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German Environmental Prize awarded to soil scientist and cleaning products manufacturer

Prof. Dr. Ingrid Kögel-Knabner (Munich) and Reinhard Schneider (Mainz) honoured on 27 October 2019 in Mannheim

Osnabrück, Germany. In 2019, soil scientist Prof. Dr. Ingrid Kögel-Knabner (60) from the Technical University of Munich, and entrepreneur Reinhard Schneider (51) from Mainz, whose company, Werner & Mertz, is in the laundry detergent and cleaning product industry and is dedicated to comprehensive sustainability at every stage of production, will split the German Environmental Prize, which is awarded by the German Environmental Foundation (DBU) and has a remuneration of EUR 500.000. At today's announcement of the prize winners, DBU General Secretary Alexander Bonde emphasized that they are both "innovators in the field of environmental protection who provide us with the solutions of the future for the enormous ecological challenges of the present. We need fundamental economic, political and technological change processes at all levels in order to find truly sustainable development." The prize will be awarded on 27 October 2019 in Mannheim by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

One of the most influential soil scientists in the world

Bonde pointed out today that, as one of the most renowned and influential soil scientists and researchers in the world, Dr. Kögel-Knabner has succeeded in shining a light on the central role played by the environmental medium of soil, which is often "fatally underestimated" in terms of importance compared to air and water. A major milestone in her research has been the discovery of how carbon is locked into the soil as an organic substance. After all, given the fact that plants absorb climate-damaging carbon dioxide from the air, which then ends up in the soil, it is the largest reservoir of carbon in the world, but plants also emit greenhouse gases as they decompose. For this reason, soil is incredibly important for the climate itself as well as for preventing climate change. Bonde: "Her research has

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provided us with a completely new understanding of the capacity of the soil to absorb and store carbon. More than anything, Dr. Kögel-Knabner has provided us with answers to the question of how soil can be used for long-term carbon storage in order to prevent climate change.”

Monitoring environmental changes in the soil and taking preventive measures

Dr. Kögel-Knabner’s work is also important for nutrient dynamics, global food security, soil conservation and biodiversity. Bonde: “Four of the nine stress limits of our planet have already been exceeded due to human influence: climate change, biodiversity, land use and biogeochemical cycles. If they are significantly exceeded, this could worsen the condition of our planetary system even further. Preventing this is a major source of motivation for Dr. Kögel-Knabner.” Her findings on quality and control mechanisms for stabilizing loam in soil have made it possible to monitor environmental changes in the soil via a modified management system, detect changes early on and take preventive measures. Soil is important as a habitat not only for plants and animals but also for a large number of organisms such as bacteria, mould, earthworms and insects.

Kögel-Knabner represents excellent research and enormous scientific and political commitment

A loss of soil also always corresponds to a loss of habitat, but also to a loss of agricultural production space. This is exacerbated by the fact that climate change will result in increased soil erosion in the coming decades, and global warming will result in a greater release of greenhouse gases, which will become even clearer as the permafrost soil thaws. For this reason, according to Bonde, it is up to society to curtail these effects and maintain diverse soil landscapes and thus diverse habitats in order to secure the world’s food supply. The fact that German soil scientists are the leaders in the field today is largely thanks to Dr. Kögel-Knabner. Bonde: “Kögel-Knabner represents excellent research and enormous scientific and political commitment.”

Schneider: “A comprehensive sustainability strategy with a great deal of personal dedication.”

When introducing Schneider, Bonde highlights the fact that “with his comprehensive corporate sustainability strategy and high level of personal dedication”, he has paved the way for environmental standards to be established at an ever-higher standard across an entire economic sector. He has consistently ensured that green products appeal to the majority of consumers on the mass market, pursued sustainability in all of his corporate decision-making and, in this way, earned the trust of the consumer. With countless initiatives for environmental protection and

sustainable development, he has broken new ground: consistent recycling of used plastics, for example from household recycling, for new packaging, printing labels in an environmentally- and health-friendly manner, using plant oils from Germany for his laundry detergent and cleaning products rather than controversial palm kernel oil from tropical regions, voluntarily subjecting the company to environmental audits in accordance with the guidelines of the European Union – the approach to sustainability pursued by the company is “visible on a national and international level”, says Bonde.

Recycled materials initiative and plants from Germany as raw materials for products

Schneider is fighting for a closed-cycle energy-saving plastic recycling process. As a “pioneer of the circular economy”, he refuses to accept the fact that just a small proportion of the plastics from household recycling are actually mechanically recycled. Despite the increased production costs of recycled plastics, Schneider launched a recycled materials initiative in 2012 with partners from the fields of industry, retail and NGOs that is open to all potential participants. This is intended to quickly increase the proportion of recycled products and establish them on the mass market. He has produced more than 293 million bottles made solely of recycled plastic in the recycled materials production facility he built in Mainz. Since 2013, he has used oils from local plants – meaning oils obtained from flax, hemp or olives grown in Europe – as the raw material basis for the laundry detergents and cleaning products sold under the “Frosch” brand. These oils are increasingly being used to replace palm kernel oil from tropical regions, which is bad for the environment. Bonde: “A medium-sized company owner with the right attitude who demonstrates his commitment to environmental protection with a clear and consistent approach.”

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 Remaining text: 5,505 characters with spaces

We use generic masculine pronouns to make our texts easier to read.

Note to the editors: Please observe the individual recognitions of Prof. Dr. Ingrid Kögel-Knabner and Reinhard Schneider as well as the IPTC-compliant photos available for publication free of charge at the following www.dbu.de.