



## For Immediate Release

### Gay Lea Foods Co-op sets bar for continuous learning

**Guelph, ON October 23, 2015.** Extraordinary and sustained attention to lifelong learning has earned Gay Lea Foods Co-operative Ltd. the 2015 Ontario Co-operative Education award and the respect of the province's co-operative leaders. The farmer-owned dairy co-op will be honoured at the Co-op Conference and Celebration at the Teatro Conference and Event Centre on Oct. 28 in Milton.

"We believe in developing leadership and understanding of the co-operative model from an early age," notes Gay Lea Foods Board Chair Paul Vickers. The co-operative has been a longtime supporter of the Ontario Co-operative Young Leaders program for teens, founded in 1967. Gay Lea Foods created a complementary program for pre-teens to learn leadership skills and about co-operation, and is a strong supporter of youth development within Ontario's rural community. For the last seven years, the co-op has welcomed school and community groups to the Gay Lea Dairy Heritage Museum in Aylmer. Visitors will soon learn more about co-operation and Ontario's dairy heritage through an interactive program.

The co-op also prepares a new generation of delegates and directors through its Co-operative Leadership Program. Young farmers spend time with their counterparts from Quebec who are sponsored by Agropur coopérative, also known for outstanding member education.

The co-operative's recent *Leadership in Governance: by farmers for farmers* program for delegate and director development has created an advanced achievement program, and next year, will be aided by an online knowledge hub for Gay Lea Foods' many constituents.

"Building on the success of our member focused training and development programs, we have recently turned our attention to growing the co-operative's employee leadership capacity," adds Vickers. Launched in 2012, the *Lighthouse* Program is an eight module, 16-day program that develops employees understanding of the business and their individual leadership skills.

Vickers says that the co-operative didn't succeed alone. National and provincial co-operative associations have provided guidance, and many programs are a result of collaborations. "(Gay Lea) also lead(s) the way by openly sharing its ideas," notes Paul Hanna of the The Co-operators Group Limited, who supported Gay Lea's nomination for the provincial award.

Three other Co-operative Spirit Awards will be presented at the Co-op Conference and Celebration. London's Ian Shewan is recognized for advocacy and government relation; social co-operative pioneer TeamWerks Co-operative of northwestern Ontario earns the Co-operative Spirit Award in the category of co-operative engagement, and Peggy Baillie of Eat Local Sudbury Co-operative Inc. is acknowledged for her exceptional work in food co-op development.

Principle Six, or "Co-operation among Co-operatives" is the key theme of this year's conference. The event, organized and hosted by the Ontario Co-operative Association, brings together leaders, stakeholders, staff and members from new, emerging and established co-ops for a full day of learning, networking and celebration.

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#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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