

## 'A testament to USU:' Four USU faculty receive governor's medal

By Kevin Opsahl staff writer Dec 18, 2015

When she was an undergraduate biology student in Pennsylvania, Michelle Baker started out studying cancer therapies with mice; then she stumbled upon another project studying the microbial ecology of a reservoir in the state.

"I didn't know you could get paid to sit next to streams and lakes; I thought that was cool," said Baker, now a Utah State University professor in biology.

A 16-year veteran of USU, Baker's work in the lab with students and statewide research projects apparently paid off — Gov. Gary Herbert's office recently announced her as one of the 2015 winners of the Governor's Medals for Excellence in Science and Technology.



Michelle Baker works on an experiment at USU, on Thursday.

Credit Eli Lucero/Herald Journal

Baker said she was honored to receive the medal, recognizing the three other USU personnel who received the award. According to a USU officials, this is the first time since 1988 that four faculty members from the school were awarded the medal in a single year.

"I think it's a great testament to USU and our research and education programs," Baker said.

The other USU recipients for the 2015 medal are Christine Hailey, dean of the College of Engineering, Paul Hill, a professor for USU Extension in Washington County, and Executive Vice President and Provost Noelle Cockett.

"It is always an honor when one of our outstanding professors is selected for this prestigious award by the governor," USU President Stan Albrecht said in a news release. "This year, we are particularly privileged that four of our best and brightest were singled out and recognized for their many achievements over long and impactful careers in science and technology."

For Baker's part, she was recognized by the Governor's Office of Economic Development for her work leading iUTAH, a \$20 million multi-institution project funded by the National Science Foundation to study and protect Utah's water. The project is part of an NSF Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) Track-1 Award.

Baker's leadership was key to the success of the highly interdisciplinary project, the release said.

Baker added, "I think it's a testament to the impact of water in our state and training workforce of tomorrow to help us meet our future water needs in light of population growth and drought. It comes at a nice time ... where we're finding interesting things that could be relevant to information the state needs."

USU recently announced it analyzed the results of a 2,300-household survey, spanning residencies in Cache, Salt Lake and Wasatch counties in summer 2014. The survey collected detailed information about how local residents in distinctive neighborhoods use and think about water in their daily lives.

Going forward with iUtah, Baker envisions a collaboration not just between USU and the University of Utah, but the state's other institutions as well.

“When we work together, big things can happen,” Baker said.

When she’s not working on iUTAH, Baker savors being in the lab with her students.

“That’s the best,” Baker said of interacting with her students. “It’s fun to see them learn and become independent scientists.”

At the same time the governor’s office praised Baker for her work, this year’s other USU recipients were also praised.

Hailey was appointed dean in 2013, taking over from longtime dean Scott Hinton, who was appointed president of the USU Research Foundation. Though she’s caught up in administrative duties now, the governor’s office recognized Hailey as an “advocate for graduate student programs and has been instrumental in increasing the participation of women in engineering at USU,” the governor’s office stated.

“The award really belongs to the College of Engineering,” Hailey said in the release. “When we talk about recruiting women and under-represented minorities and more graduate students, that effort takes an entire team of professionals. One person can’t accomplish everything we’ve done here. It’s a collective effort by faculty, advisers, department heads and staff.”

Cockett, who has been at USU since 1990 in numerous capacities, received the medal for being a world leader in sheep genomics. Cockett worked on the international team that sequenced the sheep genome.

“My colleagues and I prioritized the ‘tools’ needed to advance research in sheep genomics, and then we pooled funding, expertise and resources to make these accomplishments possible,” Cockett said in a prepared statement. “I greatly appreciate the support I’ve received over the years from USU and from colleagues in the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences, and I’m honored to be recognized with this award.”

Hill earned the medal for bringing nationally-recognized STEM education programs to Washington County. Since 2011, more than 1,400 STEM projects have been completed by youth through the Washington County 4-H program.

The recipients will be honored at a gala Jan. 13, 2016.



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#### Editor's Note

This story has been edited to reflect the fact that this is the first time since 1988 that four faculty members have been awarded the Governor's Medal, rather than more than one person, as the original version stated.