

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

WAYNE McKINNON NAMED 2008 GEORGIA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Clayton “Wayne” McKinnon of Douglas, Ga., runs a farm that embodies hard work, agricultural diversity and family farming. A farmer for the past 36 years, the hard work McKinnon and his family have put in is paying off. His operation now includes 600 acres of rented land and 800 acres of owned land.

His crops include cotton on 800 acres, peanuts on 500 acres, tobacco on 100 acres, wheat on 200 acres and blueberries on 47 acres. In addition he raises pullets and roosters on contract, and maintains a 150-head cow-calf herd. Per acre crop yields are 900 pounds for cotton, 3,400 pounds for peanuts, 2,600 pounds for tobacco, 60 bushels for wheat, 14,000 pounds for highbush blueberries and 2,500 pounds for rabbiteye blueberries

As a result of his success as a diversified crop farmer, McKinnon has been selected as the 2008 Georgia winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. McKinnon now joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 14 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

Family members are involved in all phases of the operation. McKinnon’s wife, Lynn left a teaching career to help out on the farm. Early in their marriage, she was in charge of vegetable harvesting crews. She hauled gooseneck trailers full of produce to markets in Thomasville, Ga., and still takes pride in her ability to back a trailer. Later, she specialized in building cotton modules and hauling peanut trailers. Currently, she supervises tobacco suckering and blueberry harvesting crews.

McKinnon counts on his 15-year-old son Clay to drive tractors, a job he has done since he was eight years old. Clay plans to become a medical doctor and farm part time when he’s older. “Clay is a real contributor and he has first hand experience with what farming is all about,” says McKinnon. The McKinnons also have two daughters who both contributed to the farm. Their older daughter Amanda is a teacher in local schools and their younger daughter Monica is starting on an educational program that will lead to a career in working with troubled children.

McKinnon also relies on 18-year employee Guadalupe Rodriguez for help in managing the farm. He says Rodriguez is “a huge contributor to the success of our farm.”

McKinnon started farming with his father who bought 100 acres from his granddad in 1957. “The 1958 crop was our first one, and last year we grew our 50th crop,” says McKinnon. His father continued to buy farms, and McKinnon bought the first of four farms he bought on his own in 1977. In addition, he is currently developing some marginal land close to town for subdivisions, and he owns a commercial building close to town leased out to a poultry supply company.

Irrigation is an important contributor to his yields. He notes that 25% of his cotton, 20% of his peanuts, 100% of his tobacco, 100% of his blueberries and 100% of his wheat is irrigated. He started irrigating with his dad using traveling guns. In 1980, McKinnon bought his first center pivot irrigation and now has 10 pivots.

Over the years, flue cured tobacco has been a mainstay crop. He built his first bulk barn for curing tobacco in 1974, and then phased out the use of old stick barns. “Now, tobacco harvesting is fully mechanized, and we don’t physically handle the tobacco,” he says. After tobacco poundage quota was phased out several years ago, he more than doubled tobacco acreage. Like most tobacco farmers today, McKinnon grows his on contract. His contract is with Philip Morris USA. From 1996 through 1998, he took part in a tobacco farmer leadership program sponsored by Philip Morris. His tobacco prices this year will be \$1.70 to \$1.75 per pound, depending on the grade of the tobacco.

His latest innovation is the addition of a \$200,000 boiler system to slash the energy costs of tobacco curing. The boiler will heat water in a closed system with radiators heating the air in the bulk barns. “We’ll use byproducts such as wood scraps, old wooden pallets, baled cotton stalks, baled peanut vines and baled wheat straw as fuel for the boiler,” he explains. This year, as he uses the boiler for the first time, he’s testing various mixes of wood scraps and crop residues to see which works best.

“This boiler will cut our curing costs from \$1,000 per barn using diesel fuel to less than \$150 per barn,” he says. “Overall, this system will save me more than \$100,000 in curing costs.” He spent \$53,000 in diesel costs to cure his tobacco in 2007, and with recent increases in diesel costs, he figures he would have spent \$110,000 to cure tobacco this year if he didn’t have the boiler. “I also plan to heat my pullet houses with the boiler system as well,” he adds. “This boiler should save me an additional \$40,000 per year in heating the chicken houses.”

McKinnon grew strawberries for about three to four years and that experience led him to diversify into blueberries. “Blueberries aren’t as perishable as strawberries,” he explains. McKinnon’s blueberry yields are among the highest in the state, and he has shared his experiences with other growers while hosting field days. He planted his first blueberries in 2000, starting with highbush varieties and later adding rabbiteye varieties to extend the harvesting and marketing season.

He grows the blueberries using raised beds, bark mulch, underground drip and overhead sprinkler irrigation, and both hand and mechanical harvesting.

This year, he's investing in a new locally owned blueberry processing plant. He says the plant should be in operation for the 2009 season and will be capable of individually quick freezing fresh blueberries. It will also create about 35 seasonal jobs during the five-month processing season. The fruit will be marketed nationally through the Michigan Blueberry Growers organization.

In 1993, he started growing cotton and began phasing out corn and soybeans. When he started growing cotton, ginning capacity was limited, so he and six other farmers built a new cotton gin in 1995. He started growing peanuts in 1994 and gradually expanded over the years as he bought peanut poundage quota. As corn prices rose dramatically earlier this year, he started growing that crop again. Late planting forced him to select a tropical corn hybrid with genetically engineered insect resistance.

He and his dad started growing chickens in 1962, and McKinnon has grown them continuously over the years. "I now have five houses of pullets and one house of roosters that I grow for Pilgrim's Pride," he says. He also uses the chicken litter as a fertilizer for all his crops except blueberries.

Beverly Sparks with the University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension Service is the state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year award in Georgia. Eddie McGriff, Extension agent in Coffee County, Ga., nominated McKinnon for the award. McGriff says he nominated McKinnon because of his innovative farming practices, the involvement of his entire family in the farm operation and for his willingness to share his farming expertise with other growers.

As the Georgia state winner, McKinnon will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher International of Jacksonville, FL, 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 \$14,000 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 19th consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$724,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Georgia include: Timothy McMillian of Enigma, 1990; Bud Butcher of Senoia, 1991; James Lee Adams of Camilla, 1992; John Morgan of Mystic, 1993; Alan Verner of Rutlege, 1994; Donnie Smith of Willacoochee, 1995; Armond

Morris of Ocilla, 1996; Thomas Coleman Jr. of Hartsfield, 1997; Glenn Heard of Bainbridge, 1998; Bob McLendon of Leary, 1999; James Lee Adams of Camilla, 2000; Daniel Johnson of Alma, 2001; Armond Morris of Ocilla, 2002; Jim Donaldson of Metter, 2003; Joe Boddiford of Sylvania, 2004; Jimmy Webb of Leary, 2005; Gary Paulk of Wray, 2006 and Daniel Johnson of Alma, 2007.

Georgia has had two overall winners with James Lee Adams of Camilla in 2000 and Armond Morris of Ocilla in 2002.

McKinnon's farm, along with the other nine state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges during the week of Aug. 4-8. The judges for this year include Jim Butler, a retired USDA agricultural engineer and research leader; Elwyn Deal, a retired Clemson University Extension leader; and James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000.

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Note to media: The farm of Wayne McKinnon will be visited by the judges on Friday, Aug. 8 from 12:45 p.m. until 3:45 p.m. The McKinnon farm is located at 456 Osbon Mills Road, Douglas, GA 31535. 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 McKinnon by calling 912-384-1146.