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MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Dr. Jinfa Zhang, a professor, Cotton Breeding, Genetics, and Genomics at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, is the 2020 Cotton Genetics Research Award winner.

The announcement was made here today during the 2021 Beltwide Cotton Improvement Conference, which convened as part of the National Cotton Council-coordinated virtual 2021 Beltwide Cotton Conferences. Zhang, who was selected by the Joint Cotton Breeding Committee, received a plaque and a monetary award.

In her nomination of Zhang, Dr. Jane Dever, a professor of cotton breeding at Texas A&M AgriLife Research, stated that he deserved the award for making not only genetic resources available but also rigorously peer-reviewed scientific knowledge unreservedly accessible to the cotton genetics research community "as we all work together to confront future challenges together."

She said Zhang confronted a strategic threat to the U.S. cotton industry from expansion of Fusarium wilt race 4 (FOV4) into Texas and New Mexico with academic integrity and authentic generosity to share knowledge with others. In 2019, he publicly released two Upland cultivars with demonstrated resistance to FOV4 and in the past two years alone has published six peer-reviewed articles on FOV4 with three more in review.

In seconding Zhang's nomination, Dr. Mustafa McPherson, a breeder with Corteva, said, "it takes knowledge of the U.S. cotton industry to anticipate the need for a trait such as FOV4 and then … to develop germplasm that will be useful to private breeders in the development of commercial varieties with resistance to FOV4. This a perfect example of basic research conducted by public breeders that is most valuable to the cotton industry."

In her supporting nomination, Dr. Margaret Shields, BASF's global cotton breeding lead, said Zhang is "driven to find genetic solution for the industry and holds the rest of us responsible to his drive." His contribution to the research community, she noted, has been "critical to creating a better understanding of cotton as a field crop and improving the genetics through his germplasm releases" of which several have been the basis of new breakthroughs in BASF's program for fiber quality with the added benefit of increased production.

Dr. Megan Sweeney, a BASF cotton breeder, also supported the nomination by adding that Zhang released several glandless lines that are gossypol free and worked to establish a niche market for this material which is a high value food source and can be produced in low input environments.

Zhang earned a bachelor, master and doctor in Agronomy from Central China Agricultural University and his Ph.D. in Plant Genetics and Molecular Biology at the University of Arkansas.

Before joining New Mexico State University in 2002 as an assistant professor, Zhang conducted research at Central China Agricultural University, the University of Arkansas, McGill University and Monsanto. He has more than 170 peer-reviewed scientific publications and 150 proceeding papers and abstracts along with 10 cultivar, 22 germplasm releases, and one genetic population of 95 recombinant inbred lines. He received the Crop Science Society of America's Editor's Citation for Excellence award in 2016.

The annual Cotton Genetics Research Award was established in 1961 by U.S. commercial cotton breeders to recognize and encourage basic research in cotton genetics, cytogenetics and breeding. It is administered by the Joint Cotton Breeding Committee consisting of representatives of the NCC, the USDA, state experiment stations, Cotton Incorporated and commercial breeders.