



J-WAFS 10th Anniversary Event, Leadership Remarks
Renee Robins, Executive Director
MIT Welcome Center
May 22, 2025

Thank you, John, for your kind words, and for giving me the opportunity to work with you these past ten years. And thank you for your inspiring remarks about J-WAFS' history and the motivations behind its creation. You touched on something powerful: the accomplishments that are possible when smart, dedicated people come together to work on hard problems.

It has been a true privilege to work alongside you, our dedicated staff, and so many others here. It's been particularly rewarding to see the growth of a vibrant MIT community of water and food researchers that J-WAFS has nurtured, a community that grew out of those few individuals who saw themselves to be working in solitude on these critical challenges.

The impact of that transformation alone is worth recognizing.

You, and Ian, have also reminded us that, while we've made real progress, humanity's water and food security challenges are still very present—and deeply urgent. In just a few minutes, you'll hear directly from some of the remarkable members of the J-WAFS community about their ongoing efforts and the impact of their research. But first, I will say just a bit more about the impact of establishing J-WAFS at MIT.

As J-WAFS approached this anniversary, we have reflected on how our programs have evolved and diversified. We also spent considerable time exploring how to assess the many ways J-WAFS has advanced MIT research for meaningful impact on the world's water and food challenges

From the beginning, we have carefully tracked key metrics: grants awarded, the number of funded researchers, publications produced, technologies that have been commercialized, follow-on funding that our seed grantees have secured to continue and expand their research, and more.

Some of these numbers are on the slide you see here. You can find more in the various articles and newsletter highlights we have shared throughout the semester, and in the "10 J-WAFS Success Story" booklets that you'll find sprinkled around the reception area.

These statistics tell a compelling story—one that illustrates the real, tangible contributions J-WAFS has made. One number that I continue to find most remarkable is that, in addition to the hundreds of students, postdocs, and research staff, we have funded over 100 professors—representing 10% of the MIT faculty.

But the numbers don't capture the full story. J-WAFS has inspired diverse researchers from all parts of the Institute to consider how their capabilities and expertise can be applied to water and food challenges. We've emphasized innovation and implementation, encouraging research that leads to real-world solutions—whether in the form of new technologies, policy guidance, or novel business models.

And perhaps most importantly, we've brought faculty, students, and research staff together:

- to be exposed to unfamiliar problems and new methodologies,
- to explore how their expertise might be applied,
- to learn from one another,
- to collaborate,
- and to build a vibrant, committed community.

Some of this has happened through various workshops and presentations where research is shared. But we also have regularly engaged faculty in our peer review processes and on ad hoc advisory committees. We've coordinated interactions with J-WAFS visiting scholars and corporate research affiliates. We've brought MIT professors together to participate on multidisciplinary proposal teams to solicit external funding. And we've connected them to the global water and food communities through our cross-institutional Food and Climate Systems Transformation, or FACT, Alliance.

We have supported the student community as well, by building a network of Fellows, mentoring the student-led water and food clubs, disseminating students' research journeys through video competitions, and providing career development opportunities to inspire and prepare these students to become tomorrow's water and food sector leaders.

So while the metrics we so carefully track tell the story of research impact, it is the stories from our community that reveal the personal impact.

And as we turn now to hear some of these stories, I will leave you with one of my favorite quotes from a J-WAFS PI, something that I believe any number of them could have said:

"Without J-WAFS, I would have never ventured into the field of water purification. The Seed grant was the perfect opportunity for me to pitch a high-risk/ high-reward project in a research area where I have no prior experience or credibility. Both the funding and the J-WAFS community led me to be deeply engaged in understanding some of the key challenges in water purification and water security."

To me, this exemplifies how J-WAFS has had impact as we work within the MIT environment, and when I look back, what I am most proud of.

Many thanks again to John, to Rohit, and to our staff, to our wonderful partners here at MIT, as well as to Community Jameel and our other supporters. And a heartfelt thank you to the many colleagues from earlier in my MIT career, whose support helped shape and prepare me for the responsibilities of this role. A number of you are here, and I greatly appreciate your presence!

Finally, we are so appreciative to all of you for joining us here on this soggy afternoon, and for being part of the J-WAFS community as it enters its second decade.