

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

Contact: Janie Batson

704-788-7026

e-mail: jbbatson@ctc.net

For Immediate Release

MICHAEL OXNER NAMED 2010 ARKANSAS FARMER OF THE YEAR

Along the banks of the Little Red River, Michael Oxner of Searcy, Ark., farms pristine land in a national wildlife refuge. It's land prone to flooding. Yet Oxner endures by producing excellent crop yields while protecting wildlife and conserving natural resources.

As a result of his success as crop farmer, Oxner has been selected as the 2011 Arkansas winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Oxner 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.

A farmer for 22 years, Oxner farms just over 6,000 acres, including 580 acres of owned land and 5,500 acres of rented land. Rice, soybeans and corn are his major crops. Last year's crops included rice on 2,600 acres, soybeans on 2,100 acres, corn on 300 acres, cotton on 280 acres and wildlife food plots grown in moist soil on 1,150 acres.

At the wildlife refuge, he attracts waterfowl by keeping the soil moist through irrigation and permanent water impoundments. He also grows millet and native grasses on a portion of the refuge.

Hybrid rice has improved his yields. He also uses Clearfield technology to control red rice. His five-year rice crop yields are about 140 bushels per acre. His soybeans produce about 20 bushels per acre and his irrigated corn yields 150 bushels per acre. Last year, his cotton was grown by a tenant and yielded 900 pounds per acre.

Oxner spent his childhood on his grandfather's farm. "When I was ten, my grandfather helped me plant two acres of soybeans," he recalls. "I plowed them, irrigated them and sold them. I was hooked on farming."

At the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, he majored in agricultural business and finance. In 1989, he rented 700 acres to farm while still in college. His grandfather suffered a stroke while Oxner was in college, and he was able to farm a portion of the land his grandfather farmed. Oxner continued farming while studying for a master's degree.

“It has flooded during five of the last ten years in the refuge,” he says. Spring flooding keeps him from growing wheat. And the flooding was bad this past spring. Yet Oxner took it in stride. As a joke, he called his Extension agent and asked for advice on controlling alligator gar in rice fields. Oxner also copes with flooding by seeding rice by airplane.

Farming in the Bald Knob Wildlife Refuge is unusual in other ways. For instance, wildlife officials prohibit certain pesticides from being used. Oxner must also leave a portion of his crops unharvested. During fall, he floods a portion of the refuge land to enhance wildlife habitat and to provide areas for public hunting.

With 15 bins and on-farm grain storage capacity of 440,000 bushels, Oxner is able to market his crops when prices are high.

“Rice prices tend to be higher in June, after a September harvest,” he says. He markets his rice through Medford Rice Sales, and sells his soybeans through Bunge Grain and Bruce Oakley, Inc. “We prefer forward contracts and basis contracts and speculate on the balance,” he says. “We market our corn through Turner Grain and individually to various feed mills. I also keep in close contact with my commodities broker who provides me with updates on grain prices from the Chicago Board of Trade.”

He employs six full time and two part time employees on the farm. He also maintains trucks to haul grain, gravel, fertilizer and lime. “When time allows, we custom haul for others,” adds Oxner. He says the trucking enterprise is a “necessary evil” because without the trucks, he would not be able to transport his crops or his crop inputs when and where they are needed. He also relies on a tracked excavator to maintain irrigation canals and drainage ditches on the land he farms.

Oxner is active in a number of community and agricultural organizations. For instance, he and his wife Sarah donated land they owned in the town of Bald Knob, Ark., to Habitat for Humanity. This organization used the property to build a new home for a local needy family.

He is a board member of White County Farm Bureau, a member of the Tri-County Farmers Association and has co-hosted agricultural programs for kindergarten students. He supports a community theater and is a member of the White County Medical Foundation. He’s also a member of the Humane Society of Searcy and First Baptist Church of Searcy. He’s a member of alumni associations for the University of Arkansas and the Dale Bumpers College of Agriculture. He’s also a member of the Riceland Foods and Staplcotn cooperatives. He has cooperated with Mississippi State University on a rice project and has cooperated with the University of Arkansas Extension Service for a study of root knot nematodes.

His wife Sarah taught school for 10 years until their children were born. Sarah now supports the farm by doing bookkeeping, paying the bills and caring for their children. She has been active in Searcy County Jaycees, Delta Zeta Sorority and Junior Auxiliary

of Searcy. She is also active in White County Farm Bureau, White County Medical Foundation, First Baptist Church of Searcy, Westside Elementary School Parent Teacher Organization and P.E.O. (Philanthropic Educational Organization), a group that promotes educational opportunities for women.

As a hobby, Oxner maintains several old antique tractors. He has two 1968 model John Deere 4020 tractors that have two consecutive serial numbers. "These were among the first generation of the six-cylinder tractors," explains Oxner.

Oxner has another hobby, raising horses and mules for pulling wagons. He met Sarah in 1993 at the National Championship Chuckwagon Races, held each September in Clinton, Ark. They married in 2001, and now have three young children, daughters Mary Frances and Laura Grace, and a son, Paten. The Oxners celebrate their wedding anniversary each year on Sept. 22, during the middle of the crop harvesting season.

"I want to continue farming as long as I am healthy and can find land to farm," says Oxner. "I want to farm until my son or daughters reach the age when they can farm if they choose to do so. I hope to give to them the opportunity to farm that was given to me."

Andy Guffey with Arkansas Farm Bureau is state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year award. "Michael and Sarah exemplify the resources and innovation of our Arkansas farmers," says Guffey. "They are innovative and they face unique challenges in their farming operation."

White County Extension agent Brian Haller nominated Oxner for the Farmer of the Year award. He says Oxners are an outstanding farm family who balance their farm, family life and community activities. Haller says renting the wildlife refuge land requires a good manager and that Oxner is also a steward of the land and wildlife. "He's the only farmer I know who is required to plant weeds (native plants) on his farm," adds Haller. "Some of these include barnyardgrass, sprangletop and smartweed which are enemies to crops but beneficial to wildlife."

Another White County Extension agent, Keith Martin, admires how Oxner is able to move water as far as six miles in canals and ditches and then turn it out onto the land he farms.

As Arkansas state winner, Oxner 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 also 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.

Oxner is the fifth state winner from Arkansas. The award was opened to Arkansas farmers for competition during 2007, and the state winner that year was Michael G. Simon of Conway. Other Arkansas winners include Brian Kirksey of Amity who was selected as the overall winner in 2008, Orelan Johnson of England who was state winner in 2009 and Bill Haak who was state winner in 2010.

Oxner's farm, along with the farms of the other eight state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges 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, longtime University of Georgia Extension ag economist from Athens, Ga.

###

Note to media: The farm of Michael Oxner will be visited by the judges on Aug. 2 from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. The Oxners live at 2320 West Booth Road in Searcy and their farm is located at 1439 Coal Chute Road, Bald Knob, Ark. 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 the Oxners by calling 501-278-5050.