

Distinguished Service Award – Gary Koch

Agriculture and the pork industry as we know it would likely not look the same had Gary Koch not immersed himself in the industry decades ago. Koch's impact on farmers, their families, and rural communities has not gone unnoticed, and his legacy continues to live on through those he has served and incoming generations.

After growing up on a typical diversified farm in Hampton, Iowa, participating in daily chores and taking on responsibilities of his own, Koch's appreciation for farmers grew and allowed him to understand what it takes to be successful.

The start of his career began in Sioux City, Iowa, then quickly changed directions when he joined Gislason and Hunter in 1984. The 1980's were a tumultuous time in agriculture and starting out as a young attorney posed no easy path. The Farm Crisis hit hard, with an unforeseeable effect. Koch worked with farm credit institutions and farmers to establish agreements allowing modified loan payments, facilitated orderly and timely liquidation to prevent further collapse of the farm economy.

"Though it was a difficult time to be in the industry, it was a very valuable learning experience," notes Koch. "We had to build internal toughness. Those of us who went through it learned a lot more about how to manage a crisis in farming, and we helped as many people survive as we could."

In 1989, Koch crossed paths with Bob Christensen when the markets began to turn, and the pork industry went into expansion mode. Many of the templates that exist today were created by the duo including feed tolling agreements, packer agreements, and grower contracts, to name a few. At the time, none of those existed, and the two trailblazed their way through to create an atmosphere in which farmers could succeed.

It was also time for the younger generations to begin their reign and move their businesses forward. With quite a bit of convincing and inventing with banks, packers, and other stakeholders, Koch facilitated farmers in the new economy.

"The most rewarding part of my career has been helping businesses that I have worked with from the beginning transition to the next generation," Koch says. "It's the most rewarding because it's the most enduring. Their impact will go way beyond me. **There are outstanding people who are poised to take over and will advance all of agriculture.**"

Along with helping farmers build their businesses, the decision made with Bob Christensen and other producers to establish the Triumph Foods packing plant in Missouri in 2004 marks another career highlight for Koch. A producer-owned processing plant had never succeeded at that point in time, and Koch notes the great partners and managers involved in the process are what made it so successful.

“Gary helped pioneer a new model of vertical integration within the swine industry in the Midwest that has improved business efficiencies and allowed farmers to better weather commodity cycles,” says JoDee Haala, director of public affair of Christensen Farms, in regards to the Triumph plant, along with others built over the years.

Over the last four decades, farming operations have grown in both size and complexity as American farmers have worked tirelessly to feed a growing global population. As a result of this evolution, farmers have faced more business challenges, market pressures, governmental regulation, and escalating opposition from environmental and animal rights activists. Koch dedicated his entire legal career to serving and protecting farmers against these growing challenges, embodying the virtues of those he served.

Through diligent work, Koch helped farmers defend their businesses against attacks from regulators and outside interests that threatened their livelihoods and ability to produce food for a growing world. Close, personal relationships with farmers and other clients developed far beyond business and focused on the overall well-being for them and their families. In doing so, Koch has been described as a passionate advocate for farmers who exuded “militant optimism” and inspired their confidence to take on new challenges and achieve greater success.

Koch’s passion to develop, and confidence in, the incoming generations is easily recognizable in even the shortest of conversations with him. His work with GreenSeam, an organization whose mission is to promote, develop, and educate leaders within agricultural businesses, provides a testament to his dedication of developing a community of like-minded individuals striving to keep agriculture in this region successful.

Currently serving as Vice Chair on GreenSeam’s board directors, Koch devotes a significant amount of time trying to help consumers understand the truth of agriculture. Composed of talent development, branding, business retention, and business development taskforces, the company’s overall objective is to have a spokesperson to represent the successful agricultural companies. Constant change is happening within agriculture; Koch believes it is vital to have a spokesperson who can be a megaphone to promote and share agriculture’s truth.

“From a science and social based approach, look at the economics,” Koch states. **“People don’t understand how important the pork industry is to the state of Minnesota and the viability of the general economy.** That message needs to be spread more widely.”

While communicating this message with younger generations, it is equally as important to highlight the different career paths available within agriculture. Over the years, Koch spent a substantial amount of time speaking with educators at all levels to communicate the importance of supporting agriculture instructors and showing youth the possibilities within the world of agriculture.

