



19 River Oaks Way  
Palm Coast, FL 32137  
T: (352) 745-0246

W: [www.agclassroom.org](http://www.agclassroom.org)  
E. [lisa.gaskalla@naitco.org](mailto:lisa.gaskalla@naitco.org)

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

### **NEW MEXICO RANCHER, EDUCATOR SELECTED AS 2018 AGRICULTURE ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR**

The National Agriculture in the Classroom Organization (NAITCO) and National Grange have selected New Mexico rancher and educator Margaret 'Margie' McKeen as the winner of its Agriculture Advocate Award for 2018.

McKeen won the award for her efforts to establish New Mexico's largest and longest running agricultural event called 'McKeen Ranch Days,' an annual program held at her ranch where more than 30 teachers and 450 students learn about animal agriculture and life on a working ranch. They learn how to milk a real cow, how to make butter and where honey comes from. In addition, they learn about the compartments of a cow's stomach and the nutrients cows absorb by observing a cannulated cow provided by the USDA Research Center. They also learn about how and why cattle are branded and dehorned.

"The impact that Margie McKeen has had over the last 56 years as a 4-H volunteer with 12 to 14 students in her group and 25 years of planning ag days is too immense to calculate," said Traci Curry, the New Mexico Agriculture in the Classroom state contact. "Her impact will be felt for generations and we already see many of the students she works with going into agricultural careers. Margie McKeen is the truest ag advocate!"

"Margie McKeen is the perfect recipient for this year's Agriculture Advocate Award," Betsy Huber, President of America's oldest agriculture advocacy organization and award sponsor, the National Grange. "From her imagination sprung a program that has helped tens of thousands of students and families understand and appreciate agriculture. She has put a face to the producer and allowed children and adults alike to know the compassion for their animals and their craft. Not just the children, but all of agriculture has benefited from the work of amazing volunteer educators like Margie, and we are so proud to honor these amazing individuals for their work."

NAITCO President and Maine Agriculture in the Classroom Executive Director Willie Grenier applauded McKeen's selection as the Agriculture Advocate of the Year. "National Agriculture in the

Classroom and state Agriculture in the Classroom programs depend on volunteers like Margie McKeen to deliver agricultural literacy outreach to schools in their communities,” she said. “Agriculture in the Classroom’s strength lies in its grassroots network of volunteers like Ms. McKeen who are passionate about spreading agricultural literacy in schools.”

In 1993, McKeen began visiting a local (K-12) school. She would start these visits beginning on National Ag Day and continue with weekly visits through Earth Day. During each school visit, McKeen would conduct an agriculture lesson, often the type available through Agriculture in the Classroom. The final visit celebrated on Earth Day culminated with an Agriculture Day in which she would bring farm animals to school and route students through 10 stations about local agriculture production. In 1998, McKeen took her volunteerism to a whole new level by creating ‘McKeen Ranch Days’ because she wanted to involve more schools.

It attracts participation from schools within a 200-mile radius of the ranch in New Mexico and Arizona. Partners involved in McKeen Ranch Days include: New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension and College of Agriculture, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum, USDA Cotton Ginning Research, New Mexico Agriculture in the Classroom and the U.S. Forest Service.

McKeen will be presented with the award at an awards banquet Wednesday, June 27, 2018 at the National Agriculture in the Classroom National Conference ‘Agriculture for ME on Land and Sea’ at the Holiday Inn by the Bay in Portland, Maine.

The National Grange is a family, community organization with its roots in agriculture. Founded in 1867, the Grange was formed as a national organization with a local focus. Its members are given the opportunity to learn and grow to their full potential as citizens and leaders.

NAITCO is a non-profit organization representing state Agriculture in the Classroom programs in most of the 50 states and six territories. It provides web-based K-12 lesson plans and companion resources, a national conference, national awards programs and professional development opportunities for state Agriculture in the Classroom programs. Its mission is to increase agricultural literacy through K-12 education.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT LISA GASKALLA AT [lisa.gaskalla@naitco.org](mailto:lisa.gaskalla@naitco.org) or (352) 745-0246.**