

October 19, 2016

Sarah Lockyer and the Editorial Board
Nation's Restaurant News
Penton
1166 Avenue of the Americas/10th Floor
New York, NY 10036

Dear Ms. Lockyer and the NRN Editorial Board,

As organizations concerned about worker, animal welfare, environmental, and/or public health issues, we are dismayed to see *Nation's Restaurant News* award Gene Lee, President and CEO of Darden Restaurants, with The Golden Chain Award, an award that is intended for those who display excellence in leadership, solid company performance, and dedication to giving back to the community. Mr. Lee is undeserving of this award for the following reasons:

While at the helm of Darden Restaurants, Mr. Lee has failed to show excellence in leadership in terms of improving conditions for employees, protecting the environment, fostering humane treatment of farm animals, or promoting the health of Darden Restaurants' customers. Although Darden's 2014 Citizenship Report and its "People, Planet & Plate" pledge tout a strong commitment to social responsibility, a closer look shows a major gulf between the company's rhetoric on animal welfare, [healthy food](#), workers' rights and environmental protection, and the actual impacts of Darden's food sourcing and labor management practices.

Under Mr. Lee's leadership, Darden Restaurants professes its commitment to strong workforce policies yet keeps the company moored to practices that prohibit a thriving workforce. For example, the company pays at least 20 percent of its hourly workforce an unsustainable wage of \$2.13 per hour. Tipped workers such as these are more than twice as likely as non-tipped workers to fall below the federal poverty line and have a three-times-higher chance of needing to subsidize food purchases with food stamps, according to the Economic Policy Institute. In addition, tens of thousands of Darden's workers earn a dismal minimum wage while only hired to work part-time with no sick leave. While a large portion of Darden's workers suffer poverty wages, Mr. Lee reportedly received a 46 percent boost in salary to \$6.14 million per year in 2016. And while Darden's partnership with Feeding America is commendable, a real solution for addressing hunger in Olive Garden's communities is to increase worker wages so that its [own employees do not need to rely on public assistance](#) for food and health care needs.

Darden Restaurants also promotes itself as a leader in animal welfare and environmental conservation; yet, its sourcing practices demonstrate its failure to ensure either good environmental or animal welfare stewardship. For instance, Darden purchases poultry products from [Simmons Foods](#) and [Sanderson Farms](#), companies which have [numerous U.S. Environmental Protection Agency violations](#). Additionally, both companies have multiple citations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for egregious acts of cruelty, such as boiling birds alive and improperly desensitizing them before cutting their throats.

Furthermore, Darden has failed to set any specific goals for reducing environmental impacts of its menu items, especially meat and dairy products which constitute the vast majority of Darden's energy, water, and carbon footprint. Participating in toothless industry-led initiatives such as the Global Roundtable on Sustainable Beef does not amount to meaningful improvements in the impact of the food it serves. In order to improve its environmental footprint, Darden should source more local, regional and organic food and reduce the use of pesticides in its supply chain.

Under Mr. Lee's guidance, Darden Restaurants is undermining public health by failing to adopt a meaningful antibiotic stewardship policy for its meat supply. Instead of addressing the issue, the company opposed a recent [shareholder resolution](#) that would have required Darden's meat suppliers to stop routine, non-therapeutic use of antibiotics. The misuse of these drugs in animal agriculture not only harms animals, but is a major contributing factor to the rise of antibiotic resistance, a leading global human health crisis. Large meat and dairy purchasers like Darden have a responsibility to address this threat by purchasing animal products that were raised without the regular use of antibiotics important in human medicine.

More details on the gaps between Darden's promises to be a good corporate citizen and its actual practices are identified in this [letter](#) sent by the Good Food Now coalition to Mr. Lee in January 2016. This broad based coalition of public interest groups has reached out on multiple occasions to ask for a dialogue with Darden Restaurants to discuss how the company can improve its food sourcing, menu items and employment practices and make the company a true leader in the industry, worthy of such an award. Thus far, the company has rebuffed this outreach. [130,000 consumers have signed a petition](#) asking Darden to implement reasonable improvements in its sourcing and labor practices.

The Nation's Restaurant News recognition of Mr. Lee undermines the coalition's efforts to hold Darden accountable for its rhetoric on responsible sourcing and labor practices and encourages the continuation of irresponsible corporate practice.

By bestowing a Golden Chain Award on Mr. Lee, NRN is endorsing practices that fall far short of excellence and are in fact detrimental to people, animals, and the planet. We hope, in the future, NRN will consider more closely a leader's commitment to key areas of social responsibility before bestowing awards or honoring the company in other ways. We would be happy to provide examples of companies and individuals that are leading the way in this regard.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kari Hamerschlag, Deputy Director of the Food and Technology Program, Friends of the Earth
Stephanie Feldstein, Director of the Population and Sustainability Program, Center for Biological Diversity
Todd Larsen, Executive Co-Director for Consumer & Corporate Engagement, Green America
Jose Oliva, Co-Director, Food Chain Workers Alliance
Mike Rodriguez, National Research Coordinator, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United
Michelle Pawliger, Farm Animal Policy Associate, Animal Welfare Institute
Andrew deCoriolis, Program Director, Farm Forward
Jim Slama, President, FamilyFarmed
Vani Hari, Founder, Food Babe
Angus Wong, Lead Digital Strategist, Sum of Us
Ashley Schaeffer Yildiz, Responsible Food Campaigner, Rainforest Action Network
Alexis Baden-Mayer, Policy Director, Organic Consumers Association
Ocean Robbins, CEO, The Food Revolution Network
Pam Koch, Executive Director, Laurie M Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University
Dave Murphy, Executive Director, Food Democracy Now!