

# Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

*Press Release*  
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For Immediate Release

## **RICHARD ATKINSON NAMED 2009 TENNESSEE FARMER OF THE YEAR**

During his 27 years of working as an independent farmer, Richard Atkinson of Belvidere, Tenn., has developed an outstanding row crop operation. He farms a total of 4,687 acres of which 4,482 acres are rented and 233 acres are owned. His crops include 1,069 acres of white corn, 1,269 acres of yellow corn, 2,043 acres of full season soybeans and 336 acres of wheat followed by doublecropped soybeans.

His yields are noteworthy. The white and yellow corn yield about 108 to 110 bushels per acre during dry years, but more than 150 bushels per acre during wet growing seasons. His full season soybeans yield 37 bushels per acre during dry years and 50 bushels per acre with normal weather. His doublecropped soybeans yield 23 to 40 bushels, and his wheat produces about 95 bushels per acre.

As a result of his success as a diversified row crop farmer, Atkinson has been selected as the 2008 Tennessee winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Atkinson 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.

After graduating from high school, Atkinson farmed in partnership with his brother until 1982. At that time, his brother decided to take an off-farm job, so Atkinson bought out his brother's share of their partnership and became the farm's sole owner and operator. He sold his beef cattle in 1992 to concentrate on row crops.

He receives premium prices for the white corn he sells to a mill in North Georgia, and he says his white corn yields as well as his yellow corn. Since the white corn is made into food for humans, Atkinson must closely manage the moisture and insects during storage.

George Smith, interim assistant dean with University of Tennessee Extension, is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Dallas Manning, an area Extension farm management specialist, nominated Atkinson for the award. "Richard keeps his crops clean and pays attention to plant populations," says Manning. "He is an excellent manager who has good planning skills." Manning also introduced Atkinson to a Tennessee Extension program called MANAGE which is aimed at helping farmers with financial planning, marketing and enterprise analysis.

Atkinson uses MANAGE resources to develop his annual crop marketing plans. He normally prices about 50% of his expected production during the winter and spring prior to harvest. He says he can cover his production costs by locking in prices of \$4 per bushel for corn that yields 125 bushels per acre.

“Basically, I sell my crops to end users or brokers who offer the best bids on basis,” says Atkinson. He closely watches the basis which is the difference between local cash prices and prices on the futures markets. Manning credits Atkinson for using smart marketing, especially in avoiding the weak basis that can occur with soybeans and wheat. A good basis contract can mean the difference between a profit and a loss, according to Manning.

Atkinson says he has recently sold yellow corn at prices of 50 cents per bushel over the normal basis in his area. He says he is able to market his crops at good prices because he owns grain dryers and bins that hold 380,000 bushels. “These grain handling facilities are a must for my operation,” adds Atkinson.

He also is adept at forward planning for both marketing and crop selection. “You get behind if you don’t look six months or a year ahead and figure out how you will get from point A to point B,” he says.

Atkinson has also won state corn yield contests. He has even won corn yield contests growing white corn. “He has produced 275 to 280 bushels per acre on 175 pounds of nitrogen, and that is quite an accomplishment,” reports Ed Burns, Extension agent in Franklin County, Tenn.

In addition, Atkinson spreads lime on about 600 to 700 acres per year for other farmers. He also sprays land on a custom basis on about 200 acres per year. “We farm right at 5,000 acres, and I don’t have time to do much more custom work,” he explains. Atkinson rents land from 35 to 40 owners, and 30 acres is the typical size of the fields he rents. He recently bought additional land and is in the process of adding a hydraulic-drive center pivot system there to irrigate about 200 acres.

In producing his crops, he minimizes soil erosion and improves soil tilth and soil water holding capacity by making extensive use of conservation tillage. He says he uses no till planting on 90% of his acreage and minimum tillage on the remaining 10%. He helps maintain a clean natural environment by using frequent soil testing, not over-fertilizing, and by using university recommendations for chemicals and chemical rates.

Atkinson is active in his community, having served on the Franklin Farmers Co-op board, the Franklin Soil & Water Conservation District board, the Franklin County Farm Bureau board and has been an active leader of the Belvidere Fire Dept. He also serves as a deacon at Maxwell Baptist Church and is on an advisory board for a local bank. On the state level, he has been an active member of Tennessee Farm Bureau, Tennessee Corn Growers Association and the Tennessee Soybean Association. He has also been a member of the National Corn Growers Association.

He has also won farming awards from his soil and water conservation district, Farm Bureau, and the Jaycees.

He is an early adopter of new farming technology. For instance, in 1994, he subscribed to a market advisory service delivered to his office by satellite. For many years, he has kept his farm and financial records on computer. His farming equipment includes a grain combine with a 30-foot platform and an eight-row corn header capable of harvesting in 30-inch rows. He uses a 16-row planter and has two sprayers, one 80 feet wide and the other 90 feet wide. He already has invested in yield monitors for his combines, and looks to adopt automated steering on new tractors he buys.

“Over the years, I have overcome dry weather, high interest rates and low commodity prices,” he says. “My recent greatest challenge has been the increased cost of doing business and the increased financial risk associated with farming. I have overcome these challenges by using sound conservative management practices such as pre-buying supplies, checking prices from different suppliers, buying supplies in bulk, buying crop insurance, using forward pricing on grain along with good planning and budgeting.”

His wife Jacqueline works off the farm at a firm that manufactures air conditioners. Richard and Jacqueline have two children. Their daughter Kristie is a homemaker and mother of two small children. Their son James attends seminary at Boyce College in Louisville, Ky., and works on the farm during the summer. Kristie’s husband, Jimmy Latham, also works on the farm. Another long-term employee, Wayne Reed, has worked for Atkinson for about 25 years.

As the Tennessee state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Atkinson 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 20<sup>th</sup> consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$764,000 in cash awards and other honors since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Tennessee include: James R. Graham of Newport, 1990; Burl Ottinger of Parrottsville, 1991; Dwaine Peters of Madisonville, 1992; Edward Wilson of Cleveland, 1993; Bob Willis of Hillsboro, 1994; Bobby W. Vannatta of Bell

Buckle, 1995; George McDonald of Riddleton, 1996; Jimmy Gaylord of Sharon, 1997; Jimmy Tosh of Henry, 1998; Eugene Pugh, Jr. of Halls, 1999; Harris Armour of Somerville, 2000; Malcolm Burchfiel of Newbern, 2001; Ed Rollins of Pulaski, 2002; John Smith of Puryear, 2003; Austin Anderson of Manchester, 2004; John Litz of Morristown, 2005; Bob Willis of Hillsboro, 2006; Grant Norwood of Paris, 2007; and Jerry Ray of Tullahoma, 2008.

Tennessee has had two overall winners with Jimmy Tosh of Henry in 1998 and Bob Willis of Hillsboro in 2006.

Atkinson'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.; and 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 Richard Atkinson will be visited by the judges on Thursday, Aug. 13 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The Atkinson farm is located at 1259 Maxwell Rd., Belvidere, TN 37306. 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](mailto:jbbatson@ctc.net), or contact Atkinson by calling 931-469-7167.