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**Minnesota Crop Improvement Association  
Presents Honorary Premier Seed Grower Award to Dr. Eric Watkins**

**ST. CLOUD, MINNESOTA, January 24, 2024** The Minnesota Crop Improvement Association (MCIA) today recognized 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, with the Honorary Premier Seed Grower Award. The award, presented annually since 1930, recognizes individuals not directly involved in seed production but who have actively supported the seed industry, MCIA, and their local community.

The award was 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.

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.

The recipient of numerous honors and awards, Dr. Watkins 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.

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.

Upon receiving the Honorary Premier Seed Grower Award, Dr. Watkins expressed his appreciation to MCIA for working with him on seed production, quality assurance, and new variety issues. He concluded, "Thank you for this excellent honor."

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