

# Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

*Press Release*

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For Immediate Release

## **JERRY RAY NAMED 2008 TENNESSEE FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Farming in a rapidly urbanizing area has its challenges, and Jerry Ray of Tullahoma, Tenn., has found a way to make farming work in such a challenging environment. He rents much of the land he farms, and the farms are spread out across parts of three counties. This requires him to move equipment over narrow, winding roads from one farm to another.

Another challenge is finding land to lease. Buying land to farm is not an option, given current land prices in his area ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per acre. "My biggest field is only 150 acres," he says. "Some fields I farm are as small as five acres." He has taken on these challenges and is now farming close to 2,000 acres. This includes 1,940 acres of rented land and only 60 acres of owned land. His crops include 600 acres of corn, 300 acres of full season soybeans, 300 acres of doublecropped soybeans planted after wheat and about 200 acres devoted to hay production. He also has about 200 acres in pastures. He maintains a 40-head beef cattle herd. In addition, he and another farmer buy cattle for backgrounding.

As a result of his successful 30-year career as a diversified farmer, Ray has been selected as the 2008 Tennessee winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Ray 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.

He's proud of his crop yields, 140 bushels per acre for corn, 45 bushels per acre for full season soybeans, 35 bushels per acre for doublecropped soybeans, 70 bushels per acre for wheat and two and a half tons per acre for both wheat hay and grass hay.

"In the cattle backgrounding operation, we buy 550-pound bulls that we castrate and dehorn, and then take them up to 850 to 900 pounds before we sell them," he says. "We use video auction sales to market the cattle that we sell in tractor-trailer sized lots. We're backgrounding about 500 head this year, and next year we plan to background about 1,000 head." He figures that selling the backgrounded cattle on the video auctions gains him a premium of about five cents per pound over what he'd earn by selling at traditional auction markets.

He also cuts and bales hay for others, but rising diesel fuel costs have affected this enterprise. “Last year, I charged \$18 per bale to cut hay, rake it, and roll it into a bale,” he says. “Because of increased fuel prices, I’m now charging \$25 per bale.”

Ray has adopted new technology such as no-till planting with variable rate seeding, a global positioning system for his sprayer and yield monitors for his grain harvesting equipment.

He also has invested in grain storage facilities. “Grain storage has paid off,” he says. “For instance, corn was priced at \$3 per bushel at harvest, but I was able to get prices of \$5 and \$6 per bushel later on by having storage. I put up a 20,000-bushel storage facility three years ago, and have a total of 45,000 bushels in storage capacity now. I’ve just signed up for a state cost-sharing program that, if approved, would allow me to build another 20,000 bushels in new storage facilities.”

Though he doesn’t grow poultry, the chicken business is big in his area of southeastern Tennessee. When he can get it, he uses chicken litter as a low-cost fertilizer. And because of the chickens in the area, he has enjoyed some good corn prices. “We have one of the highest corn markets in Tennessee,” he says. “The poultry companies buy grain from the Midwest and ship it in by rail. But the poultry companies have little storage capacity, and at times, they will pay good prices for grain when they are short. I sold my last batch of corn for \$6.23 per bushel. I’ve also contracted some of my 2008 corn crop for \$6.25 per bushel.”

“I helped my grandfather and grandmother on their farm when I was young,” he recalls. “I farmed part time while I was a student at the University of Tennessee. I graduated from there in 1976 with a degree in plant and soil science, and started farming full time that same year.” He also recalls that when he first started farming, he raised crops on 300 acres and hogs in one barn. “Back then, I probably made more money than I do now,” he says with a chuckle. “Farming profits have narrowed in recent years and it takes a lot of volume to make a good living in farming now.” During his early years of farming, he enrolled in the Rapid Adjustment Program, sponsored by Tennessee Extension and the Tennessee Valley Authority. This introduced Ray and others to recordkeeping, farm management and financial planning.

“We used to finish a lot of hogs on our farm,” he recalls. At peak production, Ray raised about 2,500 hogs per year. “Over the years, I raised 70,000 to 80,000 hogs,” he says. The only hogs he raised in recent years were custom fed for the roaster pig market. This involved raising 50-pound pigs to 100 pounds each when they were sold to consumers in South Florida.

Ray and his wife Barbara have two children. Son Christopher works at the Jack Daniels distillery in nearby Lynchburg, Tenn., and daughter Jacqueline is in college majoring in elementary education.

One of his profitable ventures in recent years involved baling wheat straw. "I put up 15,000 square bales of straw," he says. "I can sell a 40-pound bale of wheat straw for \$3. We figure that selling wheat for grain pays for the expenses, and what we get from straw is the profit on wheat." He has also invested in a hay bale accumulator that allows him to collect and stack the hay and straw bales without physically touching them.

Ray is on the local Farm Bureau's board of directors and is also secretary on the board of a local cooperative. He has also served on the local board of the USDA's Farm Service Agency. "I enjoy serving on these boards because doing so helped me keep up with farm programs and the deadlines for signing up," he says.

"I always wanted to farm," he says, "and I've never worked for anyone else in my life. I also enjoy giving back to the community." His most visible community service project involves hosting first grade school children every year on his farm where the main attraction is an animal petting zoo. "Kids just love to touch our animals," says Ray.

Tim Cross, associate dean for Extension with the University of Tennessee, coordinates the Farmer of the Year award program in the state. Larry Moorehead, Extension agent in Lynchburg, Tenn., nominated Ray for the award. Moorehead admires Ray's management abilities. "His farm records are excellent," says Moorehead. "He knows which fields and crops make money and which ones don't."

As the Tennessee state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Ray 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 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; and Grant Norwood of Paris, 2007.

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

Ray'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 Jerry Ray will be visited by the judges on Tuesday, Aug. 5 from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. The Ray farm is located at 1198 Raysville Rd., Tullahoma, TN 37388. 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 Ray by calling 931-759-4595.