



## Three Honored with Siehl Prize for Excellence in Agriculture

A farmer focused on profitable farming and agro-ecology, a CEO of one of the most progressive Farm Credit System associations and a retired research station superintendent focused on integrated crop systems are this year's recipients of the prestigious Siehl Prize for Excellence in Agriculture. The three recipients, **Tony Thompson**, **Paul DeBriyn** and **Wallace Nelson**, were honored at a ceremony on May 26 at the McNamara Alumni Center at the **University of Minnesota**.

The Siehl Prize was created in the early 1990's with a gift from New Ulm, Minnesota area livestock breeder and businessperson **Eldon Siehl**. Siehl, a dedicated philanthropist with a lifelong interest in agricultural systems, was concerned about people losing touch with the agrarian roots and wanted to ensure achievements in agriculture were both recognized and celebrated. Awarded annually, recipients receive a \$50,000 cash award, along with a sculpture and lapel pin.

### 2011 SIEHL PRIZE LAUREATES

#### 2011 Production Agriculture:

##### Tony Thompson

Fifth-generation farmer Tony Thompson takes his role as an agricultural producer very seriously, adopting innovations and technologies that enhance his Windom-based farm's productivity while reducing negative or unintended impacts on the natural ecosystems.

Thompson's Willow Lake Farm operation has grown, prospered and diversified: he now owns or rents nearly 3,500 acres of row crops and almost 1,000 acres of remnant prairie, managing the land in

ways that simultaneously produce bountiful crops of grain and prairie seed while protecting soil and water resources, and generating a profit.

Thompson firmly believes that a farm is like an organism or community: It cannot be insensitive to the lives and processes that surround it, nor can it be inattentive to its own needs. Human and ecological health and welfare are inseparable. A farmer's job is to be attentive to the broader ecology and economy while doing daily what most likely assures a future for the farm.

"I'm not an extraordinary farmer, but I have spent a lot of time with researchers and students and I strive to be a creative and adaptive farmer. Winning the Siehl Prize encourages me to continue to keep an open mind and learn as much as I can," says Thompson. "It validates that agriculture needs to continue to change and adapt to keep pace with growing demands for food while also addressing food quality, food safety, ecological function, water and air quality, landscape aesthetics, recreational opportunities and biodiversity."

Thompson uses Willow Lake Farm to foster experiential learning. Over the past 30 years, thousands of students have visited the operation including entire college classes from the University of Minnesota and Iowa State University. Individual students come and stay to pursue independent projects and over the past 10 years, Thompson has hosted five international students from the University of Minnesota's MAST program. He also hosts an annual summit where for two days farmers, conservationists, researchers, consumers and educators explore ideas and approaches at the nexus of agriculture and ecology.

"Given the tremendous agricultural and ecological challenges in our future, it's important to find ways to engage and encourage the next generation of bright young people to be involved in agriculture and farming," he says. "Farming is a wonderful lifestyle for those who love challenges, are flexible and adaptive."

#### 2011 Agribusiness: Paul DeBriyn

For more than 24 years as the president and CEO of **AgStar Financial Services**, Paul DeBriyn has directed the company to serve rural America by providing financing, counsel and other services to those who feed, service and fuel the world.

DeBriyn began his career at the St. Paul Bank for Cooperatives in the early 1980's. In 1987, he became president and CEO of the Mankato-based Farm Credit Services of southeastern Minnesota, which evolved into today's AgStar.

At the time, the Minnesota agricultural economy—like many others nationally—was in a deep recession, creating an adversarial environment for lenders and

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Paul DeBriyn (right), Agribusiness Siehl Prize Laureate and nominator Daryn McBeth (left), Agri-Growth President.

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# Member In Focus

**Company:** Great River Energy

**Website:** [www.greatriverenergy.com](http://www.greatriverenergy.com)

**Location:** Headquartered in Maple Grove; serving 28 electric distribution cooperatives covering 60 percent of Minnesota's geography and about 1.7 million people.



