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Minnesota Crop Improvement Association Presents Awards

ST. CLOUD, MINNESOTA, January 24, 2024 The Minnesota Crop Improvement Association (MCIA) today presented its highest honor, the Achievement in Crop Improvement Award, to **Roger Wippler**, who recently retired as manager of MCIA's Foundation Seed Services. The award, presented annually since 1972, recognizes exemplary service to the seed industry as well as outstanding leadership in agriculture. During his 34-year tenure with MCIA, Roger Wippler led the Association's Foundation Seed Program and was key to developing its Variety Licensing Program in partnership with the University of Minnesota. Through writing, speaking, outreach, and education, Roger raised public awareness of the purpose of the seed certification system and its importance to Minnesota's seed industry.

MCIA also recognized four Premier Seed Grower awardees, **Scott Lee** of Benson, **Larry Riopelle** of Argyle, and **Merle Schwenzfeier** and **Roger Schwenzfeier** of Hallock. Each year since 1928, MCIA has presented this award to recognize individuals or partners involved in quality seed production, active in MCIA, and who provide excellent service to the seed industry.

The recipients of MCIA's Honorary Premier Seed Grower Award this year were MCIA Field Services Manager **Kris Folland** and **Dr. Eric Watkins**, Vice Provost for Distributed Learning at the University of Minnesota and Professor in the Department of Horticultural Science at the UMN's College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences. This award recognizes individuals not directly involved in seed production but who have actively supported the seed industry, MCIA, and their local community. MCIA has presented this award annually since 1930.

The awards were presented at the Minnesota Crop Improvement Association's 121st Annual Meeting. The event was held at the Holiday Inn and Suites in St. Cloud, Minnesota, January 24, 2024.

Achievement in Crop Improvement Award

Roger Wippler, of Roseville, after a 34-year career with the Minnesota Crop Improvement Association, recently retired from his position as Foundation Seed Services manager. Roger grew up on a hobby farm near Randall, Minnesota. His love for agriculture began when he was old enough to help area farmers by picking rocks, stacking hay bales, and milking cows. He went on to study landscape technology and agriculture education in college. After stints as an energy auditor, landscaper, and educator, in 1989 he joined MCIA. Roger has been involved in the Association's longstanding efforts to diversify its services, leading the development of the Variety Licensing Program. He has also been something of an ambassador for the Association, helping to maintain and strengthen its relationships with partner organizations such as AOSCA, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the University of Minnesota, and commodity groups. He's also done public outreach for MCIA by staffing the Certified Seed exhibit at the Minnesota State Fair. Outside of MCIA, he has served as a UMN Extension Master Gardener for 24 years. Roger accepted the Achievement in Crop Improvement Award with gratitude, saying, "I greatly appreciate this honor. It has truly been a privilege to work with members of MCIA and be a part of this great organization."

Premier Seed Grower Awards

Scott Lee, of Benson, raises certified wheat and oats to be conditioned and sold to local farmers. He also grows soybean seed and corn. Lee's Seed Farm has been an active seed producer and MCIA member since it was established by Scott's father, Wallace, in 1969. The operation includes a seed cleaning plant. Scott serves on the board of the Minnesota Wheat Research and Promotion Council and has been involved in many local, regional, and national agriculture organizations. Lee's Seed Farm has been the location and host of the University of Minnesota small grains research plots for many years.

Larry Riopelle, of Argyle, grew up working on the Riopelle Seed Farm, which was started by his father and uncle. He continued helping out on the farm while studying farm management in college. Within nine years of graduating, he and a cousin would be running the business. The farm has produced certified seed for decades. During Larry's tenure, the farm added bulk seed handling and seed treating. Today, Larry's son, Josh, operates the business along with his business partner, Adam. They continue to grow all classes of certified wheat seed, including foundation seed for MCIA. Larry has served on many boards in his community and is a member of the Minnesota Wheat and Soybean associations.

Brothers **Merle Schwenzfeier** and **Roger Schwenzfeier**, of Hallock, grew up near Orleans Minnesota, raising livestock and producing crops. After college, they began farming together, a partnership that endured until Roger's retirement. The next generation is now involved with Merle in running the farm. The Schwenzfeiers grow wheat, soybeans, and sugar beets, and every year they grow certified wheat seed. They have been active seed producing members of MCIA for over 40 years. Both Merle and Roger have served on local boards, including the school, church, and elevators.

Honorary Premier Seed Grower Awards

Kris Folland, of Halma, began his career with the Minnesota Crop Improvement Association in 2006 as a field supervisor, managing seed certification and seed production for northern Minnesota. Since 2019, he has been the able manager of MCIA's Field Services department. Kris has worked with all facets of MCIA's processes and procedures, program reviews and development, and standards. His successful efforts to develop new business relationships have been a key to MCIA's growth. Kris and his wife, Bethany, farm together and are both involved in the Kittson Country 4-H. Kris also serves, or has served, on many local, regional, and state boards and committees.

Dr. Eric Watkins has taught at the University of Minnesota since 2004. In addition to being a professor in the CFANS Department of Horticulture Science, in 2022 he took on the position of Vice Provost for Distributed Learning. Dr. Watkins' research has been important to the success of northern Minnesota's turfgrass production. His research focuses on the development of low-input turfgrass cultivars for use in cold climates. Research activities involve germplasm improvement of several cool-season turfgrass species including fine fescues and perennial ryegrass. He is also involved with turfgrass cultivar evaluation and other turfgrass science research. Dr. Watkins has taught several university courses related to turfgrass management and plant breeding.

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Since 1903, Minnesota Crop Improvement Association (MCIA) has provided programs and services to meet the needs of an ever-changing agricultural world. These services include seed certification, organic certification, foundation seed production, and a variety of customized third-party verification programs for seed and identity-preserved grains. MCIA operates from facilities on the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus with field staff located throughout Minnesota.

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If you would like more information on this topic, please contact Kris Folland at 218-791-2156 or kris.folland@mncia.org.