

# Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

*Press Release*

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For Immediate Release

## **GIBB STEELE III NAMED 2008 MISSISSIPPI FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Far from the main roads and deep in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, you'll find the farm of Claude Gibson "Gibb" Steele III. Don't blink or you'll likely miss his farm headquarters that's the focal point of downtown Longwood, Miss. Longwood is so small, it doesn't have a Post Office. That's why Steele gets his mail from nearby Hollandale, Miss.

A successful rice and soybean farmer, Steele farms heavy clay gumbo soils on land scattered throughout much of Washington County. His farm includes an impressive total of 7,300 acres with 5,000 acres of rented land and 2,300 acres of owned land. His yields are good ones, 177 bushels per acre for rice grown on 3,650 acres, 55 bushels per acre for soybeans grown on 2,650 acres and 69.9 bushels per acre for wheat grown on 700 acres. One reason for the high yields: both soybeans and rice are irrigated.

As a result of his accomplishments as a rice and soybean farmer, Steele has been selected as the 2008 Mississippi winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Steele 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.

"I grew up on a small sheep farm in Greenwood, Miss.," says Steele. "My father worked for the Federal Land Bank and, after selling the land in Greenwood, he bought 500 acres near Calhoun City, Miss., where we grew crops and cattle. He later swapped that land for land here near Hollandale, and in 1973 I became a partner with my dad. Then in 1978 my brother came into the operation. Together, my brother and I acquired most of our land during the 1980's and 1990's."

"We started farming rice in 1974 and 1975 when allotments opened up," he continues. "We cleared a lot of land, more than 1,000 acres in those days. I got to do a lot of manual labor that my son missed out on."

Steele and his wife Pam have one son, Gibson, and Steele is slowly turning more of the day-to-day management of the farm over to Gibson. Pam helped on the farm during the early years by working as a secretary for her husband. She also currently serves as a director and secretary-treasurer of the Lake Washington Land Owners Association.

Almost all of the land Steele farms is precision land leveled. This allows for efficient flood irrigation for his rice crops and furrow irrigation from polyethylene pipe for his soybeans. The poly pipe eliminates the need for ditches and dams, and eliminates labor-intensive hand priming used for siphon pipe. "Once you can get rice irrigated, it generally makes a good crop," he adds. He retains the water on the rice with the use of small levees or earthen dikes that are just tall enough hold about four inches of water on the soil. He plants wheat on rented land that is not precision land leveled. He also was an early adopter of no till rice planting. The adoption of high-flotation tires helped eliminate ruts in his fields.

He uses grain drills to plant rice and conventional row crop planters for seeding the soybeans. He equipped his soybean planters with small plows to create furrows that allow for better irrigation and drainage. With soybeans, it's important to get water on and off the soil quickly, and the plows help accomplish this. Better irrigation, planting on time, and using improved varieties have allowed Steele to increase his soybean yields from about 30 bushels per acre during the 1970's and 1980's to close to 60 bushels per acre today. By switching from maturity group six and seven soybean varieties to group four and five varieties, he's now able to complete soybean harvesting during the third week of October.

"Our goal is to do no conventional field work or tillage in the spring," he says. "All we do is plant, and we want to be through planting both rice and soybeans by the end of April."

"Employee management is more of an art than a science," says Steele, who takes pride in recruiting and retaining long-term employees. Many have worked for him 15 years or more.

In 1979, Steele started an aerial application business. A few years ago, he sold his interest in the flying service to his brother. "He manages that and I manage the farm," Steele adds.

Many farmers in Mississippi have started raising corn in recent years. High corn prices have prompted Steele to start thinking about raising some corn himself, perhaps in 2009. He has avoided corn so far because it is not a compatible rotation crop with rice, his main crop. Strong rice prices earlier this year prompted him to increase his acreage of that crop. "We planted 30% more rice this year," he says. "We planted some rice behind rice because of the good prices, but we don't normally like to do that," he says. He normally plants rice and soybeans in rotation and notes that this reduces the likelihood of weeds becoming resistant to herbicides.

He's adding new grain bins to hold 300,000 bushels. This should aid in marketing and provide storage space for all his crops. Steele marketed last year's soybeans and wheat on his own using advice from two market consultants. He's more comfortable, however, turning over crop marketing to experts. "We market our rice in a pool," he explains. "I don't have the stress of worrying about what the markets will do." While this minimizes

the likelihood of receiving extremely high or low prices, he says it has consistently resulted in strong season-long average prices.

Steele does his part to attract ducks to his farm. "Rice and soybeans left in the field attract the ducks," he says. "We like to hunt ducks, so we stop up culverts to keep water on some fields, and we even pump water to bring ducks to some of our fields." He has also placed about 300 acres in the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program.

Steele has served as a commissioner for the Washington County Drainage Commission, Washington County Planning Commission and as president of the Hollandale Rotary Club. He has held leadership positions in the Mississippi Rice Council, Mississippi Rice Promotion Board and the U.S. Rice Producers Association. He's also active in the Delta Council, an organization that has promoted agricultural and economic development of the Mississippi Delta since 1935.

"I have lived my dream of being a farmer," says Steele. "You never go to work when you love your job. My hope is that my son enjoys his life as a farmer as much as I have."

Melissa Mixon with Mississippi State University is the state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year award. Robert Martin, Extension agent in Issaquena and Sharkey counties, nominated Steele for the award. Steele helps Martin by providing land for soybean variety trials. "He's a steward of the land and is active in local, regional and national organizations," adds Martin.

As Mississippi winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Steele 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 Mississippi include: Hugh Arant, Sr. of Ruleville, 1990; Bill Hawks of Hernando, 1991; Kenneth Hood of Gunnison, 1992; Tol Thomas of Cruger, 1993; Rick Parsons of Vance, 1994; Ed Hester of Benoit, 1995; Bill Harris of Benton, 1996; Robert Miller of Greenwood, 1997; Ted Kendall, III of Bolton, 1998; Wayne Bush of Schlater, 1999; William Tackett of Schlater, 2000; Willard Jack of Belzoni, 2001;

Hugh Arant, Jr. of Ruleville, 2002; Rick Parsons of Vance, 2003; Sledge Taylor of Como, 2004; Laurance Carter of Rollins Fork, 2005; Brooks Aycock of Belzoni, 2006 and Tom Robertson of Indianola, 2007.

Mississippi has had three overall winners with Kenneth Hood of Gunnison, 1993, Ed Hester of Benoit, 1995 and Willard Jack of Belzoni, 2001.

Steele'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. 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 Gibb Steele III will be visited by the judges on Tuesday, Aug. 5 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The farm is located at 40 Riverside Road, Hollandale, MS 38748. 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 the Steele farm by calling 662-827-5155.