

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

KEVIN ELLIOTT NAMED 2011 SOUTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Kevin Elliott of Nichols, S.C., is carrying on a family tradition of tobacco farming. Along the way, he has also become an excellent grower of corn, soybeans and wheat.

As a result of his success as a tobacco and row crop farmer, Elliott has been selected as the 2011 South Carolina winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Elliott 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.

Elliott's farm consists of 600 acres with 150 acres of rented land and 450 acres of owned land. Last year, he grew flue cured tobacco on 60 acres yielding 2,500 pounds per acre, corn on 200 acres yielding 150 bushels per acre, soybeans on 300 acres yielding 42 bushels per acre and wheat on 150 acres yielding 75 bushels per acre.

At times, he has produced higher yields, 3,200 pounds per acre for tobacco, 47 bushels per acre for soybeans, 90 bushels per acre for wheat and 175 bushels per acre for corn. And he has produced even higher corn yields that he grew in his yield contest entries.

He has also been a consistent winner in National Corn Growers Association yield contests. He won his first yield contest in 1995 and won the 2010 state corn yield contest in the ridge-till non-irrigated category with a yield of 197 bushels per acre.

"I sell my tobacco by contract to R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company," he explains. "I price my corn, soybeans and wheat and deliver those crops to a local grain elevator."

This year, he's selling tobacco from 23 acres to an R. J. Reynolds subsidiary, the Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company. Santa Fe specializes in buying tobacco that is free of pesticide residues. Farmers who grow this tobacco use only certain pesticides and fertilizers, those that rapidly break down in the environment. After curing, this tobacco is tested for pesticide residues. Some farmers begin with this type of tobacco as a first step before growing organic tobacco.

"With this tobacco, we can not use maleic hydrazide (MH) for sucker control," explains Elliott. "We also are prohibited from using ripening agents and certain herbicides. My tobacco that I'm growing for Santa Fe has had no herbicides for weed control, and it

actually looks better than our other tobacco where we used herbicides. A good rolling cultivator is key for keeping the tobacco free of weeds.”

His farm employs ten full time workers and he hires ten more on a part time basis during tobacco harvesting season.

He grows his own tobacco transplants in three 200-foot-long greenhouses. Most of the time, he uses all of his transplants in his own fields, but for this year’s crop, he obtained excellent seed germination. As a result, he had enough transplants left over for 20 acres that he sold to other farmers. He uses a machine to mechanize the seeding of the tobacco into the greenhouse trays, and says the tobacco is ready for transplanting eight weeks after seeding.

“One my challenges was finding enough land to rent,” he says. “We have been able to expand by buying land.” One farm he recently bought will get new drain tile. He adds that installing drainage was not feasible on land he rented.

Under the old quota system, tobacco profitability was a challenge. “Now that quotas have been eliminated, we contract with tobacco companies,” he explains, “We have increased our tobacco acreage, and we’re making profits because they’re buying more of our tobacco.”

In 2006, he bought a new shed and tobacco baling system that centralized post-harvest tobacco handling while also eliminating stress and saving on labor expenses. Elliott currently plans to build additional grain storage. “This will allow us to market our corn, soybeans and wheat at different times of the year, and for better prices,” he explains.

He grew up on a tobacco farm, drove tractors when he was eight years old and a few years later he harvested tobacco. “I was right handed, so I cropped tobacco on one side of the row, and my cousin who was left handed cropped tobacco on the other side of the row,” he recalls. “I started farming with my dad after graduating from high school and attending technical college for one year. My wife Joni and I took over her dad’s farming operation in 1988 after a tragic car accident took the lives of both her mother and her father.”

One of his goals is to protect his land to benefit future generations. “We have less soil erosion, less soil runoff and better water quality because I’ve built grassed waterways and started using strip tillage planting,” he says.

Elliott has been active in local community organizations. He has been a board member of Horry Telephone Cooperative since 2007. He was on a school advisory board from 1990 until 1999. He and Joni are also members of Harvest Baptist Church in Green Sea, S.C. He was named Conservation Farmer of the Year in 2000, and he also won a 2008 conservation award from Woodmen of the World. Since 1995, he has been a member of both the South Carolina and the National Corn Growers Association.

His wife Joni was a two-year member of an Extension advisory committee. In 2008, Horry Electric Cooperative named her Rural Lady of the Year. Joni also grew up on a tobacco farm. She has driven tractors since she was five years old, and still works on the farm in addition to managing the farm's finances and payroll. One of her main farm jobs now is supervising tobacco sucker removal. She has also been a National Corn Growers Association member.

Kevin and Joni have two grown married sons. Both work on the farm. Their oldest son Brad has two sons, raises his own beef cattle and operates a pine straw business. Their younger son Andrew is father to a newborn son and works part time hauling grain for a grain elevator. Kevin recently helped Andrew buy his first farm.

Elliott looks forward to a bright future in farming. He says, "I have three young grandsons and I'm training them to become farmers."

Steve Meadows with the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is state coordinator of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Elliott was nominated for the honor by Bruce Johnson. Johnson worked as an Extension agent in Horry County, and retired to become an agricultural services representative with Horry County State Bank. Elliott is the fifth state winner of the award nominated by Johnson.

Johnson worked closely with Elliott in conducting on-farm Extension crop demonstrations. "Kevin and his family do a great job in producing quality crops," says Johnson. "They are active in their community and church, and they are modest about their many accomplishments." Johnson also admires Joni's ability to make tasty bologna sandwiches.

As the South Carolina state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Elliott 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 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 South Carolina include: C. E. Thrailkill of Fort Lawn, 1990; Charles Snowden of Hemingway, 1991; Robert E. Connelly, Sr. of Ulmer, 1992; Henry Elliott, Sr. of Andrews, 1993; Ron Stephenson of Chester, 1994; Greg Hyman of Conway, 1995; Randy Lovett of Nichols, 1996; David Drew of Mullins, 1997; Jerry Edge of Conway, 1998; Blake McIntyre, III of Marion, 1999; Raymond Galloway of Darlington, 2000; W. R. Simpson of Manning, 2001; Gill Rogers of Hartsville, 2002; Harold Pitts of Newberry, 2003; Earl Thrailkill of Fort Lawn, 2004; Chalmers Carr of Ridge Spring, 2005; Steve Gamble of Sardinia, 2006; William Johnson of Conway, 2007; Kent Wannamaker of St. Matthews, 2008; Thomas DuRant of Gable, 2009; and Marty Easler of Greeleyville, 2010.

South Carolina has had one overall winner with Ron Stephenson of Chester being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 1994.

Elliott's farm, along with 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.

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Note to media: The Elliott farm will be visited by the judges on Aug. 4 from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. Elliott lives at 4661 Alma Rd., Nichols, S.C. 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 Elliott by calling 843-392-3585.