

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release

For Release Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2017 after 1:30 p.m.

Virginia Farmer Robert Mills, Jr. Named 2017 Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

(Moultrie, Ga.)—Robert Mills, Jr., a first generation farmer who grows tobacco and raises beef cattle and pullet breeder chickens near Callands, Va., has been selected as the overall winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award for 2017.

As an eighth grade student in an agriculture class, Mills decided to become a farmer. As soon as he made that decision, people told him he could never do it. His determination proved the doubters wrong. Mills now offers himself as an example for young people who face long odds in reaching their goals. His life is also an example of the positive impact that agricultural education and the FFA organization can have on young people.

Mills was named as the overall winner at the Willie B. Withers Luncheon held during the opening day of the 2017 Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show. Mills was chosen as Farmer of the Year over nine other state winners who were finalists for the award.

His farm now encompasses 2,244 acres. His tobacco enterprise is diversified. Mills grows conventional flue cured tobacco, organic flue cured tobacco, dark fired tobacco, and tobacco harvested as a bioenergy crop. Winter wheat is his other main cash crop. He also grows pearl millet and hay.

He hopes to expand his Angus-based beef herd to 400 cows by this coming spring. He raises about 34,000 of the pullet breeder chickens each year. He grows the chickens on contract with a poultry company. His farm receives day-old chicks and Mills keeps them until they reach 21 weeks of age when they are moved to layer houses.

By obtaining the contract to grow chickens, Mills was able to quit his public job and realize his dream of becoming a full time farmer.

This is the 28th year for the Farmer of the Year award. The award recognizes excellence in agricultural production and farm management, along with leadership in farm and community organizations. The award also honors family contributions in producing safe and abundant supplies of food, fiber and shelter products.

Peter Ghiloni, president and chief executive officer of Swisher International, Inc., of Jacksonville, Fla., praised Mills for his farming accomplishments. “Robert is an outstanding farmer who has become a role model for others who want to farm,” said Ghiloni. “It is an honor for our company and our Swisher Sweets cigar brand to recognize Robert and his farming accomplishments.”

Ron Carroll, marketing vice president with Swisher, represented the company in presenting the cash award to Mills. Carroll visited Mills and his farm along with the farms of the other nine state winners during the judging tour. “Robert is truly an inspiration, and he has overcome many obstacles during his journey to become a full time successful farmer,” said Carroll.

Mills expressed his thanks to Swisher and the other award sponsors. “I am a first generation farmer who started farming at an early age with basically no financial resources,” said Mills.

Mills grew up in a suburb of Danville, Va. He grew his first vegetables at age 13, bought a tractor at age 15, and worked for a while for another farmer. He grew his first tobacco in 1995, bought his first farm in 1998, started raising cattle in 1999, and began farming full time in 2001.

As he expanded his farming enterprise, he borrowed money and paid back the loans. Before he started farming full time, he worked in a farm supply business and later as a conservation specialist for the Pittsylvania Soil & Water Conservation District.

Robert Mills, Jr. was selected for the honor by three judges who visited his farm and the farms of the other state winners during early August of this year.

The judges this year included farmer Thomas Porter, Jr., of Concord, N.C., who was the overall winner in 2011, Charles Snipes, a retired Extension weed scientist from Greenville, Miss., and beef cattle rancher Cary Lightsey of Lake Wales, Fla., who was the overall winner in 2009.

Porter served as this year’s senior judge. He said that Mills impressed the judges with his determination to farm and with the diversity of his tobacco crops. “Robert Mills has an amazing story to tell, from his beginning in farming up until the present,” said Porter. “He is an avid advocate for agriculture and is very active in community and agricultural affairs. He truly has a passion for what he does and is very deserving of this most prestigious honor.”

Robert and his wife Cynthia have two sons. Cynthia works off the farm as an information technology resource teacher. Their older son Logan wants to farm, and their younger son Holden wants to be an on-the-road John Deere mechanic. Both sons are already great mechanics, according to Robert.

As the Southeastern Farmer of the Year, Mills will receive a \$15,000 cash award plus \$2,500 as a state winner from Swisher International. He will also receive the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year from Massey Ferguson North America, a \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States cooperative, a Columbia jacket from Ivey's Outdoor and Farm Supply, a smoker-grill from Hays LTI, and a Henry Golden Boy "American Farmer" Tribute Edition rifle from Reinke Irrigation.

Massey Ferguson North America and its parent firm AGCO have been longtime sponsors of the award. "The Farmer of the Year award is our chance to give back to those who give each of us so much to be thankful for," said Ash Alt, field marketing manager with AGCO. "We are pleased to provide one year's use of a Massey Ferguson tractor to Robert Mills, and we look forward to working with Robert and his family in selecting a model that is right for their needs."

Each state winner receives a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher International, a \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States cooperative, and a Columbia vest from Ivey's Outdoor and Farm Supply.

The other state winners this year include Chris Langley of Camp Hill, Ala., Mark Morgan of Clarksville, Ark., Mark Wilson of Homestead, Fla., Everett Williams of Madison, Ga., Mike Bach of Owingsville, Ky., Mike Sturdivant of Glendora, Miss., Van Hemric of Hamptonville, N.C., Kemp McLeod of McBee, S.C., and Mike Robinson of Belvidere, Tenn.

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