

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

ANDY WENDLAND NAMED 2011 ALABAMA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Andy Wendland, son of a prominent Central Alabama farming family, has stepped into running the family business and made it better. Based in Autaugaville, Ala., Autauga Farming Company is a smooth running farm with a good mix of row crops and beef cattle.

As a result of his success as a beef cattle and row crop farmer, Wendland has been selected as the 2011 Alabama winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Wendland now joins eight other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 18 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

His farm has 6,975 acres, most of it owned by Wendland family members along with 985 rented acres. "Land to farm is hard to come by," he says. "Much of the land that we used to farm is now growing pine trees."

This year, he's growing about 1,350 acres of cotton, 575 acres of wheat, 150 acres of soybeans, 300 acres of corn, 150 acres of oats, 100 acres of rye and 2,650 acres in permanent pasture or hay land.

He has often grown rye, soybean and wheat seed for the Alabama Crop Improvement Association. This year, he is growing Sunn hemp as a seed crop. A potential soil building cover crop, Sunn hemp is a summer annual legume. In addition, he has 120 acres of pecans and about 1,500 acres of timber.

He uses conservation tillage and has upgraded his farm equipment. Some is now equipped with precision farming technology. He also uses computer based management tools, including FarmLogic for crop input records and grid-based soil sampling.

Even with little irrigation, his long term per acre yields have been good, about 750 pounds for cotton, 45-50 bushels for wheat, 90 bushels for oats, 35 bushels for soybeans and 85 to 90 bushels for corn. He irrigated 220 corn acres last year and harvested 190 bushels per acre. "This is just our third season of irrigation," he says. "Most of our corn is irrigated, and next year we plan to irrigate cotton. We are considering adding more irrigated acres."

Last year, his livestock enterprises included 792 cows, 767 calves, 150 replacement heifers and 40 herd bulls. “Our cows are mainly Angus, Charolais and Simmental crosses,” says Wendland. “We have 10 breeding units or herds. We only buy full-blood performance tested bulls.” Alabama’s Beef Cattle Improvement Association recognizes many of his cows as top producing Gold Star Cows. He maintains a closed herd and uses cattle management software to help determine which cows are most efficient and which heifers to keep as replacements.

He markets his calves through the Producers Feeder Calf Sale. “We sell calves in uniform truckload lots,” says Wendland. “Because of the herd health program and the reputation of the sale, we hope we sell for premium prices. Our sale is a model that other Alabama groups have followed.” Prior to the sale, he sends his calves to Hollinger Cattle Co., in Camden, Ala., where they are preconditioned for 45 days. “This reduces stress on sale day, and the calves perform better on feed for the buyers,” he adds.

He markets his cotton through Autauga Quality Cotton Association, a cooperative that consistently obtains higher than average prices for its members. He uses forward contracts in marketing the grain crops.

Autauga Farming Company raised hogs for many years until local markets collapsed. “We also ran McQueen Smith Farm Gin until 2007,” he adds. “From 2000 until 2009, we offered guided deer and quail hunting. We recently leased out the deer hunting land to our hunting customers, but we still offer guided quail hunts through our Bear Creek Hunting Preserve,” he says.

“We have off-farm and farm-related businesses,” says Wendland. “We’re part owners of a John Deere dealer network located in Alabama and Georgia. We also have an on-farm fertilizer business that offers fertilizer, lime and custom application.” His farm also offers custom harvesting and sells hay and wheat straw.

Even at an early age, he realized no farm job was off limits. “Dad always liked to see us working,” he recalls. He remembers picking up tree roots by hand in cleared fields with other local boys. After he started farming full time in 1989, he worked with cattle and hay, built up cattle numbers and converted cropland to pastures. “We have a 170-acre cotton field behind our office that now grows grass,” he says.

He maintains soil conservation practices and takes other steps to protect the environment. “When we fed store-bought protein supplements to our cattle, we had plastic containers left over,” he explains. After being turned down by local recycling companies, Wendland persuaded the USAg Recycling firm to come to the farm to grind and recycle thousands of the containers for himself and other local farmers.

Wendland is an alumnus of the Executive Program for Agricultural Producers sponsored by Texas A&M University. He has been active in the Lions Club. He’s president of the Autauga County Farmers Federation, and served on committees dealing with membership, water resources, young farmers, wheat and feed grains for the Alabama

Farmers Federation. He's a past president of the Autauga County Cattlemen's Association, and serves on the Alabama Crop Improvement Association board. He also sits on the board of SunSouth, the John Deere dealer network operating in Alabama and Georgia. He has frequently welcomed school kids and other non-farm groups on tours of his farm.

Wendland's sister Suzie Rhodes is a partner in charge of financial management. Their father Milton "Buzz" Wendland is semi-retired, but is still available for guidance and advice. Bill Lipscomb has been with the farm since 1974 and works as farm manager.

Andy met his wife Dawn while they were students at Auburn University. Dawn works as a kindergarten teacher at Autauga Academy and teaches kindergarten children at Church Street United Methodist Church in Selma, Ala.

The Wendlands have five children. Katie will attend Auburn University this fall. Drew will be a senior in high school. Will Howard is a high school sophomore. Dan is an eighth grade student and Emma is in fourth grade.

Wendland says, "I'm fortunate that I grew up farming. I love what I do. No two years are the same. There's a constant challenge to remain frugal and profitable, and to keep up with management and technology. My goal is to improve our production, refine our practices and be successful. We have a great team here helping us work toward that end."

Jeff Helms with the Alabama Farmers Federation is state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year awards for Alabama. Ralph Golden, area organization director with Alabama Farmers Federation, nominated Wendland for the award. Golden has known Wendland for many years, and admires how he improved the farm. Golden says, "This is a farm with more than 100 years of family tradition, but it is also a modern farm with a strong community presence. The Wendlands are very generous people."

As the Alabama state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Wendland 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 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 awards for the 22nd consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$844,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Alabama include: Ricky Wiggins of Anderson, 1990; George Kiser, Sr. of Foley, 1991; Allen Bragg of Toney, 1992; Sykes Martin of Courtland, 1993; David Pearce of Browns, 1994; Glenn Jones of Blountsville, 1995; Raymond Jones of Huntsville, 1996; Dan Miller of Greensboro, 1997; Homer Tate of Meridianville, 1998; Eugene Glenn of Hillsboro, 1999; George T. Hamilton of Hillsboro, 2000; Bert Driskell of Grand Bay, 2001; Charles Burton of Lafayette, 2002; Bruce Bush of Eufaula, 2003; John B. East of Leesburg, 2004; James A. Wise of Samson, 2005; Glenn Forrester of Columbia, 2006; Billy Gilley of Holly Pond, 2007; Lamar Dewberry of Lineville, 2008; David Wright of Plantersville, 2009; and Shep Morris of Shorter, 2010.

Alabama has had one overall winner with Raymond Jones of Huntsville being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 1996.

A distinguished panel of judges will visit the Wendland farm, along with the farms of the other eight state finalists, during the week of Aug. 1-5. The judges for this year include Jim Bone, a retired manager of field development for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.; Charles Snipes, a retired Mississippi Extension weed scientist who is president and research scientist with Stoneville R&D, Inc., from Greenville, Miss.; and John McKissick, a longtime University of Georgia Extension ag economist from Athens, Ga.

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Note to media: The judges will visit the farm of Andy Wendland on Aug 1. from 12:30 p.m. until 3:30 p.m. His farm is located at 2714 Hwy. 14, Autaugaville, Ala. If you would like to visit the farm during the final two hours of judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at jbbatson@ctc.net, or contact Wendland by calling 334-365-8726.