

Chair's Address

Science New Zealand Awards

Grand Hall, Parliament Buildings, 3 December 2020

We are primarily here tonight to celebrate and honour the recipients of the 2020 Science New Zealand Awards.

But I think we should pause a little and reflect on the extraordinary year we've all had. Each of us has had to address personal and professional challenges beyond anything we might have thought likely, when we held this event last year.

The pace and scale of change has been close to overwhelming at times.

But what we witnessed was a willingness and an ability to step up, to take on the challenges and to re-think how we do things, and that has been truly inspiring.

On behalf of the Boards and Management across all the CRIs, let me say thank you to each and every one of the 4,500 CRI staff for their response to challenges presented by COVID.

We also owe thanks to all those who supported us – our families, friends, clients and partners, and of course our owner, the Government.

It is good to have many of you here tonight.

What the CRIs have achieved as a part of that wider team of 5 million is nationally important, and unprecedented. And where better to acknowledge and celebrate that, than here, at Parliament.

So where do we go from here?

Well, we do what scientists always do. We learn from the past ... we analyse the present ... and we bring our skills, our knowledge and our connections to look forward with imagination.

We remain committed to the primary purpose of CRIs – that is, to benefit New Zealand through excellent science, and its application.

Science in New Zealand has never been more valued than right now – by the public and by decision makers.

Two recent international polls back this up:

The first found that 92 per cent of New Zealanders felt that the government was better able to handle the pandemic by being well informed on the virus. In fact, New Zealand was the top ranked Western country in that poll.

The second asked 25,000 scientists around the world if their legislators in their country had used scientific advice to inform their COVID-19 strategy.

New Zealand topped that poll too. We were the only country where more than three-quarters of respondents were satisfied with policymakers' inclusion of science.

Those polls simply confirm what we, as research providers, saw in practice, close-up, every day:

- ... Our science, trusted to be accurate, without agenda.
- ... Our science, informing options, proposing solutions.
- ... Our science, robust and deep, and communicated in ways which make it useful and easy to adopt.
- ... Our science, built on decades of research, data acquisition, global connections and knowledge of our New Zealand communities and users.
- ... Our science, making a difference for New Zealand.

In other words, we were doing what we do all the time.

It is what we have done ever since New Zealand's first Crown-owned science capability was established back in the 1840s.

As you listen to the citations of the award winners tonight, you will see that commitment is as strong and relevant as ever.

It is making a difference across economic, environmental, social and cultural elements of New Zealand.

You will hear of the difference made in our regions, at a national level and internationally.

Ask yourself, as every winner is announced – where would New Zealand be without the commitment, across the CRIs, to a common purpose?

As science-based organisations, we bring the same drive and determination to understanding how we can best contribute in the future.

The task is enormous: the recovery, the reset, and the rebuild of our national wealth and wellbeing.

However, we should not limit our ambition for New Zealand by simply recreating what we had before.

New Zealand's future will come from innovation, as indeed it has in the past. The issues and challenges we face domestically and globally are also our opportunities.

Look at what the CRIs bring. Science for a purpose. Excellence, curiosity, discovery, application and impact, integrity and credibility.

That's why three out of every four dollars spent by businesses externally on R&D in New Zealand are spent with CRIs.

No other government-owned research organisations in the OECD attract as much externally funded research.

Customers come to us because they have confidence that the right research will be designed, developed and delivered for them, primarily because of our sector knowledge and connection.

They also come to us because they want a ‘future view’ ... because we look at challenges and opportunities through a different lens (often seeing what they haven’t considered or cannot see).

Our team of 4500 people are motivated to deliver science ... from discovery ... right through to impact.

They are involved in all the big, overarching issues and opportunities for New Zealand – like climate change ... water resources ... land use ... biosecurity ... primary sector productivity ... and emergency responses.

And they’re often at the forefront of the application of new technologies that are transforming the way we work and live.

As analysis shows, the CRIs are already the most integrated and collaborative element of New Zealand’s science system.

These Awards – now in their fourth year – illustrate that.

We have significant, long-term, large-scale collaborations with each other, with universities and with other research organisations.

We’re also sharing in developments in areas such as digitisation, data science, risk and resilience science and application, and so on.

But we know more can be done to build on our combined strengths to collaborate and integrate across disciplines and institutions.

We are about to go live, for example, with one initiative that demonstrates this - a National Environmental Data Centre ... a single portal to the many valuable environmental databases established, hosted and curated by CRIs.

The pandemic has caused the CRIs to accelerate how we work together collectively.

Strategically, we see three important elements to guide us.

The first is the need to have a pan-CRI science strategy, where appropriate, that will harness the collective scientific expertise of the CRIs, and the distinctive capability each CRI can bring to bear on those national issues.

We know when we collaborate and integrate, the outcome is powerful indeed.

The second is greater conversion of scientific knowledge to impact. The New Zealand system is already highly productive at knowledge creation, as OECD data shows. What we need is more focus on the application of that knowledge.

The third is truly strategic engagement between Government, CRIs, Industries and Māori. Such alignment will turbo-charge New Zealand’s future.

These are simple, yet challenging concepts.

But we are determined to start with challenging aspirations, and a commitment to collective action.

Tonight's award winners have demonstrated what can be achieved when we do that.

In closing, the events of 2020 have brought the CRIs closer together – Chairs, CEOs, managers and staff – like never before.

And the combined power of 7 Chairs and 7 CEOs, backed by the authority and commitment of a team of 4500, has demonstrated exactly what we can achieve when we all work together.

For me it's been impressive and humbling, and, like my colleagues, I'm proud to be a part of this movement.

Given that science in New Zealand has never been more valued ... this is a very exciting time for CRIs.

Thank you.

Nga mihi ki a koutou.