

# Des Moines Sunday Register

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**20 21** PEOPLE TO WATCH  
SUZAN EREM



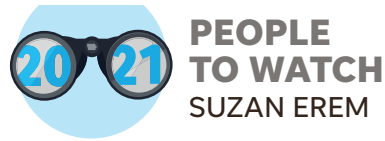
Suzan Erem is executive director of the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust.

## Protecting land for growing 'table food'

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**Suzan Erem is executive director of the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust.**

## Protecting land for growing 'table food'

**Donnelle Eller** Des Moines Register  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Suzan Erem imagines an Iowa where people can walk or bike a few blocks to their local farm to buy the locally raised fruits, vegetables and meat they need to feed their families.

Erem's group, Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, is working to make that idea a reality.

The eastern Iowa nonprofit, called SILT, has outlined an ambitious plan to raise \$3 million over the next three years to protect farm acreage around nearly a dozen Iowa cities and towns. The group will provide beginning farmers with low-cost land reserved exclusively for sustainable agriculture, where they can raise healthy food that supplies the kitchens of local families, schools and restaurants.

"We import nearly 90% of our food to Iowa," said Erem, who helped start SILT five years ago and serves as its executive director. But "just imagine our cities being surrounded by these little

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# Erem

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pockets of farms ... so that as they expand and grow, we're feeding ourselves."

Erem has been chosen as one of the Des Moines Register's 15 People To Watch in 2021.

Stuart Valentine, a Fairfield investment adviser who is SILT's board president, said protecting some Iowa farmland for local growers adds to the state's "food resiliency."

Experts say interest in community-supported agriculture, where families pay a fee to get fresh fruit, vegetables and meat from local growers and livestock producers, has spiked after food supply disruptions tied to the coronavirus. Consumers shopping for everything from eggs to hamburger have run into empty shelves.

It's helped families realize how vulnerable the food supply chain is, Valentine said. "Taking a sliver of productive farmland and repositioning it for domestic food" production "makes a lot of sense," he said.

## Cost of land a major issue for food growers, especially beginners

Access to affordable land for people to grow food is a significant challenge in Iowa, where three-fourths of the roughly 30 million acres of farmland is used to grow corn and soybeans. These row crops, often grown on ever-bigger farms to increase efficiency, feed cows, pigs, chickens and other livestock and are turned into ethanol and biodiesel that fuel the nation's cars and trucks.

The crops are processed into food and provide power for families across the nation and globe. But they don't end up directly in Iowans' fridges for dinner.

SILT and Erem's plan would expand on the agrihoods that developers are beginning to build in Iowa and across the U.S., pairing new housing with working farms that supply food to the community and development's residents.

Earlier this year, Linn County chose Erem and SILT to manage a 45-acre farm that's part of its planned \$120 million residential, retail and commercial development on 180 acres east of Cedar Rapids.

Key to Erem and SILT's work is driving down the cost of land — one of the biggest roadblocks any Iowa farmer



Suzan Erem, executive director of the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, works at a farm near Morse in Johnson County on Tuesday. JOSEPH CRESS/IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN

faces — so it's economically feasible for local growers to raise produce and meat for their neighbors.

Iowa farmland is selling for an average of \$7,559 an acre this year, an Iowa State University survey shows, but can easily fetch about \$10,000. During a period of record corn and soybean prices in 2012, some Iowa farmland sold for \$20,000 or more an acre.

Already, SILT has protected about 1,100 acres, using conservation easements and land donations to permanently ensure its use by farmers to raise healthy food for their neighbors.

Lyle Luzum and his wife, Sue, sold their 170 acres between Calmar and Decorah to SILT for about 20% of its \$11 million value. It's now under one of the easements, and is being operated by a family that raises pastured livestock.

"People who want to farm and grow food for us to eat have no way to get in on that land, unless we provide it," Luzum said.

"Access to land is dependent upon whether you were born right. That's disturbing," he said.

## Farmers face having 'debt for life'

The conservation easements SILT uses to help landowners protect their land limit the use of the farms to growing "table food" sustainably, preventing it from being used for conventional row-cropping or being developed for commercial or residential use, Erem said.

SILT can provide the protection regardless of whether owners remain on the land, donate it to the group or decide to sell it, she said. The group checks annually to guarantee the land is farmed sustainably.

If the land is donated to SILT, the group provides long-term discounted leases to farmers who can pass them onto their heirs to continue to grow food sustainably. Growers go through a rigorous vetting process to qualify for the leases. And if they decide to end the leases, SILT returns to them any investments they have made in buildings.

