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Steven Strauss, a professor in Forest Ecosystems and Society, researches poplar trees in the field. Strauss and Geosciences professor Dawn Wright were recently recognized by the AAAS

Two OSU professors named fellows of AAAS

Strauss and Wright are awarded prestigious title for their research work, along with 486 other fellows across the globe this year

By: Lauren Sigel

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Professors Steven Strauss and Dawn Wright have been named fellows of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

Both professors were nominated based on their contributions to their fields of research and are being honored for the impact their work has made in the scientific world.

The AAAS is, according to their official website, "an international non-profit organization dedicated to advancing science around the world by serving as an educator, leader, spokesperson and professional association."

They are the world's largest general scientific society, and sponsor programs that "raise the bar of understanding for science worldwide."

Dawn Wright, an OSU professor of geography and oceanography since 1995, specializes in ocean informatics and marine and coastal geography.

Wright is also a member of the Ocean Studies Board of the National Academies. For many years, Wright has been working on ways to improve data and maps from the ocean floor.

"I've been working on ways to improve how data and maps from the ocean, especially the ocean floor, can be structured, organized, managed and used [in] many different kinds of analyses so that we can better understand how the ocean works," Wright said. "This is essentially what marine geographic information science is."

Wright is also a leader in the scientific world in the field of ocean informatics, a fairly new field that

integrates computer science, information technology, and the generation of scientific knowledge.

"Informatics in general is the science of information processing and the development and use of information systems, including geographic information systems," Wright said. "It kind of bridges the gap between pure, hard-core computer science and basic science."

Steven Strauss, a professor of forest biotechnology, is being recognized for his contributions to genetics and evolution, as well as his interdisciplinary work in the field of biotechnology.

Strauss has been a professor at OSU for over 23 years, and during this time has focused not only on the scientific aspect of forest biotechnology, but has also dedicated a significant part of his career to promoting public awareness of biotechnology issues.

Strauss has published more than 150 scientific papers and given more than 160 lectures on biotechnology and genetics of trees.

"Forest biotechnology is essentially the use of advanced methods to alter the biology of trees used in forestry," Strauss said. "I am currently working with genes that make trees grow faster and make better wood, and lately we've seen some amazing results."

Strauss added that despite the fact that they are learning and growing every day in this field, the science is growing almost too fast to keep up with.

"However, science keeps growing at an astronomical rate in the field of genetics, so it's quite the challenge to keep 'retraining' yourself," he said.

Strauss is the director of the Tree Biosafety and Genomics Research Cooperative at OSU, a university-public agency that, according to their website, "conducts research and promotes education on the biosafety and physiology of genetically engineered trees used in plantation forestry and horticulture."

Strauss also directs the OSU program for Outreach in Resource Biotechnology, which seeks to provide accurate information about biotechnology, the ways in which it is being used in agriculture and the implications this has for the economy, human health and sustainability.

"Biotechnology and bioengineering are controversial subjects, and the government heavily regulates both of them," Strauss said. "I felt a calling to make the case against the government that their regulations are not promoting research, but slowing it down because the regulatory process poses such high hurdles for potential companies interested in investing in biotechnology."

"The education effort goes deeper than just the forestry aspect of it. I've had training in ecology, physiology and policy. I feel like I'm one of the few people in my field who can, and will, speak out about some of these bigger issues."

To be nominated as a fellow for the AAAS, a person has to be nominated by three scientists who are already fellows of the AAAS.

Two out of the three sponsors must not be from the same university as the nominee. They make their nominations based on what they think the nominee has contributed to the scientific world.

Molly McElroy, a communications officer for the AAAS, said that fellows are announced once a year every fall, and are listed in an issue of "Science", a journal that the AAAS publishes.

"This year's fellows were listed in the Dec. 19 issue of 'Science'," McElroy said. "486 fellows were picked from all over the world. Fellows can consist of professors, science educators ... we even had a librarian one year."

Wright said that she was quite surprised to receive this honor.

"I usually don't think about these kinds of things and just try to "keep my head down," so to speak, and work hard on the task at hand: my teaching, my research projects, mentoring of graduate students and working on committees and service projects," Wright said.

"A professor from Kansas State did let me know that I was going to be nominated, but I didn't think about it after that because not everyone who is nominated receives the honor after they finish the selection process."

"The main thing about being a fellow is that you have this honor attached to your name for the rest of your career. It was a great privilege to be in the company of those who were selected this year, including Steve Strauss," Wright said.

Not only was Wright surprised and honored to be named a fellow of the AAAS, she is also enjoying the celebrity status that comes with her nomination.

"I'm actually a bit more excited at the moment that Web 2.0 guru Tim O'Reilly (of O'Reilly Media) is following me on Twitter," Wright said.

For Strauss, being named a fellow of the AAAS gives him the positive reinforcement he needs to continue his work in fighting government regulations and promoting education of biotechnology.

"In biotechnology, there are always people who vigorously oppose you," Strauss said. "People can get quite nasty. It's not pleasant work, and most scientists don't want to deal with it.

"It takes fortitude to look at yourself and say that you really believe in what you do, and to move forward."

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