The Waainek Research Facility will provide the necessary space and equipment for relevant investigations and experiments into agricultural entomology. The facility was officially opened on 12 March 2009 and was attended by academics, students and several people from the agricultural industry. This included such dignitaries as Prof Ric Bernard (Fig. 1), Dean of Science at Rhodes, and Dr Jock Danckwerts, Director on the board of the Citrus Growers’ Association, and Chairman of the boards of Citrus Research International, Kat River Citrus Company and River Bioscience.

The Waainek Research Facility was previously the Old Tick Research Unit, which was started in 1971 and closed in 1991. The buildings on the site (on Rhodes University premises) were erected in the late 1970s, and last year, renovation began so that the buildings can house expanding research in the field of agricultural entomology (Fig. 2).

Professor Martin Hill (Fig. 1), Professor of Entomology and Head of the Entomology Department, whose main interests lie in the biological control of weeds and plant/insect interactions, played a major role in the development of this facility. According to Professor Hill, research at the new facility will especially include effective ways of controlling pests. Crops affected that will be focused on are citrus, macadamias and litchis, as well as chicory, peppers and potatoes, amongst others.

Funding for the facility came from the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Dr Peter Clayton (Fig. 1), who stated that this new facility represents “an extraordinary marriage of research and industry”, making it one of the four areas at Rhodes University that are internationally visible. The philosophy of the Waainek Research Facility is threefold: to undertake research that is industry-driven; to undertake fundamental research and not undermine it; and to advocate a commitment to uphold environmental awareness.

The research facility is being welcomed by staff and students of several departments at Rhodes University, including zoology and entomology, botany and physics, as well as agriculturists who hold an interest in the field. Lyndall Pereira, an honours student in the Entomology Department, is excited about the new facility, because “it’s about having a certain place where there is everything that you need, and so this is perfect – the whole department is just blossoming because of it.”

Professor Brad Ripley, ecophysicist in the Botany department agrees that this addition to Rhodes University is “great, because the facility is open to us too.” In fact, the Botany department is running experiments next door, where they are experimenting with measurements on grasses.

The research facility houses a research officer, a PhD student, two master’s students and two honours students. Currently, four of these six researchers are working on citrus projects, all with citrus industry funding. Dr Sean Moore, IPM Programme Manager with Citrus Research International (CRI), says “CRI and Rhodes University have a long-standing relationship. It is gratifying to see it culminating in this centre of expertise. Hopefully more and more students will be attracted to study within the unit”.

Fig. 1 Prof Ric Bernard (Dean of Science), Prof Martin Hill (Head of Entomology) and Dr Peter Clayton (Deputy Vice-Chancellor), all of Rhodes University, were present at the official opening of the Waainek Research Unit on 12 March 2009.

Fig. 2 One of the newly renovated laboratories in the Waainek Research Unit.