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Darden Restaurants' CEO undeserving of leadership award, say activist groups

Gene Lee's record on environmental, health, animal welfare and worker issues at odds with "Golden Chain" accolade

WASHINGTON, D.C. — In a [letter](#) sent today to Nation's Restaurant News, a coalition of 15 environmental, animal welfare and worker justice organizations with over ten million supporters expressed dismay over the publication's decision to honor Gene Lee, CEO of Darden Restaurants, as one of the recipients of its [Golden Chain Award](#). The award, which will be presented on October 24 during the [Multi-Unit Foodservice Operators \(MUFSSO\)](#) conference, "celebrates industry veterans for their outstanding leadership, solid company performance and dedication to giving back."

"Darden Restaurants CEO Gene Lee deserves the 'Golden Greenwashing' award, not the Golden Chain award," said **Kari Hamerschlag, deputy director of the Food and Technology program at Friends of the Earth**. "Darden consistently misleads the public and the media with its empty rhetoric on responsible business practices. There is nothing responsible about serving meat and dairy produced in polluting factory farms with routine antibiotics or paying paltry wages to the majority of its restaurant staff."

Within the [letter](#), the groups stated that "Lee is undeserving of this award" and "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." The letter detailed reasons why Lee should not be given the award. Among these reasons include:

- Darden undermines public health by buying meat from suppliers that routinely use antibiotics for nontherapeutic purposes in order to compensate for unsanitary practices. Darden subsidiary Olive Garden recently received an "F" grade for its weak antibiotics policies in "[Chain Reaction II](#)," a report released last month by a number of public interest groups.
- Approximately 20 percent of Darden's hourly workforce is paid a paltry \$2.13 per hour. Tens of thousands of Darden workers are paid only the minimum wage and are employed part-time with no sick leave, while Lee reportedly received a 46 percent boost in salary to \$6.1 million per year.

- There is a major gulf between Darden’s rhetoric on environmental and animal welfare stewardship and the actual impacts of its food sourcing practices. 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.

“In an era when corporate social responsibility is on the rise, Nation’s Restaurant News’ award committee should consider more than just profits when evaluating corporate excellence, said **Michelle Pawliger, farm animal policy associate with the Animal Welfare Institute.**

“Rewarding Mr. Lee’s false rhetoric gives a silent nod to Darden’s problematic practices—which include a continued reliance on suppliers that abuse animals. It also ignores the thousands of consumers who have spoken out against Darden for not implementing real improvements.”

“Instead of marking progress, Nation’s Restaurant News’ honor encourages more restaurant chains to use misleading rhetoric instead of meaningful action to address the serious social and environmental issues facing our food system,” added **Anna Meyer, food campaigns manager at Green America.**

Additional details on the gaps between Darden’s promises to be a good corporate citizen and its actual practices were identified in a January 2016 [letter](#) sent to Lee from members of the [Good Food Now! campaign](#). In May 2016, the Good Food Now! campaign and allies delivered [130,000 petition signatures](#) calling on Darden to improve its labor and sourcing practices.

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The [Good Food Now! campaign](#) is a partnership of Friends of the Earth, Restaurant Opportunities Center-United, the Food Chain Workers Alliance, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Green America and the Animal Welfare Institute. For more information, visit www.good-food-now.org.