This year’s Agricultural Research Council (ARC) annual National Master Dairyman Awards ceremony was presented on Thursday, 18 November 2021 as a virtual event by Agri-Expo, on behalf of the National Milk Recording and Improvement Scheme. The prestigious competition celebrates South Africa’s top commercial and smallholder achievers in the industry and is recognised by key stakeholders as a highlight on the country’s agricultural calendar. The awards ceremony was opened by Dr Hilton Vergotine, Acting President and CEO of the ARC. He congratulated the participants for their outstanding performance particularly given the unprecedented pandemic environment. Dr Vergotine highlighted some achievements, namely an average of 71 farmers who tested 10,574 cows per month and received 426 technical reports per month overall. “Three dairy farmers upgraded from smallholder to semi-commercial and one from semi-commercial to commercial,” Dr Vergotine said. Also, the ARC developed an online/mobile functionality to process and deliver farm management reports. “This interface allowed for key information to be readily available to the farmer, on their mobile phones, by providing lactation information, index of cow production traits and cow reproduction information,” according to Dr Vergotine.

The virtual awards included a panel discussion with Joyene Isaacs, Chairperson of the ARC. According to Isaacs, the ARC is critical for commodities to move ahead. “My vision for the ARC is to be the first call for agricultural research in South Africa and even the continent,” Isaacs said. She also encouraged all organisations in the field of agricultural development to become part of the ARC’s agenda of doing research as well as disseminating information for the benefit of everyone. Winners are awarded in various categories to acknowledge the country’s most outstanding achievers in breeding genetically superior animals, using performance recording and performance testing as tools.

The winners of the 2021 ARC National Master Dairyman Awards are:

* ARC National Master Dairyman of the Year 2021: JK Basson Familie Trust (JK Basson), Darling, Western Cape
* ARC National Small-Scale Dairyman of the Year 2021: Zim Dairy (Nompe Zim), between Harrismith and Kestell, Free State
* ARC Special Award for innovative development by a Dairy Producer 2021: Zim Dairy (Nompe Zim), between Harrismith and Kestell, Free State
* ARC National Herd with the Best Somatic Cell Count 2021: JJ Nel Familie Trust (Hannes Nel), Ladismith, Western Cape with 108 330 cells / ml
* ARC National Herd with the Best Intercalving Period 2021: Middledrift Dairy (Sipho Nondlebe), Middledrift, Eastern Cape with an intercalving period of only 367 days

The ARC’s National Milk Recording and Improvement Scheme plays a critical role in the dairy industry through the provision of genetic improvement services, accredited by the International Committee for Animal Recording (ICAR). The objective of the scheme is to enhance the sustainability and profitability of production, ultimately contributing to food security, job creation and human capital development.