

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release
Contact: Janie Batson
704-788-7026
e-mail: jbbatson@ctc.net

For Immediate Release

ORELAN JOHNSON NAMED 2009 ARKANSAS FARMER OF THE YEAR

As a child, Orelan Johnson of England, Ark., was kept busy on his family farm hoeing cotton. Harsh as it was, that childhood labor didn't deter Johnson from seeking and realizing his dream of becoming a farmer.

A farmer for 44 years, he now raises crops on 3,800 acres, including 3,200 acres of rented land and 600 acres of land he owns. His crops include cotton on 434 acres, corn on 800 acres, wheat on 493 acres, rice on 1,431 acres and soybeans on 586 acres.

As a result of his success as a row crop farmer, Johnson has been selected as the 2009 Arkansas winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Johnson now joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 20 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

Johnson comes from a long line of farmers. His father and grandfather farmed land he still farms. He graduated from the University of Arkansas at Monticello with a degree in agriculture and business, and worked off the farm for a time. "I wanted to quit college," he recalls, "but my dad talked me out of quitting, and I've gained an appreciation for the value of education."

In 1965, he returned to farm with his father. In 1967, he rented his first 160 acres. In the early 1970's, his younger brother who had farmed with them died in a car accident. Johnson's father retired from farming shortly after that. "So I bought my dad's equipment and started to expand the farm," he recalls. "If my brother hadn't died, he and I would still be farming together." By 1978, Johnson was able to buy his grandfather's 169-acre farm.

His irrigates rice, cotton, corn and soybeans and produces excellent per acre yields, 1,250 pounds for cotton, 200 bushels for corn, 185 bushels for rice, 65 bushels for soybeans and 75 bushels for nonirrigated wheat.

Most of his cotton is marketed through the Staplcotn cooperative. For wheat and corn, he books about 65% of his projected production prior to harvesting. The balance is hedged by buying July puts for wheat and September puts for corn. He books about 40% of his

anticipated rice production with Producers Rice Mill in Stuttgart, Ark., and the rest is entered into their seasonal pool. He also books about 50% of his anticipated soybean production prior to harvesting and the balanced is hedged. He has priced some of his 2009 crops at excellent per bushel prices, \$9 for wheat, \$13 for soybeans and \$6.50 for corn.

His grain bins hold 450,000 bushels and enable him to spread out his marketing. He built bins to hold 200,000 bushels last year, and this year he's adding storage for another 100,000 bushels.

Johnson has about 200 acres in woodlands, and has used conservation incentive programs to plant more trees.

Switching from conventional tillage to no till planting was one of his biggest challenges. "I was pushed into no till farming," he recalls. He met with John Bradley, then leader at the University of Tennessee Ag Research & Education Center in Milan, Tenn., who convinced him to no till a 20-acre field. "At first, it was hard because the old school of thought was that you had to work the land, and work it, work it, work it," he recalls. "In time, we overcame the fear, and we now use no till planting every chance we get. We now make two trips over the field compared to 15 trips when we used conventional tillage, and we have reduced soil erosion and made our land more productive."

He even plants no till rice in fields where ruts are not a problem. He uses a large air drill to plant his rice. He was one of the first farmers in his area to use tracked tractors on rice land rather than those with wheels. "We level rice land to a zero grade, and that allows for continuous rice production," he says. "It also allows us to better manage red rice weed problems."

Neighboring farmers closely watch Johnson. He recently bought an Australian-made harrow to manage straw and ruts in rice fields. "We got this tool in the fall, and since then, a neighbor has bought two of them," says Johnson.

One of his best investments was buying earthmoving equipment and a laser instrument to level land. "In 1980, I used my laser and dirt pan to fix a problem area on land our family farmed," he notes. "We fixed it in half a day. A neighbor then asked me to level his land, and when we finished, he handed me a check for my work. This is how our sideline earthmoving business started."

This business, Laser Level, Inc., is now a major contributor to overall farm profits. Earlier this year, he built a reservoir. He relies on current and retired USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service employees for design work. He currently uses eight tractors with pans, one bulldozer and three track hoes in this business. "I turn business away," he says. "Our earthmoving business has not been hurt by the downturn in the economy." He uses his equipment to level land, build reservoirs and fishponds, install tail water recovery systems and prepare building sites. "Anything you can do with a dirt pan, dozer or track hoe is a possibility," he says.

Cole Plafcan, vice president and branch manager of AgHeritage Farm Credit Services in Lonoke, Ark., nominated Johnson for the Farmer of the Year award. Andy Guffey, a staff member with Arkansas Farm Bureau, is the award's state coordinator. "The Johnsons run a quality operation, the best row crop farm I've ever seen," says Guffey. "Orelan was an early user of no tillage and laser leveling, and he's a leader who helps other farmers."

Johnson is a 32nd degree Mason and is a member of England's Masonic Lodge and First Baptist Church. He is active in Farm Bureau and sits on the boards of a local cotton gin and Scott Products. He has generously donated his time and equipment to local parks, schools, cemeteries and churches, and to remove storm debris for neighbors.

Woodworking is his hobby, and he has donated dozens of handmade toy boxes to the children of family and friends. In 2001, his farm was named a Monsanto Center of Excellence to showcase conservation tillage. He has provided land for University of Arkansas test plot studies, and he won a statewide cotton award for conservation tillage in 2004.

His wife Tena has been a 30-year Sunday school teacher at First Baptist Church, and has worked on presidential election campaigns for Bill Clinton and Wesley Clark. She also lobbied on behalf of the Grown and Made in the USA cotton program and for a state-funded educational program for three- and four-year-olds.

The Johnsons have two grown children. Their son Wade has worked on the farm since he was a child. He farms on his own and still works with his dad as a part owner and manager of the farming operation. Johnson and his son meet daily and share decision-making.

The Johnsons have a daughter Angela who has an accounting degree, keeps books for the farm and is a licensed teacher. The Johnsons have five grandchildren who enjoy the family's swimming pool and fishing in a pond on the farm with their grandpa.

As Arkansas state winner, Johnson will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher International of Jacksonville, Fla., a jacket and a \$200 gift certificate from the Williamson-Dickie Company, and a \$500 gift certificate from Southern States.

He is also now eligible for the \$15,000 that will go to the overall winner. Other prizes for the overall winner include the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year from Massey Ferguson North America, a custom made Canvasback gun safe from Misty Morn Safe Co., and another \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States cooperative. Also, Williamson-Dickie will provide another jacket, a \$500 gift certificate and \$500 in cash to the overall winner.

Swisher International, through its Swisher Sweets cigar brand, and the Sunbelt Expo are sponsoring the Southeastern Farmer of the Year award for the 20th consecutive year.

Swisher has contributed some \$764,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Johnson is the third state winner from Arkansas. The award was opened to Arkansas farmers for competition during 2007, and the state winner that year was Michael G. Simon of Conway. Last year's Arkansas winner, Brian Kirksey of Amity, was selected as the overall winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award.

Johnson's farm, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges during the week of Aug. 10-14. The judges for this year include Elwyn Deal, a retired Clemson University Extension leader from Anderson, S.C.; James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000; and Jim Bone, manager of field development for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.

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Note to media: The farm of Orelan Johnson will be visited by the judges on Wednesday, Aug. 12 from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. The Johnson farm is located at 24 Rej Road, England, AR 72046. If you would like to visit the farm during the judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at jbbatson@ctc.net, or contact the Johnsons by calling 501-275-3796.