

2024 Honorary Premier Seed Grower Award



Kris and Bethany Folland

Kris Folland

Kris Folland was born and raised in Kittson County, Minnesota, near the towns of Karlstad and Halma. Growing up near the family farm, he was active on the farm, in 4-H, and all outdoor activities. During high school he enjoyed football, raising beef cattle, and the outdoors. After graduation he attended the University of Minnesota Crookston and graduated with a degree in agronomy. During his college days, his time was split between class and driving home to work on the farm and with his cattle.

After college, Kris worked in the grain and elevator business for 5 years. His employment with MCI began in 2006 as a field supervisor, managing seed certification and seed production for northern Minnesota. For the past 17 years, he has been busy working with the many programs and services that MCI offers. In 2019, he was promoted to manager of Field Services. While continuing to conduct day-to-day field tasks, he now manages and develops programs and standards, along with his co-workers.

During the summer, Kris inspects certified seed fields and manages the part-time field inspection staff. Crops inspected are very diverse with wheat, perennial ryegrass, and soybeans being predominant. In winter, he is busy inspecting seed conditioning facilities and bulk seed handlers.

Kris has worked with all facets of MCI's processes and procedures, program reviews and development, and standards. His successful efforts to develop new business relationships have been a key to MCI's growth. He enjoys all aspects of his work and especially appreciates his co-workers, past and present, and the wonderful MCI members he's worked with throughout the years. When describing MCI members and seed growers, MCI staff often state, "We are honored to work with the *best of the best* in agriculture across the state."

Kris and his wife, Bethany, have been married for 21 years and have four children. The oldest two are in college and the younger two are in high school. Kris and Bethany have been side-by-side farming, ranching, and working since they met in college. As an early childhood major, Bethany was a daycare provider for 10 years and a substitute teacher. Today, she keeps all facets of the family and farm running, including planting corn and running combine. She is also a 4-H leader.

Kris is a Certified Crop Advisor. He also serves, or has served, on many local, regional, and state boards and committees, including Kittson County 4-H, Minnesota Soybean Research and Promotion Council, Kittson County Extension, Lake Bronson Farmers Union Oil Coop, Northern Crops Institute, Minnesota Turf Seed Council, Kittson County FSA, and others. He is also honored to be a Farm Rescue volunteer many times.

Kris and Bethany have been honored as Minnesota SWCD State Conservationists for Kittson County. They were also selected as Emerging Leaders for Kittson County and were honored to be the first farm in the area to be a Minnesota Water Quality-certified (MAWQCP) farm.

In their free time, Kris and Bethany enjoy traveling, fishing, hunting, skiing, and keeping up with their children.

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Dr. Eric Watkins

Eric Watkins

Dr. Eric Watkins grew up near Sunburg, Minnesota. He enjoyed gardening as a child and was active in the Kandiyohi County 4-H program, where he exhibited vegetables at both the county and state fairs. This led him to think about plant breeding as a possible career. After graduating from Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg High School, he attended the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, where he found a summer job working for Dr. Nancy Ehlke in the Department of Agronomy and Plant Genetics. Through this experience he became very interested in working on turfgrasses and pursued graduate study at Rutgers University, conducting research in their well-known turfgrass breeding program under the direction of Dr. Bill Meyer.

Dr. Watkins' research focuses on the development of low-input turfgrass cultivars for use in cold climates. Research includes several species including fine fescues and perennial ryegrass. The turfgrass production in northern Minnesota is very important to the area and is a significant percentage of U.S. production. Seed is grown, conditioned and packaged and sold all over the country and across the globe.

He has taught several courses at the University of Minnesota related to turfgrass management and plant breeding. In September 2022 he started a new role at the UMN—vice provost for distributed learning. In this new role he provides leadership for online educational programs across the five campuses of the University of Minnesota system. He continues to maintain his research program and looks forward to helping turfgrass seed producers for years to come.

Dr. Watkins has received several Honors and Awards including:

- Crops Science Society of America Fellow
- Turf & Ornamental Communications Assoc. Environmental Communicator of the Year
- Crop Science Society of America Teaching Award
- John Tate Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Advising
- Center for Transportation Studies Faculty Scholar
- Office of Information Technology Fellow
- Musser International Turfgrass Foundation Award for Excellence
- Philip C. Hamm Award for outstanding undergraduate in plant sciences

He describes his work eloquently, “I like the diversity of projects I get to work on. Minnesota is rare in that we have the entire supply chain for turfgrass seed, so I get to work with seed producers, sod growers, seed vendors, public agency decision-makers, professional turfgrass managers, and residents with lawns. I also love working at a large university—there are so many interesting, talented people to learn from and work with.”

Dr. Watkins and his wife, Lily, have four children. He enjoys reading, focusing mostly on biographies of important leaders in history, especially U.S. presidents, and is a close follower of Minnesota sports teams.

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Scott and Catie Lee

Scott Lee

Lee's Seed Farm was started in 1969 by Wallace Lee. He raised certified small grains and soybeans and built a seed cleaning plant on his farm northeast of Benson. Scott Lee was born the year his father, Wallace, built the seed cleaning plant, and his handprint was placed in the basement concrete when he was two years old.

