

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

BILLY BAIN NAMED 2009 VIRGINIA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Now in his 41st year as a farmer, Billy Bain of Dinwiddie, Va., is a diversified row crop and beef cattle producer. He has earned a solid reputation for serving the agricultural industry of his state.

In 2008, his farm was selected to host a large Virginia Tech-sponsored field day where he welcomed 1,500 farmers and other visitors to his well-maintained, neat-as-a-pin farmstead and fields.

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

He farms 3,200 acres in both Dinwiddie and Sussex counties. He's currently raising about 1,100 acres of corn, 1,800 acres of soybeans, 300 acres of wheat and 55 acres of peanuts. "The balance is in hay," he says. "I sell hay to horse owners." In addition, he maintains a 60-head Angus beef herd and sells calves when they reach 500 to 600 pounds.

His yields are good, 160 to 175 bushels per acre for irrigated corn, 100 to 130 bushels per acre for dryland corn, 80 bushels per acre for wheat, 30 to 45 bushels per acre for soybeans, 3,400 to 4,000 pounds per acre for peanuts and four to six tons per acre for hay and pasture forages. In past years, he grew irrigated cotton that yielded up to 1,400 pounds of lint per acre.

He also produces and sells baled straw, but this business has suffered due to the downturn in the economy. "We used to sell 15,000 to 18,000 bales of wheat straw, but this year I'm keeping most of the straw and its nutrients on my land," he says.

During the mid 1990's, he was among the first Virginia peanut growers to use strip tillage planting. "I started with eight rows one year, then expanded to one acre, and the year after that, I grew 600 acres of strip tillage peanuts," he recalls.

He has reduced his peanut acreage in recent years, in the wake of the peanut quota buyout, a policy Bain opposed in vain. By his count, he has testified before Congress seven or eight times during his farming career. He has also served on advisory committees for political leaders of both the Democrat and Republican parties. "I'm 64 years old, and I believe now it is time for younger farmers to get involved in politics," he says.

As he decreased his peanut acreage, he started putting more emphasis on his beef and forage enterprises. He's excited now about growing Teff grass, a warm season annual lovegrass he planted for summer grazing on 18 acres. Teff is often compared in nutritional value to timothy and was originally grown in Africa for its grain. "Teff is supposed to produce a good yield in dry weather," says Bain. "We plant it in early June and it makes fine horse hay."

Finding forages and crops that respond well to dry weather is one of his goals. "Crops planted with strip tillage do better in dry weather," he says. "Dry weather is our biggest challenge. We seem to miss most of the rains in this area. The 2006 crop year was a good one, but we've had droughts almost every year since then."

Bain recently completed a major remodeling project on an old family farm home. "This house was built in 1850," he says. "I started remodeling it in 2006, and I lived in a camper trailer for 15 months while it was being remodeled. That was an ordeal."

"My grandfather was a farmer and a minister," Bain recalls. "My father farmed and passed away in 1962 when I was in high school. After he died, we rented our farm out and I joined the military. I have farmed on my own since 1968." The land he farms contains both sandy coastal plain soils and clay piedmont soils.

Now he works and rents 43 different farms. "The average field size I farm is only 25 to 30 acres," says Bain. "The biggest field I farm has 250 acres and that field is irrigated with a center pivot. I have four pivots that I use for irrigation."

Of the 3,200 acres he farms, he only owns about 260 acres. "When people had land available, they called me," he says. "I've had opportunities to buy land, but I just felt over my farming career that I could rent land cheaper than I could own it."

Keeping 43 landowners happy is a constant challenge. "I have good relationships with all of my landowners, probably because I take the time to groom their land like I would my own." He keeps one employee busy maintaining the rental parcels by spraying herbicides or using a rotary cutter to keep their land well maintained.

He employs six regular farm workers and hires a few more during hay harvesting season. "Most of these are long-term employees," he says.

Bain has been a member of the National Peanut Board, the National Peanut Growers Group and served three terms as president of the Peanut Growers Cooperative Marketing

Association. The Appomattox River Soil and Water Conservation District recognized his conservation efforts in 1999 and 2008.

His farm has hosted a number of tours for children, one sponsored by the local soil and water conservation district, and others for children taking part in the Ag in the Classroom educational program.

He has served on Farm Service Agency, Extension advisory, Colonial Farm Credit and soil and water conservation district boards. He has also furnished farmland for variety plots of peanuts, corn and soybeans. He is a member of Virginia Farm Bureau, the Virginia Small Grain Association, and the Virginia Agribusiness Council. He is a member of both the National Corn Growers Association and the American Corn Growers Association. He is also a member of National Association of Farmer Elected Committees composed of farmers who serve on local Farm Service Agency committees.

Bain is not married, but counts former high school classmate Linda Hass as a special friend. Bain also has four grown children, a son Joe, and daughters Jenny, Barbara and Carolyn. None of his children farm, but he hopes that one of his grandsons will be up to the challenge.

James Riddell, assistant director for agriculture and natural resources with Virginia Cooperative Extension, serves as state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year award. He says Bain is “an innovative producer and leader and is a mentor for many Virginia growers.” Mike Parrish, Extension agent in Dinwiddie County, nominated Bain for the award. “Billy is an advocate for agriculture and is willing to work with legislators for the benefit of the entire state,” says Parrish. “He actively promotes worker safety and pesticide safety, and his farm is indeed a showplace. He just gives back to the agricultural community. He goes the extra mile for agriculture.”

As the Virginia state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Bain 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 since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Virginia include: Nelson Gardner of Bridgewater, 1990; Russell Inskeep of Culpepper, 1991; Harry Bennett of Covington, 1992; Hilton Hudson of Alton, 1993; Buck McCann of Carson, 1994; George M. Ashman, Jr. of Amelia, 1995; Bill Blalock of Baskerville, 1996; G. H. Peery III of Ceres, 1997; James Bennett of Red House, 1998; Ernest Copenhaver of Meadowview, 1999; John Davis of Port Royal, 2000; James Huffard III of Crockett, 2001; J. Hudson Reese of Scottsburg, 2002; Charles Parkerson of Suffolk, 2003; Lance Everett of Stony Creek, 2004; Monk Sanford of Orange, 2005; Paul House of Nokesville, 2006; Steve Berryman of Surry, 2007; and Tim Sutphin of Dublin, 2008.

Virginia has had two overall winners with Nelson Gardner of Bridgewater in 1990 and Charles Parkerson of Suffolk in 2003.

Bain'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 August 10-14. The judges for this year are 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 Billy Bain will be visited by the judges on Friday, Aug. 14 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The Bain home is located at 19509 Bain Road, Dinwiddie, VA 23841. 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 Bain by calling 804-478-4832.