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Helen Gunderson is selected to receive new Farmland Owner Award from Practical Farmers of Iowa

AMES, Iowa — Helen Gunderson has been chosen as the first recipient of the Farmland Owner Award, a new award from Practical Farmers of Iowa that recognizes non-operator landowners who are managing their land for long-term sustainability of farm businesses, environmental quality, soil productivity, rural communities and the next generation.

The Farmland Owner Award was created to call attention to the need for improved landowner partnerships with farmers, and of the vital – but often unacknowledged – role non-operator landowners play in shaping the agricultural landscape, rural communities and opportunities for beginning farmers.

This year's award is co-sponsored by the Women, Food and Agriculture Network and the Agricultural Law Center at Drake University.

"So much of Iowa's farmland is owned by non-operator landowners," says Dan Wilson, president of Practical Farmers' board of directors. "We created the PFI Farmland Owner Award to honor those landowners who are doing a good job, and to show others what they could be doing to create a more sustainable future for young farmers in Iowa."

Wilson says the PFI board selected Gunderson – an Ames resident who owns 500 acres near Rolfe – to receive the inaugural award because of her multiple efforts to manage her land for long-term sustainability.

"Helen knows there is more involved in renting a farm than just the amount of cash rent being received," Wilson says.

An ethical obligation to the land

In 2009, Gunderson started renting 180 acres to Betsy Dahl, the daughter of long-time neighbors in Pocahontas County, who is transitioning the land to organic production with a longer rotation of row crops and small grains. In 2011 Gunderson donated 60 acres of her land along Beaver Creek in Pocahontas County – land that includes remnant native and restored prairie, as well as about 10 acres of cropland – to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF). She maintains about 35 acres of her land in the Conservation Reserve Program, and in her will she has bequeathed land to Practical Farmers of Iowa.

"I don't believe in land dynasties," Gunderson says. "I have felt fortunate and privileged to have inherited farmland, and the affluence that ebbs and flows with that, and I realized I'd arrived at a position where I could make a difference."

Gunderson says there was an era when “a lot of guilt was placed on absentee landowners,” who were often blamed for a variety of agricultural problems. At one time she says she also felt guilty about the affluence that came from owning farmland, because the dependence on her land for income resulted in a reluctance to make big changes in how she managed it – such as transitioning some to organic.

“If I’d carved out a career where I wasn’t dependent on farm income, I’d long ago have made radical changes,” Gunderson says. Over time, however, she reconciled those feelings and came to realize that the wealth conferred by her farmland actually empowered her to act on her sense of ethics toward the land.

“I realized I could take a risk to have Betsy farm,” she says. “It’s turned out to be a worthwhile risk. There are ethics to everything in life, and as a landowner, with my income basically being from farmland, I felt I had an ethical obligation to the land.”

From passive owner to proactive manager

Gunderson didn’t always manage her land. For years her older brother Charles made all the management decisions. As the only boy in the family out of six children, Gunderson says he had been specially groomed to manage the family land – which included not just the land Gunderson inherited, but the land he and her four sisters had inherited as well.

The arrangement worked because Gunderson had been living out of state, first in Duluth as a physical education teacher, then in Fargo working in sports information and directing the YMCA at North Dakota State University, then in San Francisco while earning a Master of Divinity degree. Even then, however, she says that at least once a year, “something would trigger deep anger and resentment” about her brother being the only one groomed to manage the family farm.

In the early 1990s, Gunderson moved back to Iowa and became more interested in understanding the farm reports Charles would send her. Part of her interest stemmed from a sense of responsibility to learn more about how her land was being managed, and part was the culmination of other experiences she had been reflecting on over the years.

While working in Fargo, for instance, Gunderson had the chance to help organize a symposium on world hunger where she was exposed for the first time to some of the most influential thinkers in the emerging realm of alternative and sustainable agriculture. On visits home, and then after moving back to Iowa, she saw how altered the landscape around her home had become and started work on a documentary about the road where she grew up – a project she continues to work on.

“I realized farmsteads along the five-mile stretch of road I grew up on were disappearing,” Gunderson says. “When I was growing up there were 11 places along the road where families lived. The kids from those families could fill over half a school bus. At some point in the ‘80s there were no kids, and there were only four families. The houses and groves were cleared, plowed and tilled for corn and beans.”

Evolution of a farmland owner

Today, while Gunderson sometimes wonders what her life might have been like had she had the chance to become a farmer like her father and grandfather, she appreciates the perspective she has arrived at – one she doesn’t think would have been possible otherwise.

"If I'd found a position on the farm, would I have lost my land?" Gunderson asks. "Would I have yearned for alternatives and found Practical Farmers of Iowa? I came to realize that there are many people who can be involved in agriculture who aren't farming the land."

While she says she didn't have "one of those absolutely defining moments," Gunderson credits a discussion with her spiritual advisor with inspiring in her the "wake-up call" she needed to challenge the way things had always been done in her family. "She asked me when I was going to start managing my land," Gunderson recalls. "That brought things together for me that had been germinating under the surface for many years."

Gunderson says she hopes this award will inspire other landowners to become more active in managing their own land. "All of us can affect the landscape by the food choices we make, but people who own land are in a rare position to influence the future of the land."

Gunderson will be recognized at Practical Farmers of Iowa's 2014 annual conference. Suggestions for future recipients of the Farmland Owner Award can be sent to Teresa Opheim, executive director of PFI, at teresa@practicalfarmers.org or (515) 232-5661. Anyone who owns land but does not labor on it is eligible.

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Founded in 1985, Practical Farmers of Iowa is an open, supportive and diverse organization of farmers and friends of farmers, advancing profitable, ecologically sound and community-enhancing approaches to agriculture through farmer-to-farmer networking, farmer-led investigation and information sharing. Farmers in our network produce corn, soybeans, beef cattle, hay, fruits and vegetables, and more. For additional information, call (515) 232-5661 or visit www.practicalfarmers.org.

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