Great River Energy is a not-for-profit electric cooperative, owned by its 28 member cooperatives. They generate and transmit electricity for those members located in the outer-ring suburbs of the Twin Cities up to the Arrowhead region of Minnesota and down to the farmland region in the southwestern portion of the state. Collectively, the member cooperatives serve nearly 645,000 member-consumers — or about 1.7 million people. Great River Energy is the second largest electric power supplier in Minnesota and they own and operate 11 power plants which generate more than 2,800 megawatts of electricity. Great River Energy owns and operates nearly 4,500 miles of transmission line and owns or partly owns more than 100 transmission substations. Great River Energy's more than 850 employees are dedicated to serving their member cooperatives with integrity and accountability in an environmentally sensitive manner.

Great River Energy was formed in 1999 after United Power Association and Cooperative Power merged. All total, the company has been serving Minnesota for more than 75 years. The cooperative structure has proven to be central to their continued success in delivering on their mission of providing members with reliable energy at affordable rates in harmony with a sustainable environment.

## **Q & A with Bob Ambrose, director of government affairs: How is your organization funded?**

As an electric cooperative providing wholesale electricity services to distribution cooperatives throughout the state, Great River Energy is owned and governed by our 28 members. Great River Energy's board of directors reviews and approves the organization's budget and wholesale electricity rates each year. Our revenues are primarily derived from the sale of power to our member electric cooperatives and power sales to other utilities in the region under long-term contracts and spot-sale arrangements.

## **What is new with Great River Energy?**

The utility industry is constantly changing. Early in the 2000s our member cooperatives were experiencing tremendous growth, which drove the construction of several new natural gas peaking plants. We also saw the rapid development of a lot of wind energy, driven partly by Minnesota's 2007 Next Generation Energy Act and the passage of a 25 percent renewable energy requirement that is being phased in by 2025. Great River Energy also helps lead the CapX2020 effort to build new high voltage transmission infrastructure throughout the state and region. Although the recent economic downturn has slowed electricity sales, Great River Energy continues to build a number of smaller

transmission line projects to ensure reliable service and serve local electric needs. Of course, Great River Energy has also responded to the economic downturn by becoming a leaner, more efficient organization.

## **What are the key trends affecting your industry?**

For many years, energy and environmental policies have been key concerns of legislators, regulators, utilities, and other stakeholders. We expect that to continue with a renewed emphasis on the costs of providing reliable service.

## **What are your legislative priorities?**

We work hard to provide our members with reliable energy at affordable rates in harmony with a sustainable environment. Therefore, we always need to work closely with state and national policymakers to ensure that we can be successful in meeting these goals. The 2011 Minnesota legislative session gave us an opportunity to work out some of the kinks we have experienced in implementing the 2007 Next Generation Energy Act. In future sessions we will continue working with legislators to explain the unique ways electric cooperatives are affected by legislation and regulations. Ensuring our members have reliable, affordable baseload energy, as well as the electric transmission infrastructure needed to deliver it, will always be key legislative priorities.



The Minnesota Agri-Growth Council is an advocate for the state's food and agriculture industry. Founded in 1968, the Council is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that represents the shared interests of its 200-plus members, which include food and agriculture businesses, organizations and producers, as well as the service industries that support them.

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their farm clients. Despite these difficult circumstances, DeBriyn built successful relationships with farm organizations and concerned stockholder groups and found common ground from which mutual trust and respect arose.

As a result of his leadership and tireless efforts, DeBriyn took the business from nearly a \$30 million deficit in 1987 to a positive position of \$745 million in capital today. As one of the largest associations in the Farm Credit System with over 600 employees, AgStar conducts business nationwide with more than 25,000 farmers, agribusinesses and rural residents. "It's been gratifying to see the success of our team members, clients and stockholders over the past 24 years," he says.

DeBriyn is committed to strengthening connections between agriculture, the rural economy and the health of rural communities. The AgStar Fund for Rural America, created in 2001, has given more than \$3 million to grants and scholarships supporting education, essential community facilities, county fairs, rural technology and environmental needs. "We plan to put more effort into projects that enhance the quality of life for those in agriculture and rural America by supporting investments in critical access hospitals, assisted living housing and businesses that create rural jobs," says DeBriyn.

