

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

RON ST. JOHN NAMED 2011 FLORIDA FARMER OF THE YEAR

A native New Yorker, Ron St. John came to North Central Florida in 1986, and has blazed a trail of innovation and expansion in dairy farming ever since. St. John lives in Trenton, Fla. He owns five dairy farms, including two in Georgia, and has a new one under construction in Florida.

As a result of his dairy farming success, St. John has been selected as the 2011 Florida winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. St. John 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.

Last year, he farmed 11,820 acres, including 6,995 acres of rented land and 4,825 acres of owned land. He has about 17,000 milk cows. Confinement cows produce some 20,500 pounds of milk per cow per year, while cows in his grazing dairies produce about 14,000 pounds of milk per year. After evaluating costs and returns of both confinement and grazing dairies, he says grazing dairies produce greater returns on investment. Labor costs are especially lower for grazing dairies.

He raises replacement heifers, keeps some for his own herd and sells the rest. He also buys herd bulls. The bulls are mainly used on his Georgia dairies and after artificial insemination at his Florida farms.

In Florida, he grows three crops per year, corn silage, forage sorghum and ryegrass. "We're growing brown midrib forage sorghum," says St. John. "It produces more digestible fiber and yields more than the forage sorghum we had grown. At some point, brown midrib sorghum may replace some of our corn."

Forages serve another purpose by using nutrients in the waste effluent he applies to the land. "The number of cows we keep is determined by how well we recycle nutrients," says St. John. "I like to think we're the ultimate recycler." He says corn is especially good at taking up nutrients.

He started his Georgia dairy operations in 1996. In Georgia, the growing season isn't as long. If there's a Georgia crop that's short-changed, it is forage sorghum. "If we don't

plant sorghum on time, we just plant ryegrass,” he adds. “We get tremendous ryegrass yields in Georgia.”

On his grazing dairies, he also relies on Tifton 85 bermudagrass that he overseeds with oats and ryegrass for winter grazing.

He also uses a variety of feeds in his rations, including cottonseed, soybean meal, citrus byproducts, hominy, wet distiller’s grain and wet brewer’s grain.

He markets milk through Southeast Milk cooperative. Latitude Foods based in Orlando, Fla., buys milk from the grazing dairies.

He hopes to invest in an anaerobic digester to convert dairy waste into methane gas. In addition, he’s exploring technology to remove solids from waste and concentrate nitrogen so it can be applied as fertilizer.

“My dad was a county agent who tried vegetable farming before dairy farming,” recalls St. John. “He was a child of the Depression and taught me to be conservative in financial dealings.” St. John drove a tractor to pull a hay baler when he was six years old. In 1960, when he was 14, his dad took his first vacation. While his dad was gone, a big barn burned down on the farm. It was a traumatic event, but St. John says, “It was one of the best things that could have happened to me because we built a modern milking parlor, and that encouraged my interest in dairying. After I graduated from Cornell University, my dad turned over the farm to me.”

In time, his dairy in western New York became one of the state’s biggest. St. John wanted to expand, but competition for land was fierce. At an Atlanta Dairy Herd Improvement Association meeting, he saw a Georgia Extension report that showed low costs for producing milk in the Southeast. “That got my attention,” he recalls. He explored dairy farming in Georgia, but learned that milk prices were higher in Florida, so he moved to the Sunshine State in 1986. “We located here for economic reasons, but we sure enjoy the weather,” he says. “I remember a terrible blizzard that hit western New York in 1977, and I don’t miss it a bit.”

He farms in partnership with several good friends. “A good partnership is a good ship to ride in,” explains St. John. One partner is Peter Gelber who was raised in the Bronx and now manages the Georgia farms. Gelber’s wife Elizabeth is a veterinarian who handles animal medicine issues for all of the dairies. His other major dairy farming partner is William “Sandy” McArthur. Wes Grant is managing partner of Chiefland Farm Supply, a retail dealer for Ace Hardware, Purina Feeds, lumber and farm supplies. Suwannee Valley Feeds is another of St. John’s sideline businesses. It specializes in buying commodity feeds and in risk management through milk and feed ingredient futures trading. He also invested in Tri County Metals, a roofing and truss fabrication business owned by a daughter and her husband.

These farm-related enterprises allowed St. John to vertically integrate his operation and be more competitive by containing input costs.

St. John sponsors a local soccer team and sits on the board of Palms Medical Group. He has been active in the New York Dairy Herd Improvement Association and was named Outstanding Young Farmer in New York by the Junior Chamber of Commerce. He currently sits on the board of Farm Credit of Florida and Southeast Milk Inc. He is also on Florida Farm Bureau's Dairy Advisory Committee and is on an advisory committee for the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. He has also spoken on dairy farming to groups throughout the U.S. and in Brazil.

St. John's wife Marcia works as chief financial officer for Chiefland Farm Supply and assists with paying bills and handling finances for the dairy farms. She also sits on the board of the College of Central Florida Foundation. They've been married 14 years and have four daughters from previous marriages. Ron's daughters include Jan who returned to the dairy after a 12-year career in farm lending, Christine who is an elementary school teacher in Kansas and Betsy who owns the roofing and truss business with her husband in Trenton, Fla. Marcia's daughter Brooke is a senior at Florida State University.

"I believe in expansion using the latest technology," says St. John. "We plan to expand our grazing dairies and capitalize on our competitive advantage with year-round grass."

Joshua Craft with Florida Farm Bureau is state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year awards. Joe Siegmeister, assistant director of field services with Florida Farm Bureau, nominated St. John for the award. Siegmeister says, "He is pro-active on environmental issues. The digester is just the latest example. He also avoids the pitfalls that can grow into financial disasters."

As the Florida winner, St. John will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo in Moultrie, Ga., 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 goes 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 Florida include: Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1990; Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1991; Wayne Wiggins of Plant City, 1992; Leroy Baldwin of Ocala, 1993; Billy Long of Apopka, 1994; Richard Barber of Ocala, 1995; Al Bellotto of Lakeland, 1996; Rex Clonts of Apopka, 1997; John Hoblick of DeLeon Springs, 1998; Doug Holmberg of Valrico, 1999; Damon Deas of Jennings, 2000, Gene Batson of Mount Dora, 2001; William Putnam of Alturas, 2002; Sonny Williamson of Okeechobee, 2003; Dale Sauls of Anthony, 2004; Louis “Red” Larson of Okeechobee, 2005; Damon Deas of Jennings, 2006; Alto “Bud” Adams of Ft. Pierce, 2007; Randy Strode of Longwood, 2008; Cary Lightsey of Lake Wales, 2009; and John Hundley of North Palm Beach, 2010.

Florida has had six overall winners: Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1991; Leroy Baldwin of Ocala, 1993; Rex Clonts of Apopka, 1997; Doug Holmberg of Valrico, 1999; Louis “Red” Larson of Okeechobee, 2005; and Cary Lightsey of Lake Wales, 2009.

St. John’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 this year include Jim Bone, a retired field development manager 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: St. John’s farm will be visited by the judges on Aug. 1 from 8:30 a.m. until 11:30 a.m. St. John’s farm is located at 4951 NW 170th St., Trenton, Fla. If you would like to visit the operation 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 St. John by calling 352-463-6613.