So far, the organization has protected 13 farms in Iowa, said Erem, who started

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## Meet Suzan Erem

AGE: 57

LIVES: Rural Cedar County in eastern Iowa.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's in journalism and English, University of Iowa, 1985.

CAREER: Founder and executive director of the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust; managing editor and publisher of Voices of Central Pennsylvania; opinion page editor, Iowa City Press-Citizen; communications director, Service Employees International Union, Local 73.

FAMILY: Married to Paul Durrenberger, professor emeritus of anthropology at Penn State University and the University of Iowa and founder of SILT; daughter, Ayshe Yeager, 27.

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the group after meeting six years ago with 25 people focused on local food development, soil and water health and rural revitalization.

A land trust emerged as the best way to lower land costs, said Erem, who considers the group SILT's founders. Young farmers "don't want to pay a million dollars to walk onto a piece of land and go into debt for the rest of their lives, all so they can work 17-hour days to try to grow food for their customers," she said.

"We're just trying to level the playing field a little bit, give them a chance to get access to the land," she said.

It's an arrangement that's worked well for Adrian White and Will Lorentzen, who operate Jupiter Ridge Farm near Garber, northwest of Dubuque, under a SILT lease. The couple grow dozens of vegetables, mushrooms and herbs.

"We were thinking about buying a farm someday, but looking at the price of land, it was really steep," White said.

The couple worked with the landowner, Steve Beaumont, for a few years before he decided to donate his farm to SILT. Beaumont had built a house and a pole barn, infrastructure that helped reduce the improvements the couple had to make.

They built space to clean, pack and store produce, some of the cost of which Beaumont shared.

The couple sells produce at farmers' markets in Dubuque and elsewhere and to restaurants and families through subscriptions across eastern Iowa.

"SILT has been a huge help for us," White said. "Our first few years, we've been in the black."

"It's been a little bit of luck, a lot of hard work and finding a good opportunity," like connecting with Beaumont and SILT, she said, and not having mounds of debt while she and Lorentzen get started has been critical.

**Owners get option for 'ensuring the legacy of the land'**

Luzum said that as he and his wife got older, they had few options for his family's nearly 150-year-old farm. The couple offered it to their daughter, who considered moving her family to the farm but decided against it.

And they didn't want to sell it to the highest bidder, who likely would have used it for a CAFO — confined animal



**Snow covers the ground outside a Sustainable Iowa Land Trust farm on Tuesday near Morse in Johnson County.**

JOSEPH CRESS/IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN

feeding operation — or rolled it into an ever-larger corn and soybean operation.

"We didn't want the farm to be swallowed into a large aggregate that cares nothing about conservation," said Luzum, whose father was among the area's earliest adopters of conservation practices, building terraces on the farm's steep hills to stop erosion.

SILT "allowed us to give someone a shot at living on a farm who otherwise wouldn't," he said. "You can't wish that into existence. You have to do something."

Luzum's daughter supported the sale. Some families want to know that "the legacy of the land will carry on in a responsible, environmentally friendly way that will help future generations," Erem said.

**Another possible twist: 'A business incubator for farmers'**

Establishing the farms around Iowa cities and towns, a program SILT calls "Circle Our Cities," will likely take a decade, Erem said. The group expects to

look first to places like Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Waterloo and the Des Moines metro before moving into other parts of the state, she said.

A developer already has plans for an agrihood south of Des Moines as part of a \$260 million, 400-acre residential, commercial and retail development. And Erem said SILT also is talking with some developers in Polk County about the agrihood concept.

Erem said the group wants to protect patches of land on the edge of fast-growing metro areas, where commercial and residential development drive up prices. It's also the best place for local growers to connect with residents.

"The community can grow around it," she said. "Then we have an opportunity for more and more people to see what a fresh tomato tastes like. And get that nutritional value."

Erem said SILT is weighing using the Cedar Rapids agrihood — and potentially other metro area farms — as a place where several farmers can have access to low-cost land, equipment and buildings while they save so they can move

**About 'People to Watch'**

The Des Moines Register's "15 People to Watch in 2021" are movers and shakers, givers and doers. They were chosen by newsroom staff from scores of reader and staff nominations. Their stories will appear in the Register through Jan. 3.

onto bigger pieces of land. Erem sees it as a little like a "business incubator for farmers."

Dave Swenson, an Iowa State University economist, said produce and livestock farms have the best shot at profitability when they're located near heavily populated areas.

"Three million dollars doesn't buy a lot of Iowa farmland, but it does perhaps create the start of what could be a movement of land preservation," said Swenson, who was a SILT board member until last year.

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