Scott was active on the farm and outdoors. Growing up, he enjoyed sports, music, 4-H, and FFA through high school. Scott planned on going back to the farm and continuing the seed business after he completed college. He graduated from Benson High School in 1986. He earned a degree in crop science and seed conditioning and technology from the University of Minnesota Crookston in 1989.

That same year, Scott took over the family business. He also attended the University of Minnesota in St. Paul in 1990 and worked part time in MCIA's seed laboratory, testing seed.

Today, he raises certified wheat and oats to be conditioned and sold to local farmers. He also raises soybean seed, under contract for other companies, and corn. The seed plant remains busy with their own cleaning as well as cleaning for other seed growers and area farmers. Scott also custom farms for a couple of producers in his neighborhood. Lee's Seed Farm has been an active seed producer and MCIA member for 54 years.

Scott serves on the board of the Minnesota Wheat Research and Promotion Council, is past president of the Minnesota Seed Producers and Promotion Council, and has been involved in many local, regional, and national agriculture organizations. He has served on the Benson Township board for 32 years and is a past church council member. Scott has been a County Line First Responder for 27 years. The farm has also been the location and host of University of Minnesota small grains research plots for many years.

Scott and his wife, Catie, have been married for 30 years and have three adult children who help and work on the farm along with having their own careers. In his spare time, Scott enjoys hunting, fishing, playing guitar and piano, and singing.

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Larry and Peggy Riopelle

Larry Riopelle

Larry Riopelle grew up near Argyle, Minnesota, and at a very young age was working on the farm. He attended school in Argyle and when he wasn't playing football, he was often bagging seed and farming. He graduated in 1981 and was already well seasoned in seed production. He studied farm management at East Grand Forks College for two years while continuing to help on the farm.

The Riopelle Seed Farm was started by his father and uncle. Larry and his cousins were a large part of the farm and within nine years were operating it on their own. During this time, Larry worked with and also for Rivard's Seed in Argyle. In the 1990s, Larry continued producing certified seed along with selling corn and soybean seed. Additions to the farm included bulk seed handling and seed treating, which have continued to grow with the farm and seed business.

Larry and his wife Peggy have been married for 27 years and have worked side by side farming, producing seed, and raising their family. They have four children and five grandchildren. Peggy has been busy at home and in the field operating tractors, combine, and anything else needed throughout the growing season. Their son, Josh, started working on the farm in high school. After graduation, he worked a few jobs but was soon back farming with his family.

The farm continues to grow all classes of certified wheat seed including producing foundation seed for MCIA. Other crops grown are soybeans, corn, and sugar beets. Riopelle Seed Co. is now operated by Josh and his business partner, Adam. They have expanded to selling corn, wheat, and sugar beet seed along with seed treatment and seed additives.

Larry has served on many boards including the Argyle Coop Elevator, Argyle Lions, and Farm Service Agency County Committee. He is a member of the Minnesota Wheat and Soybean associations.

Larry and Peggy enjoy fishing on Lake of the Woods, golfing, playing pool, spending winter in Arizona, and their family.

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Roger and Phyllis Schwenzfeier

Merle and Roger Schwenzfeier

Brothers Merle and Roger Schwenzfeier grew up near Orleans, Minnesota, raising livestock and producing crops. They often helped their neighbors farm when needed and enjoyed 4-H, school activities, and building projects.

After graduating from Hallock High School, Roger studied agriculture education at the University of Minnesota. He met his wife, Phyllis, and they both taught school for three years. Roger taught agriculture and industrial arts and Phyllis taught elementary.

Roger was then offered an opportunity to farm 300 acres near Hallock from their neighbor. Roger started farming with an 806 International and 18-foot Vibra Shank cultivator.

Roger and Phyllis have been married for 50 years and have three children, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. Their son, Ryan, and his family have farmed their acres alongside Roger and Merle for 23 years.

Roger has served on many boards and committees including the elevator and church board. Phyllis has been active in church and on the food pantry board. Roger has always enjoyed carpentry and projects around the farm and home. They have retired from farming but work daily on the farm and they enjoy spending time taking care of the yard, projects at their church, and seeing their family.

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Renae and Merle Schwenzfeier

Merle studied agriculture engineering at the University of Minnesota Crookston. He met Renae; they married and settled down near Hallock. Merle started farming with his brother, Roger, after college. Renae worked at a local bank for a few years as they started their family and farm. They have been married for 43 years and have four children and eleven grandchildren. They love it when their grandchildren have time to stay and help on the farm.

Merle has enjoyed growing a variety of crops and working on farm projects in the winter. He has served on local boards including the school, church, and two elevators. They continue to actively farm their acres and enjoy spending time at the lake and with their family.

Today the Schwenzfeiers grow wheat, soybeans, and sugar beets. They grow certified wheat seed every year and have been active seed producing members of MCIA for over 40 years. The farm continues to grow, and the next generation is active and enjoys helping on the farm.