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Legacy of Compassionate Leadership

Fertilizer industry loses one of its greatest and most beloved leaders

Farmers may not know the name Ford B. West, but each has undoubtedly benefited from West's vision, leadership and commitment to the fertilizer industry and agriculture. His industry advocacy, his commitment to "do what is right" and his vision for the future are credited with minimizing additional regulations on agriculture and creating programs to support crop nutrient stewardship, among others.

"Ford had a warmth that drew people in. It inspired and assured people both inside and outside of the industry of what the right thing to do really was, and as a result, doing the right thing prevailed," says Jean Payne, president of the Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association (IFCA).

West, former president of The Fertilizer Institute (TFI), passed away on Feb. 14, 2021, leaving behind an unrivaled legacy of leadership. His selfless devotion affected every facet of the fertilizer industry, from manufacturing and distribution to retail sales, compliance regulation and workplace safety.

ResponsibleAg owes a substantial debt of gratitude to West, whose vision for industry safety and compliance was the impetus that led to the genesis of the ResponsibleAg Certification Program.

A force for the fertilizer industry

A U.S. Air Force veteran, West earned a master's degree in food science from North Carolina State University. He began his career as a microbiologist with the National Canners Association in 1977.

West always considered his people skills to be better than his science skills. So, in 1979, he hung up his lab coat and took a position at TFI working on health and safety issues. He

Inspiring leadership in others

During his 34 years at TFI, West built a reputation for impeccable integrity, tireless work ethic and the ability to quickly dissect complicated issues and devise a simple plan of action. He led the industry through regulatory battles over water-quality issues and was instrumental in creating nutrient stewardship programs important for farmers, the industry and the environment.

"ResponsibleAg is a necessary audit and compliance program in the agricultural supply industry, and its acceptance and success within the industry show the commitment to regulatory compliance. The ResponsibleAg Training Center serves both the industry and government officials to enhance understanding of and compliance with a host of regulatory requirements."

— Ford B. West

quickly put his people skills to use advocating on behalf of the industry, forging positive and influential relationships with regulators and legislators. In 2005, West became president of TFI, retiring in 2013.

Payne recalls an interaction with West during the 2010 TFI annual meeting. The 4Rs program was being launched, and during a break, he stopped her in the hall.

"He asked in that drawl of his,



Ford B. West served The Fertilizer Institute for 34 years before retiring in 2013. The Ford B. West Center for Responsible Agriculture is named in his honor.

"Miss Jean, what are y'all going to do in Illinois about the 4Rs?" she remembers. "It was such a simple question, yet when I returned home, we immediately set about creating the IFCA's 'Keep It 4R Crop Program.' Ford West led by inspiring leadership."

Leading through challenges

West also led the industry through challenging times with the potential to tarnish the fertilizer industry's reputation and place its future in peril, remembers Billy Pirkle, vice president of corporate services for Novus Ag.

"Ford played a key role in the development of regulations and guidance contained in the EPA's Risk Management Plan (RMP) rule following the gas leak explosion in Bhopal, India, in 1984. He also advocated on behalf of the industry to guide development of regulations ensuring the security of ammonium nitrate after the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City," says Pirkle.

Triumph after tragedy

It was West's leadership following a fertilizer industry tragedy that cemented his place in the pantheon of industry leaders.

On April 17, 2013, an ammonium nitrate explosion at the West Fertilizer Co. storage and distribution facility in West, Texas, devastated the tiny town, killing 15. In the days and weeks that followed, Ford West approached the industry's response with impeccable vision, tact and compassion, while insisting the industry commit to improving safety and compliance.

"After what happened in Texas, there was concern that new legislation or costly regulations for fertilizer handling and storage could impact the industry, maybe down to the farm level. Everybody said, 'We've got to do something,'" Pirkle recalls. "When new regulations didn't advance, some wanted to back away, but Ford wouldn't let the industry retreat from doing what was right. He kept industry leaders engaged, and the result was ResponsibleAg."



Even after retiring in 2013, Ford could be found at industry events supporting the ResponsibleAg program. At the 2016 ARA Conference and Expo, Ford proudly donned a ResponsibleAg safety vest and visited with Billy Pirkle, fellow ResponsibleAg board member, and Amber Duke, Asmark Institute president and CEO.



Jean Payne, president, Illinois Fertilizer & Chemical Association, Ford West and Denis Doonan with Crop Production Services, celebrated the dedication of the Ford B. West Center in October 2014.

In 2014, the industry launched the voluntary ResponsibleAg Certification Program to help agribusinesses improve



West attended the first ResponsibleAg auditor training held in October 2014, signing a hat for one of the participants.

workplace safety and ensure compliance with environmental, health and safety (EHS) and security regulations.

The same year, a former Crop Production Services facility in Owensboro, Kentucky, was donated to the Asmark Institute and transformed into a laboratory for learning about ag industry safety topics. Appropriately, the facility was named

the Ford B. West Center for Responsible Agriculture, despite his protests.

"Ford was so humble. He thought others deserved the honor more," says Pirkle, who previously served on the program's board of directors, "but ResponsibleAg would not have happened without Ford B. West." ✓

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