

Clayton County native wins food award

The James Beard Foundation recognizes Watson for his work to improve sustainable agriculture and integrated pest management practices.

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BY PAT MCTAGGART FOR THE TH |

Clayton County native Craig Watson is in good company. Last month he was one of 10 individuals, including first lady Michelle Obama, who received James Beard Foundation Leadership Awards.

The awards recognize outstanding initiatives as well as bodies of work and lifetime achievement. An advisory board of experts from diverse areas chose the honorees.

"Our new Leadership Awards shine the spotlight on game-changing pioneers who have inspired positive action to improve our country's food system," said Susan Ungaro, president of the James Beard Foundation.

A cookbook author and teacher, James Beard was a champion of American cuisine who helped educate and mentor generations of professional chefs and food enthusiasts.

Obama was recognized for planting the first vegetable garden, at 1,100 square feet, at the White House since Eleanor Roosevelt's victory garden during World War II.

Watson, a 1970 graduate of Central Community High School in Elkader, is vice president of sustainable agriculture for the Sysco Corporation in Houston, Texas. He graduated from Iowa State University with a bachelor of science degree in animal science and received his master's degree in meat science from ISU in 1976. He received the award for his work to improve sustainable agriculture and integrated pest management practices for Sysco's food product.

Sysco is a global leader in distributing food products to restaurants, health-care and educational facilities, hotels and inns and other food service businesses. It is the world's largest broad line food distributor.

Watson's program has impacted more than 921,000 acres of agricultural land worldwide.

The pest management practices aim to reduce input, waste and cost, including tracking of water used in irrigation and processing of fruits and vegetables from Sysco's growers, who must agree to implement the program before selling to Sysco. It focuses on maintaining a safe food supply and encouraging prudent use of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, energy and water.

There are more than 4,000 farmers in the program. During the past six years, farmers have reported the avoidance of nearly 3 million pounds of pesticides. During the past growing season, farmers have reported the avoidance of more than 6 million pounds of fertilizer and more than 485,000 tons in recycled materials.

Watson also works with local food, connecting the supply chain between the farmer and Sysco to obtain food from local farmers to distribute.

"As we develop our local food segment, we can never lose sight that food safety must be our first priority," Watson said.

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