

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

DONALD HORSLEY NAMED 2011 VIRGINIA FARMER OF THE YEAR

A grain farmer and an independent hog producer for 41 years, Donald Horsley of Virginia Beach, Va., has also developed niche enterprises that complement each other and his entire operation. He especially prides himself in caring for the land of his many landlords as if it were his own.

As a result of his success as a row crop and livestock farmer, he has been selected as the 2011 Virginia winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Horsley 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.

Horsley farms in partnership with his wife and two sons at Land of Promise Farms. The operation includes a total of 5,300 acres, of which 5,200 acres are rented and 100 acres are owned.

Last year's crops included corn on 1,300 acres yielding 140 bushels per acre, wheat on 1,050 acres yielding 60 bushels per acre and soybeans on 4,000 acres yielding 52.5 bushels per acre. By using his 175,000 bushels of on-farm grain storage and by storing additional grain at local elevators, Horsley is able to make extensive use of forward pricing contracts. He also uses crop insurance contracts to replace lost income during disaster years. While corn, soybeans and wheat provide the bulk of his farm income, his other niche enterprises work equally well in bringing in solid profits.

Horsley raises 2,672 head of swine from 160 sows in a farrow-to-finish operation. He also grazes a beef herd consisting of 24 head of Angus cattle. He considers several aspects of his hog operation to be niche enterprises.

"When our oldest son was in college, he recognized a need for more swine producers in Virginia to raise pigs for 4-H and FFA members to exhibit at livestock shows," he explains. "With a good reputation for producing competitive show pigs, we now sell to customers in five states. I'm proud that many buyers come back year after year and they are also spreading the word." Pigs that aren't sold for livestock shows are sold for scientific research purposes while others are sold to local individuals for barbecuing and some are sold through the local auction market.

He started his small beef herd to grow forages that absorb and utilize the nutrients he applies from his swine lagoon. Also, he says, "I just enjoy the beauty of black cattle grazing on lush green pasture."

In addition, he sells about 25 tons of feed that is mixed on the farm. "We make hog and cattle feed on the farm and sell it directly to consumers, including our 4-H and FFA customers and local small scale farmers," he adds.

Horsley also serves as a dealer for products from Virginia Farm Bureau Service Corporation. "This allows Farm Bureau products such as oil, grease, twine, tires, and the like to be delivered to our farm in bulk quantities," he explains. "We are able to buy these products at price discounts which are available to other local Farm Bureau members as well."

Another niche enterprise includes sweet corn on 15 acres. "My father-in-law started the sweet corn enterprise many years ago," he says. "My wife Diane also manages a u-pick pecan business. The sweet corn and pecan niche crops capitalize on the 'Buy Fresh, Buy Local' mission, and they provide seasonal labor for our full time grain and livestock employees."

"I was raised on a farm in Suffolk, Virginia, and I've always wanted to farm," he says. "When I started farming, I rented 132 acres. My father-in-law helped me rent that land. He welcomed me into his family and gave me farm management responsibilities. We still farm the same 132 acres." Though Horsley and his family have recently bought land, he still depends on rented land for his livelihood.

Horsley is a 1969 graduate of Virginia Tech where he received a degree in animal science. Both of his sons followed with animal science degrees from the same university.

For many years, Horsley has provided a strong voice for agriculture before local government. He sits on Virginia Beach's Planning Commission, Agricultural Advisory Committee, Farm Bureau's local board and on the board of a locally owned Southern States cooperative. He was a member of the Virginia Beach Agriculture Reserve Program Committee. As a Ruritan leader, he helped form a foundation that built a community building. He is also a 4-H alumnus and longtime 4-H livestock volunteer. Recently, he was appointed to a "2040" long range planning committee for Virginia Beach.

On the state level, Horsley has been active in Virginia's Pork Industry Association, Pork Industry Board, State Fair, Agribusiness Council, Grain Producers Association, Soybean Association, Corn Growers Association, and Agricultural Council.

Nationally, he has been active in the Pork Forum and Pork Producers Council and is a member of the American Soybean and National Corn Growers Associations.

He met his wife Diane in 4-H. They competed against each other in livestock judging, and when Donald ran for state 4-H president, he asked Diane for her vote. Diane and Donald have hosted 4-H exchange students from Switzerland, England and Japan who came to the U.S. to experience farm life.

Diane graduated from Radford College, having majored in home economics, and taught school until her oldest son was born. Since then, she has worked as a homemaker and bookkeeper for the family and farm. Diane continues to be a 4-H volunteer and has been active in Farm Bureau's Ag in the Classroom projects and Women's Committee. She was named Virginia Farm Bureau Farm Woman of the Year in 1988. She served on Virginia Beach's Parks and Recreation Commission and presently serves on the Agricultural Advisory Commission and Historic Preservation Commission. Diane's dream is to someday restore an old farm house on their property.

The Horsley's have two adult sons. Their older son Shane works off the farm as an analyst for Smithfield Foods. Shane helps on the farm when he's not working at his main job, and he has provided sound advice on commodity markets and in managing farm employees.

Their son Ryan works full time on the family farm. He is involved with all aspects of the farm and manages the entire hog operation.

The Horsley's attend Blackwater Baptist Church.

Horsley says, "At Land of Promise Farms, our family partnership enjoys sharing in the day to day farm work as well as its challenges and its rewards."

Cathy Sutphin, associate director for 4-H with Virginia Tech's Cooperative Extension Service, is state coordinator of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year awards. Horsley was nominated for the honor by Watson Lawrence, Extension agent in Chesapeake, Va. Lawrence says, "Don has built a successful farm by adopting modern farming techniques. During periods of low commodity prices, he developed his niche enterprises. He has been a leader in commodity organizations and especially among farmers in Virginia Beach."

As the Virginia state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Horsley 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.

Previous state winners from Virginia include: Nelson Gardner of Bridgewater, 1990; Russell Inskeep of Culpepper, 1991; Harry Bennett of Covington, 1992; Hilton Hudson of Alton, 1993; Buck McCann of Carson, 1994; George M. Ashman, Jr. of Amelia, 1995; Bill Blalock of Baskerville, 1996; G. H. Peery III of Ceres, 1997; James Bennett of Red House, 1998; Ernest Copenhaver of Meadowview, 1999; John Davis of Port Royal, 2000; James Huffard III of Crockett, 2001; J. Hudson Reese of Scottsburg, 2002; Charles Parkerson of Suffolk, 2003; Lance Everett of Stony Creek, 2004; Monk Sanford of Orange, 2005; Paul House of Nokesville, 2006; Steve Berryman of Surry, 2007; Tim Sutphin of Dublin, 2008; Billy Bain of Dinwiddie, 2009; and Wallick Harding of Jetersville, 2010.

Virginia has had two overall winners with Nelson Gardner of Bridgewater in 1990 and Charles Parkerson of Suffolk in 2003.

Horsley'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 August 1-5. The judges for this year are 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: Horsley's farm will be visited by the judges on Aug. 3 from 1:30 p.m. until 4:30 p.m. The farm is located at 3169 Land of Promise Road, Virginia Beach, Va. 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 Horsley by calling 757-421-3625.