

www.press-citizen.com/story/news/local/2015/04/03/land-trust-protecting-food-production/25241901/

**IOWA CITY Press-Citizen**  
A GANNETT COMPANY

SEARCH: silt

SUBSCRIBE NOW 99¢ / WK FOR 13 WEEKS

HOME NEWS SPORTS GO IOWA CITY OPINION OBITUARIES USA TODAY

## Statewide nonprofit works to protect food production

Paul Deaton 8:14 p.m. CDT April 3, 2015

73 13 1

CONNECT TWEET LINKEDIN COMMENT EMAIL MORE

The Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, a Cedar County-based nonprofit dedicated to protecting farmland for the production of healthy food, is only a couple of months old but is already generating interest from land owners and sustainable food producers.

(Photo: Paul Deaton / For the Press-Citizen)

8:03 PM 4/10/2015

The Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, a Cedar County-based nonprofit dedicated to protecting farmland for the production of healthy food, is only a couple of months old but is already generating interest from land owners and sustainable food producers.

"I founded SILT with Paul Durrenberger, my husband, motivated by the fact that we couldn't find a land trust anywhere in Iowa that would promise that the farm now known as Versaland would grow food in perpetuity, even if we donated the easement," said SILT President Suzan Erem of rural Cedar County.

Forty acres near Corydon, in southern Iowa, have been donated to SILT, and a dozen other landowners representing 1,500 more acres have expressed interest in donating their land or an easement to SILT.

"If people love their local farmers market, it's time to look 20 years from now," Erem said. "The farmers they are buying from now, their retirement fund is the land they are working on. When they sell the land to have a retirement, where is your local farmers market going to be? It's at risk if you look far enough down the road.

"As the local food movement grows and as more evidence builds about the health and environmental effects of our industrial agriculture system, the desire by many to protect land to grow healthy food increases."

## IOWA CITY PRESS CITIZEN

### Helping hatch new ideas

Along with protecting land to grow healthy food, SILT's goals also include working with city planners and developers to build small farms into the planning process; creating hands-on educational centers for farmers; offering farmers long-term, inheritable leases; and working with farm groups to develop a clearinghouse for aspiring and experienced farmers looking to grow food in Iowa.

For Steve Lamer, an emergency room physician from Shueyville and SILT board member, the group is a matter of public health.

"We are now the fattest country on the planet," Lamer said. "In our grandparents' generation, I didn't see hardly any obesity. The incidence of morbid obesity, heart disease and diabetes I see prompted me to inquire into what's happening to people in Iowa."

Lamer said he believes part of the public health problem is depletion of minerals in the soil where food is produced. SILT provided an opportunity to get involved with a solution.

"When we took animals out of the operation, we made life easier for a lot of farmers," Erem said. "But we removed a huge element of soil fertility. And when we piled on annual crops like corn and soybeans because we took hay out, we just started this slow and steady degradation of the soil."

Lamer and his wife, Cindy Reed, executive director of the Iowa Lions Eye Bank in Coralville, met with Erem and Durrenberger and decided to join the SILT board.

"How can we make a difference?" Lamer asked. "By helping provide great food for people — grown in a sustainable manner."

Local entrepreneur Dick Schwab is a SILT board member working on accreditation for the nonprofit. Schwab also is a board member with the Bur Oak Land Trust, formerly the Johnson County Heritage Trust.

"The Bur Oak Land Trust protects land that has features of our natural heritage," Schwab said in an email. "SILT protects farmland from development. Both are important."

"The difference between the Bur Oak Land Trust and SILT is that SILT is the only land trust in Iowa that promises to protect land to grow healthy food in perpetuity," Erem said.

"Other land trusts focus on 'natural heritage' or natural beauty — prairies, trees, bluffs, rivers — all vitally important, but not the same thing."

SILT seeks to help those with means provide beginning farmers access to land for sustainable food production.

"The idea is there are people with means who don't want to farm, and there are people with energy who do want to farm but no means except for their labor. How can SILT provide the venue for those people to get together?" Erem said.

"I see the Johnson County area as the leading edge of the state. Because of the kind of folks who live here and the way they feel about the public good."

As examples, she pointed to the work the Johnson County Food Policy Council is doing, and the Johnson County Board of Supervisors' work to provide progressive ordinances that fit sustainable agriculture into county growth.

"Johnson County is a model for the state," Erem said. "I just look forward to our first farm donation there."

## **SILT**

- **What:** The Sustainable Iowa Land Trust guarantees the protection of farmland to grow food in perpetuity.
- **Phone:** 319-774-3496.
- **Email:** [info@silt.org](mailto:info@silt.org).
- **Website:** <http://silt.org>.