutrition security; and more sustainable management of natural resources.

Australia is increasingly focused on supporting our partners to mitigate and adapt to climate change and implement more resilient agricultural practices, improving food security and livelihoods. We are working with governments, researchers, communities, smallholder farmers and other stakeholders in our partner countries to deliver their priorities in agriculture. We do this by providing financial and technical assistance to our region to help build long-term food system resilience.

And so I am very pleased to announce Australia is investing a further \$2.6 million into the Centre for Pacific Crops and Trees (CePaCT). This investment supports the Pacific Community's regional genebank, ensuring the long-term conservation and distribution of key crops and trees of the Pacific. With a changing climate, the ability to conserve a diverse range of food plants will mean Pacific countries can access food crops that are better adapted to new conditions. This investment directly supports local scientific expertise and the regional architecture. This is one of many investments we are making. Our emphasis on climate partnerships is also on display through the Pacific Climate Infrastructure Financing Partnership, delivering off-grid renewable energy infrastructure to boost food security and rural livelihoods in remote Pacific islands.

When the scale of the challenge is immense, we need more solutions developed through partnerships, collaboration and cooperation. So I hope you have many discussions today that lead to strong partnerships. It looks like a great program. And I was particularly struck by the topic of the final session: Achieving Transformational Outcomes. *Transformation* is what it will take if we are to reach the Sustainable Development Goal of Zero Hunger. No one in today's modern world should suffer from hunger. But food security goes beyond hunger alone. It is connected to many of the challenges our world is facing, and it matters for Australia and our region. Improving food security is critical for stability; for stronger economic ties and opportunities for trade; for better health outcomes; and for promoting innovative and sustainable solutions to build a safer and more resilient region – for all.

Because of this I am very pleased to present the Crawford Fund Medal. The Crawford Fund Medal recognises Australians who have made a considerable and continued contribution to international agricultural research.

This year's highly deserving recipient is **Dr Tony Fischer**. This award recognises his significant contribution to global wheat production and agricultural development. Coming from a wheat–sheep farm at Boree Creek in southern New South Wales, Tony worked with Nobel Prize Laureate Dr Norman Borlaug leading the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center's global wheat program.

Tony has also made a substantial contribution to Australia's impact in international agricultural research through various roles with ACIAR, CSIRO, the Crawford Fund and ANU, mentoring and guiding many young scientists along the way.

Tony will be adding the Crawford Fund Medal to many esteemed awards including the C.M. Donald Medal, the William Farrer Memorial Medal and his Member of the Order of Australia.

I now call Dr Fischer to receive this award.

Congratulations, Dr Fischer.

## CRAWFORD FUND MEDAL for 2023

### Acceptance speech, 13 August 2024

Dr Tony Fischer FAIAST FTSE AM



Honourable Pat Conroy, Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Colleagues, I am deeply honoured to receive this award from the Crawford Fund and grateful for the chance to say a few words at this important conference.

First, an acknowledgement from the past. As I finished studying agricultural science at The University of Melbourne, my animal science lecturer and later founder of the Crawford Fund, Derek Tribe, posed a question I had never before considered seriously.

'Tony', he asked, 'how are we going to feed the world?' A seed was sown in Derek's office that afternoon in December 1960.

A decade later, the boy from a wheat farm at Boree Creek in southern NSW arrived to work at CIMMYT in Mexico just two weeks before his boss, the wheat breeder Dr Normal Borlaug, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his pivotal role in the Green Revolution in South Asia, undoubtedly averting more famine in that populous region of small farmers.

For me the course was set for a lengthy career in wheat agronomy, physiology, breeding and farming systems, grappling with the challenge of delivering impact through the sciences of agriculture and socioeconomics.

But first, another memorable message from December 1960: at a farewell dinner for the rowdy new agricultural graduates, our biochemistry professor Michael Birt dared to deliver a valedictory speech entitled simply 'Measure it'; excellent advice that I have never forgotten.

However, I have learned over the years that measurement must be augmented by data analysis, unrelenting curiosity, and reporting and publication, followed by promotion of your conclusions when the evidence is sound. And my final lesson was to not lose sight of the big picture goals in agriculture, which include positive impacts on food security, the welfare of farmers, and sustainability of the natural resource base of agriculture. This inevitably involves us agricultural scientists collaborating with other scientists and other people – connecting our research to the real world. I stumbled in some of these lessons myself, but was lucky much of the time.

One good fortune was my early experiences from the family wheat farm, which especially helped me early on with Norman Borlaug. Another was encountering inspirational and collaborative people along the way.

I could mention many such people, but one example suffices. I refer to my 630-page book, *Crop yields and global food security: Will yield increase continue to feed the world?*. It was coauthored by CIMMYT colleagues, namely Derek Byerlee an agricultural economist from Eurelia, near Orroroo in South Australia, and Greg Edmeades a maize scientist from a dairy farm in Cambridge in New Zealand. ACIAR and GRDC generously published the book 10 years ago; more good fortune! It is [free to download from the ACIAR website](#) and has now been cited extensively.

In finishing I want to express my gratitude to the Crawford Fund, not only for this award but also for being true over its almost 40 years to the wonderful maxim 'Doing well by doing good', promoted very early on by Professor Derek Tribe, and leading to his 1991 book of the same title. Enlightened self-interest was the blunter summary that Derek often used.

Australia does good with its overseas agricultural aid program, principally delivered by ACIAR, which supports, in neighbouring developing countries, partnership agricultural research. This helps lift their agricultural productivity and their research capacity. As a result, Australia does well: for example, gaining new insights into common agricultural problems; early warning on exotic biotic agents which threaten our agriculture; and access to novel crop germplasm. And the benefits go beyond agriculture, to strengthening our security, building trust and invaluable soft power with our neighbours and especially contributing to their economic growth.

I also wish to acknowledge the strong effort that the Crawford Fund has made in the last 20 years or so to engage the refreshing idealism of early career scientists in the task of Australia's international agricultural research. I especially highlight the foresight and energy of Cathy Reade in this. Forty of you are here today on Crawford Fund scholarships, representing the many others linked to the Crawford Fund and upon whom our regional future, as good neighbours through agricultural research and development aid, depends.

Finally, I wish to express my enduring gratitude to my wife Miriam, who is here this morning: an *ingeniero agronomo* from Chile, dedicated plant pathologist, and pioneer plant molecular biologist, as well as strong and loving mother and indispensable partner in my career.