

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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Florida Dairy Farmer Dale McClellan Named Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year for 2012

(Moultrie, Ga.)—Dairy farmer and milk and fruit juice processor Dale McClellan of Thonotosassa, Fla., has been selected as the 2012 overall winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award.

McClellan was named as the overall winner during the Willie B. Withers Luncheon held on the opening day of the 2012 Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show. McClellan was chosen as Farmer of the Year over nine other state winners who were finalists for the award.

The Farmer of the Year award recognizes excellence in agricultural production and farm management, along with leadership in farm and community organizations. The award also honors family contributions in producing safe and abundant supplies of food, fiber and shelter products for U.S. consumers.

J. Thomas Ryan, president of Swisher International, Inc., of Jacksonville, Fla., praised McClellan for his farming accomplishments. “Dale and his family represent the best of American agriculture,” said Ryan. “He is an innovative farmer, an environmental steward and a person who gives back to others through his leadership in farm and community organizations. He and his wife Mary have raised three fine sons who all hold key management positions in the family’s farm and milk and fruit juice processing businesses.”

Swisher International has been the award’s major sponsor since it was first established. “It is an honor for our company and our Swisher Sweets cigar brand to recognize this outstanding farm family and the families of the other nine state winners for their many accomplishments,” Ryan added.

At his dairy farm near Lecanto, Fla., McClellan milks about 700 cows three times each day. These cows produce a rolling herd average of some 23,000 pounds of milk per cow per year. His farm includes 1,272 acres with 952 acres of rented land and 320 acres of

owned land. Cow comfort is a priority at his dairy. He grows much of his own feed including bermudagrass, oats and corn silage. He recycles dairy waste by separating solids for application on non-irrigated land and by applying the liquid to his cropland through his irrigation systems.

McClellan also was instrumental in establishing a milk-marketing cooperative, Premier Milk, based in Ocala, Fla.

M & B Products is McClellan's milk and fruit juice processing facility and is based in Tampa, Fla. His processing plant is known for fat-free, sugar-reduced chocolate milk sold to schools throughout Florida.

Dairy farming is a family tradition for McClellan. Both his mother and father came from dairy farming families. McClellan was raised on a Tampa dairy farm owned by his grandparents. He milked cows at the dairy to earn money during high school. His grandparents also owned a milk processing plant that went broke and closed during 1979. McClellan was able to purchase cows from his grandparent's farm. His persistence resulted in the re-opening of the farm's processing plant in 1987. He now employs 140 people at the processing plant. He equipped the plant with new equipment and modern refrigeration. M & B has also pioneered in its innovations in milk and juice flavoring, packaging, and vitamin and calcium fortification.

When he established his dairy farm in 2003 at Lecanto, McClellan faced strong local opposition. He was able to overcome this opposition by patiently meeting with the neighbors to his farm, answering their questions, and persuading them that his farm would be a positive influence on the local environment and the local economy. His efforts paid off. McClellan's dairy farm is now widely respected and has earned several local awards for its contribution to the economy of Citrus County.

"I thank Swisher International, the Sunbelt Expo, and the other award sponsors for this award," said McClellan. "It is indeed an honor for our family, especially after meeting the other state winners and their families, and learning of their many accomplishments in farming and in service to their communities."

The new Farmer of the Year was selected for the honor by three judges who visited his farm and the farms of the other nine state winners during early August of this year. The judges included Charles Snipes, a retired Mississippi Extension weed scientist who is president and research scientist with Stoneville R&D, Inc., from Greenville, Miss.; John McKissick, a longtime University of Georgia Extension agricultural economist from Athens, Ga., and farmer Brian Kirksey of Amity, Ark., who was selected as the overall winner of the award in 2008.

Charles Snipes, the senior judge for this year, praised McClellan for enhancing the public's perception of production agriculture. Snipes also praised McClellan's adoption of new farming technology, his environmental stewardship and his ability to turn a profit, even when facing strong public opposition to his farm. "He also has a great family-run

farm, with all family members providing major contributions to the success of his operations,” adds Snipes.

Since the award began in 1990, McClellan is the seventh overall winner to come from Florida. In the 23-year history of the award, Florida has had more overall winners than any other state. This is the 35th anniversary year for the Sunbelt Expo. The farm show was first held during 1978 in Moultrie, Ga.

As the Southeastern Farmer of the Year, McClellan will receive a \$15,000 cash award plus \$2,500 as a state winner from Swisher international. He will also receive the use of a tractor of his choice for a year from Massey Ferguson North America and gift certificates totaling \$1,000 from the Southern States cooperative. From Dow AgroSciences, McClellan will receive the choice of either \$2,000 in PhytoGen cottonseed or a \$1,000 donation to a designated charity. From Ivey’s Outdoor and Farm Supply, he will receive a Columbia Cathedral Peak Vest and a Columbia Steen Mountain Tech Full-Zip Jacket.

Other state winners this year include Sam Givhan of Safford, Ala., Heath Long of Tichnor, Ark., Barry Martin of Hawkinsville, Ga., Jim Sidebottom of Greensburg, Ky., Bill Spain of Booneville, Miss., Gary Blake of North Wilkesboro, N.C., Monty Rast of Cameron, S.C., Steve Dixon of Estill Springs, Tenn., and Maxwell Watkins of Sutherland, Va.

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