Agriculture is an international industry with emerging technologies and business practices. Koch believes declaring the message that these new innovations and products will be displayed on a

world stage is very attractive for young people. Most importantly, an agricultural background is not a prerequisite.

“There is a universe of youth that don’t have a clue about the opportunities in agriculture,” argues Koch. “We need to get the word out at the primary school level and show them there are exciting pathways to success. If they don’t understand how rewarding the career possibilities are, no one will sign up for it. We need to keep kids here and try to save as much as we can of our rural communities.”

When prompted for one statement to leave the incoming generation with, Koch proclaims, **“Don’t doubt yourself. There is no substitute for hard work. When you get up every day, have intellectual curiosity about the endeavor you are involved in.”**

Koch notes he never comes into work without thinking, “What can I do to make this better? How can we do it better?”

In the April 2017 edition of DIRT, Koch shared this sentiment:

“So, as I finish my career in the private practice of law, I close with what is most exciting and perhaps that of which I am most proud. That is the next generation of America’s farmers and ranchers. As much as their parents and grandparents may have accomplished, the next generation will do even more. They are educated, talented, and diverse. They appreciate the legacy on which they will build. But they understand the world, and their responsibilities as custodians of a proud agricultural heritage. I know that with their talent, hope, and optimism, our future as the greatest food producing nation is in good hands.”

Koch dedicates much of his success and drive to continue his work to his wife, Joleen, and their daughters, Allison and Laura.

“They embraced my colleagues and friends,” proclaims Koch. “It would not have been possible for me to do what I did without their support, understanding, and the sacrifices they made in pursuit of our shared values.”

The late Bob Halverson, Koch’s mentor at Gislason and Hunter when he began his career, also deserves great credit.

“Bob was my hero. He was courageous; he was an indefatigable worker; he was very creative; and he really liked people,” Koch declares. “He understood farm folks and could speak their language. He took away the mystery of the law – all the technical jargon – and they would understand; they trusted him.”

Perhaps his greatest takeaway from Halverson was the importance of earning someone’s trust. Trust, once lost, is hard, if not impossible, to fully regain. It is evident by the relationships he

formed, and success he built, that Koch took this lesson to heart and has carried it with him throughout the entirety of his career.

He mentions his relationship with the late Bob Christensen also allowed him to excel and grow in his career. Working with Christensen permitted him to partake in things traditional lawyers do not have the opportunity to do. Koch states he always was a part of the business and owes a debt of gratitude to Christensen, Lynn Christensen, and MaryAnn Christensen, and the rest of the management team for their steadfast support, both prior to his joining the Christensen Farms organization and his current position with the company.

Of the many comrades in arms over the years, Koch's legal assistant, Sue Fix, deserves much of the credit. "Whatever good I accomplished was due to Susan; whatever mistakes I made are my own."

Overall, Koch notes the people in this industry are what has kept him in this business.

"The farm community is a fun community. I am grounded in it – it's my heritage," Koch proclaims. "I admire the people and businesses I have worked with; their hard work and skill is commendable."

Koch declares his passion working within the pork industry stems from the pride he feels for pig farmers. He notes the innovative and aggressive approach pig farmers take toward becoming better, and how the farmers compete, yet retain respect for each other and a basic level of friendship. To represent such talented, great people is a privilege for Koch.

Koch's "Luckiest Guy in the World" speech goes something like this:

"When I came up to Minnesota, I was a young guy with no money and a lot of big ideas. When you're young, you're stupid and not afraid of anything. There happened to be a lot of guys with no money, big ideas, and who weren't afraid of anything, either. I had the privilege of becoming the family attorney for a lot of growing family farms in the state, which catapulted my career in the agriculture community forward.

Now, there are kids and grandkids starting to take over businesses and farms, and I get to be there with them and watch them grow. It's been a rewarding lifetime. I am the luckiest guy in the world. I have gotten to do some really wonderful things with some really wonderful people."

"Touched" is the word Koch used to describe how he felt when he heard the news about his nomination for the Distinguished Service award, noting, "Somebody cares about what I spent 35 years doing."