In addition to his work at AgStar, DeBriyn volunteers in leadership positions at the **Minnesota Agri-Growth Council** and University of Minnesota. He has also served as a Farmer Mac Board member and on the Minnesota Agriculture and Rural Leadership Council.

"The Midwest has the environment and elements for successful agriculture to feed the world," he says. "It's a great

time to be in agriculture, but it's important to remember agriculture is a volatile industry and goes through cycles."

From a financial standpoint he has this advice for young farmers:

1. Understand your numbers: costs, production and revenue.
2. Build a working capital cushion for lean years.
3. Be aware of what's happening globally and how it affects agriculture.
4. Be prepared for bumps in the road. Recognize that the good times won't last forever, but also that the bad times won't last forever.

### 2011 Knowledge: Wallace Nelson



For more than 40 years Wally Nelson has influenced agriculture in southwest Minnesota and at the University of Minnesota by guiding the Southwest Research and Outreach Center while profoundly affecting the farmers, agribusiness and people in the community and beyond.

Nelson was born and raised on a farm near Walnut Grove and received his Ph.D. in 1956 from the University of Minnesota. After working as an agronomist and assistant superintendent at the Northeast Experiment Station near Duluth, he helped establish the Southwest Research and Outreach Center in Lamberton and was superintendent there from its inception in 1959 until his retirement in 1993.

His leadership led to integration among research areas in crop production. "As head of a brand new experiment station

I had the unique opportunity to interact with 55 project leaders that had research at our station. I am most proud of helping integrate individual research projects into a multidisciplinary agricultural systems approach," says Nelson. "Farmers were then able to see how timeliness of planting, equipment size, row spacing, tillage, nitrogen application ... all of these things interacted. We put together a whole system for management on the farm. Industry responded with products and farmers adopted new techniques. All of that has contributed to the outstanding production gains we've seen over the years."

Through the field days and meetings he organized at the center, Nelson developed a vibrant connection with farmers and agribusiness leaders as well as University faculty and staff. Professionals and farmers wanted to hear about cutting-edge research and listen to Nelson's advice regarding innovative crop production, soil management and environmental research projects.

Nelson has been retired for 19 years, but his excitement for agriculture has not diminished. "I wish I was 50 years younger so I could act on all of the ideas for agricultural research and education that I have," he says. "There are tremendous opportunities in agriculture. When I was born there were two billion people in the world compared to 7 billion now. Agriculture has a positive role to lead in the environment and in food production to feed 9 billion people by 2050."

The Southwest Research and Outreach Center is establishing the Wally Nelson Endowed Chair for Crop Production and will hold an open house to celebrate Nelson's accomplishments on July 19 at 5:30. For more information about attending the open house, call 507.752.7372.

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## Congressional and State Issues Covered at Agri-Growth Legislative Wrap Up

The **Minnesota Agri-Growth Council** held the 2011 Legislative Wrap Up on June 8 at the Saint Paul Hotel. This year's program was a little different than in past years for several reasons. First, the State Legislature had not completed its work and was still facing a Special Session at the time of the event. However, with the agriculture budget bill having been the only appropriations bill signed by **Governor Dayton** during the regular session, there was still plenty to review.

Second, in addition to state legislative perspectives this year, the event hosted **U.S. Congressman Tim Walz** for remarks about issues facing Congress. Walz touched on many issues ranging from free trade agreements, to bioenergy, where he reiterated the federal government definitely has a role in funding research and development for next generation fuels. In reference to biofuels, Walz also emphasized that if the U.S. military was spending millions of dollars on green energy, it was a sign of its importance to our country's energy independence and not because the military are a "bunch of tree huggers."

During the first panel of the wrap up event, **Rep. Paul Torkelson (R - Nelson Township)** and **Minnesota Pollution Control Commissioner Paul Aasen** discussed the pending budget negotiations, likelihood of the Legacy Amendment bill being signed by the Governor during a Special Session, and other potential consequences of a state government shut down.



**Top:** Cory Bennett, Agri-Growth lobbyist, leads a panel discussion with Commissioner Aasen and Rep. Torkelson.

**Bottom:** Congressman Walz addresses a question on trade at the Wrap Up.



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