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CLIMATE CHANGE OPENS NEW PASTURES FOR CROP PESTS 'Plant Doctors' to help through Global Plant Clinic

Changing weather patterns may help spread crop pests and diseases in the future. Global Plant Clinic is one strategy to help with plant health.

Speaking today (3 September) at the Crawford Fund's Annual Development Conference in Parliament House, Canberra, titled "Agriculture in a Changing Climate: The New International Research Frontier", Dr Trevor Nicholls, CEO of CABI, a not-for-profit agricultural research organisation, explained the urgent need to help poorer, tropical nations devise adoption strategies at the local level as they would be hardest hit by a changing climate.

"We are already struggling to keep pace with increasing demands for food as populations increase", said Dr Nicholls.

"In the tropics, even a small increase in temperature will cause yield declines in maize, rice and wheat. As many countries in these regions are already food insecure, having largely subsistence agriculture and growing populations, this poses a very serious problem."

"Pests and diseases may be exacerbated with a changing climate. Some pests will be able to expand to higher altitudes and latitudes and more extreme climatic disturbances will create more opportunities for pest colonisation and establishment. These problems will need to be addressed with preventative action and tightening of entry controls, and by identifying novel biocontrol agents to harness these pests."

"Crop yields are reduced by a variety of pests such as insects, nematodes, diseases and weeds," said Dr Nicholls. "This is a continuing arms race in which agricultural practices try to tip the balance in favour of the crop."

CABI is working on adaption strategies including training and capacity building at the local level, community-based early warning and risk management; and early control of pest outbreaks.

CABI's Global Plant Clinic (GPC) is an initiative that employs 'plant doctors' who staff mobile clinics and advise local farmers on plant health problems in the same way as medical doctors and vets.

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The Crawford Fund wishes to thank the sponsors for this event, including:

AusAID – the Australian Agency for International Development; Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research; Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; Australian Government Department of Climate Change; CAB International; Centre for International Forestry Research; International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT); Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research; CSIRO Climate Adaptation National Research Flagship; Grains Research and Development Corporation; Industrial Research Limited; Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation; South Australian Research and Development Institute; The World Bank.

Consultations usually take place once a week in public places, such as markets or village meeting areas. Farmers bring along samples of their diseased crops for plant doctors to diagnose and prescribe safe, affordable and locally available solutions.

The Global Plant Clinic has helped to establish more than 80 plant health clinics in nine countries throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia with pilot clinics in another nine countries.

View a plant clinic in action in Bangladesh: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRydKPqXYM8>

More info on The Global Plant Clinic - <http://www.cabi.org/ProjectsDetail.asp?ProjectID=310>

Clinic photos available on request.

Conference info and media materials at <http://www.crawfordfund.org/events/conference08media.htm> or contact Cathy Reade on 0413 575 934. A range of press releases will be issued for the event and it is possible to prearrange interviews. Keynote speakers include Ms Katherine Sierra, Vice President for Sustainable Development, World Bank; and Prof Ross Garnaut, author of the Garnaut Climate Change Review.

About CABI: CABI is a not-for-profit agricultural research organisation. Its mission and direction is influenced by its 44 member countries that help guide the activities undertaken as a business. These include projects and consultancy, information for development, scientific publishing and mycological services. www.cabi.org Contact Sarah Wilson, PR and Corporate Communication Manager, CABI, UK, ph +44 (0) 1491 829 361, mob +44 (0) 75169 28845, email s.wilson@cabi.org