

Press Release

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University of Georgia Biologist Named SURA Distinguished Scientist

Washington, DC – The Southeastern Universities Research Association (SURA) today announced that Susan R. Wessler, University of Georgia professor of plant biology, will receive its newly established Distinguished Scientist Award. The award honors a research scientist whose extraordinary work fulfills the SURA mission of “fostering excellence in scientific research.” The award and \$20,000 honorarium will be presented to Wessler on April 17 during the SURA Board of Trustees meeting to be held at the University of Miami.

“SURA is particularly pleased to honor Dr. Wessler as our first recipient of the Distinguished Scientist Award. Her reputation is one of a dedicated teacher, a disciplined researcher and a strong leader in her field of study,” said William R. Harvey, President of Hampton University and Chair of the SURA Council of Presidents and Executive Committee.

Wessler came to the University of Georgia in 1983 after earning her Ph.D. in biochemistry at Cornell University and serving as a postdoctoral fellow of the American Cancer Society at the Carnegie Institution in Baltimore. She rose from assistant professor of botany to a Regents Professor – the first woman to hold that title at the university – in 2005. From her arrival at UGA, she was awarded a grant from the National Institute of Health and has successfully competed for grant renewals for almost a quarter of a century. This has helped Wessler leverage the reputation of her laboratory to attract a cohort of world-class plant genetics faculty and to secure a leadership role for the University of Georgia in this field of study.

“It is a great honor to receive the first SURA Distinguished Scientist Award,” said Wessler. “Like everything in scientific research, this award reflects the hard work of many researchers who have worked in my laboratory including the graduate students, postdoctoral associates and technical assistants. It is also a reflection of the continued support I have received from my faculty colleagues and administrators of the University of Georgia.”

In addition to receiving a number of awards from the university, in 1998 Wessler was elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences for her pioneering studies of transposable elements – mobile fragments of DNA that can move from one chromosomal location to another and increase their contribution to the whole genome until they can account for the majority of the genomic DNA. In 2003, she was elected to a three-year term as a Councilor of the National Academy of Sciences and last year was selected as one of five associate editors of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Also in 2006, Wessler was chosen to receive one of only 20 Howard Hughes Medical Institute Professor awards. She has published over 100

research articles and authored or co-authored three books, including *Introduction to Genetic Analysis*, a leading genetics textbook for undergraduates.

“Her impact on the scientific community at the University of Georgia cannot be overestimated. During her 24 years at the university she has had 19 major grants funded for almost \$16 million,” wrote University of Georgia Vice President for Research David Lee in his letter nominating Wessler. “Dr. Wessler is a consummate professor who is passionately committed to communicating the excitement of scientific research to her students. She has risen rapidly through the ranks while raising a family and never shirking her local, national and international responsibilities.”

The SURA Distinguished Scientist Award was established last year to commemorate the organization’s 25th Anniversary. SURA’s Development and Relations Committees manage the solicitation, screening and selection of the recipient for this award from a SURA member institution. Each of SURA’s 63 member institutions was eligible to make one nomination for the award. Additionally, the committee screens for the SURA Distinguished Friend of Science Award presented in conjunction with the Fall Board of Trustees meeting. The first such award was given to U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee – a Congressional leader for the innovation, competitiveness and research agenda – at the November 2006 SURA meeting

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The Southeastern Universities Research Association (SURA) is a consortium of over 60 leading research institutions in the southern United States and the District of Columbia established in 1980 as a non-stock, nonprofit corporation. SURA serves as an entity through which colleges, universities, and other organizations may cooperate with one another, and with government and industry in acquiring, developing, and using laboratories and other research facilities and in furthering knowledge and the application of that knowledge in the physical, biological, and other natural sciences and engineering. For more information, visit www.sura.org.