

## Interview with a Renowned International Papermaking Expert

### ***Carrying Forward the Tradition of Fundamental Research***

## Joel Panek, Chair of the Fundamental Research Committee

Korea TAPPI Journal met with Joel Panek, Chair of the Fundamental Research Committee, to explore the history, significance, and future direction of the Fundamental Research Symposium, widely regarded as one of the most prestigious academic events in the pulp and paper field. Since its first symposium in 1957, the FRS has evolved around fundamental research themes aimed at scientifically understanding papermaking. The unique format of the symposium, held at universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, where participants stay together, fosters intensive academic exchange and collegial interaction. Chair Joel Panek describes the symposium as “the Olympics or the World Cup of our field,” emphasizing its role in advancing fundamental knowledge and facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer. He encouraged active participation from researchers and students in Korea.

**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** It’s a pleasure to meet you via Zoom, Joel. First, could you please introduce yourself to the members of Korea TAPPI?

**Joel Panek:** Nice to see you again, Professor Lee. It’s hard to believe it has already been four years since we met

at the 2022 Fundamental Research Symposium. I am currently working at Smurfit Westrock in Virginia, USA, and I am serving as the Chair of the Fundamental Research Committee, which organizes the Fundamental Research Symposium. I’m delighted to have this opportunity to meet with the members of Korea TAPPI and introduce the Fundamental Research Society.



**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** When did you first become aware of the Fundamental Research Symposium?

**Joel Panek:** During my college years, I had a strong interest in paper industry. While majoring in chemical engineering, I had the opportunity to work as a student intern at a paper mill in my hometown. At a library

book sale at the university, I came across a volume from the very first Fundamental Research Symposium in 1957 and purchased it for just 50 cents. I found this book fascinating. It was eye-opening to see that research was being done on paper and enlightening to see the pictures and the discussions. I eventually discovered there is a whole series of symposia, and I've obtained a number of volumes over the years. I still pull the old volumes out and re-read them. It's like listening to classic jazz.

**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** When did you begin serving as Chair of the Fundamental Research Society?

**Joel Panek:** I've been a fan of the Fundamental Research Symposium since I first learned about it, so it is a privilege and an honor to be in this position. I've been a committee member since 2006, and became committee chair at the beginning of 2018, following the symposium in 2017. I was the chair for the 2022 symposium, which was delayed one year because of COVID. That was quite a learning experience for me, particularly the amount of

details that go into organizing an event. We had 88 delegates, which is fewer than what we normally have partly because of COVID. It was still a successful event.

The Fundamental Research Symposium is held every four years, alternating between Oxford and Cambridge in England. A highlight of our symposium is spending time with our colleagues from across the globe. We hold the symposia at colleges within the university to keep everything together in one spot. The 2022 symposium was at Jesus College in Cambridge. Most of the delegates stayed at rooms in the college, so we were able to interact a lot during the technical sessions, have breakfast, lunch, and dinner together, and have a beer at the bar afterwards.

**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** I understand that the Fundamental Research Symposium will be held this September. Could you please introduce it to us?

**Joel Panek:** The 18th symposium will be held at Worcester College, Oxford, September 13-17, 2026. The title of the symposium is, 'Advances in Pulp and Paper Re-



FRS Committee members discussing preparations for FRS in 2022

search'. The program will include a keynote, six invited perspective speakers, and 26 technical presentations. The topics cover a broad range, including paper-water interactions, nanocellulose, cellulose-based packaging, paper mechanics, coating, and lignin-cellulosic materials. We've received over 60 submissions, and we've narrowed that down to less than 30 accepted papers for presentations. In addition, we'll have two poster sessions with around 30 posters. The papers are published as a book and handed to the delegates at the start of the symposium.

**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** How many participants do you expect to attend the Symposium?

**Joel Panek:** We expect at least 100, it will be great if we get around 120. The participants come from academics, institutes, and industry, and can be new to our industry or well-seasoned. Whoever comes to our symposium really enjoys it. It's a wonderful experience to live and learn at an Oxford college, with many opportunities to interact with colleagues you have known for years or others you may recognize by only name and publications. Our organizing group manages costs and builds sponsorships, making the experience affordable. The accommodation costs, including meals, are similar to, if not less than, what you would pay if you were to stay separately in Oxford.

**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** Could you tell us about the early development of the Fundamental Research Society?

**Joel Panek:** The vision of the original organizers was to present and discuss fundamental research around themes, to build our knowledge and scientific understanding of papermaking. The initial symposium in 1957 was on the fundamentals of papermaking fibers. The next one in 1961 was on the formation and structure of paper followed by the consolidation of the web in 1965. Many notable researchers around the world contributed. It built a lot of fundamental knowledge and understanding that carries on to today. The Fundamental Research Symposium is held every four years to allow more thorough

research to be completed. I believe it is one of the most important events in our field—much like the Olympics or the World Cup.

**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** There must have been many individuals who made significant contributions to the Fundamental Research Society.

**Joel Panek:** Of course. Many legendary figures have contributed to the Fundamental Research Society. Toby Rance is a key person in our history for organizing and chairing the first symposium and keeping it going for the next 20+ years. Derek Page, Johannes Van den Akker, Borje Steenberg, Jasper Mardon, Alfred Nissen, Kit Dodson and many, many others made a great contribution for the society as well as for our industry.

**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** I assume that many people are actively involved with the Fundamental Research Society today.

**Joel Panek:** Yes, we have 16 committee members, in



From right to left: Joel Panek, Janet Preston, Doug Coffin, and Hak Lae Lee

addition to an event management company (SAS) and typesetting company (RefineCatch), who are working together to make the upcoming symposium a success. For key roles in the committee, Doug Coffin is the programme secretary, Petri Mäkelä is the proceedings editor, Janet Preston is our publicity manager, and Bill Sampson is treasurer. We're good friends and we work closely together. Doug manages the review of submissions and builds the technical program from the accepted papers. Petri works with RefineCatch to format the manuscripts and publish the hard cover books and pdfs, in addition to transcribing discussions during the symposium sessions into an additional volume. Janet does a wonderful job at getting the word out through our website, LinkedIn site, journals, and conferences. Many others are playing important roles by reviewing papers and chairing sessions. Oliver Phipps from SAS is our event organizer and helps with everything from booking the venue to keeping us on track.

**Journal of Korea TAPPI:** We sincerely appreciate your kind permission to utilize materials from the Fundamental

Research Society for the development of educational textbooks for students studying pulp and paper science through Korea TAPPI. Finally, could you share a message for KTAPPI members and students in Korea?

**Joel Panek:** Yes, I'm very pleased to have this opportunity to meet the members of Korea TAPPI. The Fundamental Research Society has always made great efforts to advance fundamental research in the pulp and paper industry and related fields, and I believe these efforts have led to meaningful achievements. I hope that talented young researchers will continue to lead this field in the future, and I am glad that FRS publications can contribute to the development of educational materials for the next generation. I also hope many of you will participate in the upcoming Fundamental Research Symposium in September. Thank you.

**Interviewer:** Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Korea TAPPI



Committee members gathered at Jesus College, Cambridge, during the FRS meeting in 2022