

# Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo

## Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release  
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For Immediate Release

### **CHRIS SWEAT NAMED 2022 ARKANSAS FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Chris Sweat is a fourth generation farmer who grew up on a full-time poultry and cow/calf operation. His great grandparents started a beef and dairy farm, and his dad later established his own chicken and cattle operation. As a youngster, Chris was active in 4-H and FFA. He recalled, "I wasn't the type of kid who wanted to play video games or even go to ball games. My fun was working with the calves, and I looked forward to the spring branding and going to sale barns with my dad and grandad who let me buy and sell cows as a youngster."

Chris went on to attend Southern Arkansas University where he received a BS degree in Agriculture Education in 1997 and a Master's degree in Agriculture in 2009. He met his wife, Denise, who also grew up on a farm, at a 4-H livestock event. She graduated from Southern Arkansas University as well with a BS in Agriculture Business in 2000. Knowing they wanted to raise their family on a farm, they started with 27 acres in Montgomery County.

Chris recalled, "Denise works for Farm Credit as a regional vice president, having worked her way up the corporate ladder. In the early days of our marriage we moved a couple of times with the company but always wanted to return to McCaskill." In 2003, they bought their first 80 acres in Hempstead County and harvested some timber to start working on the foundation piece to their farm where their home, built in 2007, is now located. They continued to increase their acreage over time, and Chris taught agriculture classes at several schools and very recently retired from teaching.

He said, "We had a goal of adding enough land so that in the future, when our girls want to come back and start a family, there would be enough land to sustain them. We've purchased land that's been in our family for generations and have been fortunate to farm alongside my parents and grandparents. It's a lifestyle we hope and expect to pass on to our children."

In his first year of farming Chris Sweat owned 27 acres. He and his family have built that up to a total of 1110 acres currently operated, with 780 acres rented and 330

acres owned. He also has 35 acres of natural mixed timber and grows mixed grass hay yielding 1200 rolls/yr. On the livestock side, he owns 120 head of commercial cows/calves; 60 head of registered seed stock (Simmental/Simbrah); 20 to 30 head of recipient cows for embryo transfer; and runs 50 to 100 head of hair sheep seasonally.

Rolling Hills Farm is a family-run operation that hires a few seasonal workers for job-specific tasks. Registered seedstock are marketed through private treaty sale and promoted at livestock shows. The majority of registered cattle are sold as show projects to Texas 4-H and FFA members.

Chris added, "In 2015 we started breeding our registered Simmental cows with registered Simbrah bulls to produce Simbrah cattle. The Simbrah cattle have slightly more "ear," and are more tolerable in the heat and are extremely marketable in the Texas show cattle market. Our commercial cattle are backgrounded and then sold at the local sale barn or by private treaty off the farm. Some cattle are marketed as replacement heifers and others as commercial heifer show projects. We also contract pregnant recipient cows to seedstock producers."

Chris is a co-owner and founder of the Sheep and Goat Buying Station in Hope, Arkansas. The buying station was established in 2009 with a close family friend, Jesse Duckett. He said, "In the beginning it ran for six months out of the year at Mr. Duckett's farm as a buying station for local sheep and goat producers to market their animals at an established price. Over the years we've helped grow the sheep and goat industry in southwest Arkansas, marketing approximately 5000 sheep and goats yearly. I owe a lot to Jesse; from the time I was a teenager, he has been a wonderful mentor."

Chris elaborated, "In 2019, our partnership expanded and the Goat and Sheep Buying Station moved to the Hope Livestock Auction, now operating ten months out of the year as a live auction. We continue to set record numbers and expect to see the sale continue to grow. Income from this enterprise is made on commissions and is a supplement our ranch income. It also allows us to diversify into lamb and goat production periodically."

Chris also serves as a beef semen salesman for Genex, selling approximately 50-70 units of semen monthly, a service that allows him to meet area cattlemen while generating supplemental income and securing contacts for future seedstock sales. He also consults and networks with numerous seedstock sales across the country, keeping him current on the genetics and market trends in the industry.

Daughters Sara, 19, and Anna, 16, began exhibiting livestock at a very young age and both have been active in 4-H and FFA as well as in their church's youth group. Sara is now a sophomore at Southern Arkansas University where she's studying animal genetics. Anna will be a tenth grader in the fall and is active in FCCLA, honor society, 4-H, and FFA.

Their proud dad commented, "Both girls can run tractors, cut and bale hay, and do everything from running a skid steer to loading the grinders with feed. Whatever needs doing, they turn their hands to. And my wife Denise is great at keeping our farm's books and budget and makes sure all the bills are paid on time. She can even run a tractor and check on the cows when needed."

On the county level, Sweat has been a Hempstead County 4-H volunteer in the past as well as an Agri teacher at local schools. He is currently a member of the Hempstead County Cattlemen's Association, a Nevada County 4-H volunteer, and a Sunday school teacher at Avery's Chapel Methodist Church. On the state level, he is a member of the Arkansas Cattlemen's Association, the Arkansas Simmental Association, and co-founder of the Southwest Arkansas Livestock Event. On the national level, he is a member of the American Simmental Association and is the Sales Talk Judge at American Junior Simmental Association at Junior Nationals. Denise Sweat is a lifetime member of the Nashville junior Auxiliary and has been involved in Buckles & Banners 4-H Leadership, Howard County and Hempstead County Cattlemen's Association. She is currently on the board of directors of the Arkansas Development Finance Authority and holds memberships in Arkansas Women in Ag, Inc., Arkansas Cattlemen's Association, and Arkansas Simmental Association as well as the American Simmental Association on the national level.

The biggest problems Chris Sweat has encountered are the capital debt farmers are saddled with, especially in the beginning of their careers, and finding land to rent or purchase. "Then," he said, "there are the price fluctuations in our livestock produced, finding reliable labor, the rising costs of inputs that can exceed the market price of livestock, weather uncertainties, of course, and the unpredictable factors of wars and various political policies that affect farmers."

At Rolling Hills Farm Chris has crossed fenced pastures to allow rotational grazing, run more cattle, and better maintain the pastures. He noted, "We run sheep seasonally to help with weed control without the use of pesticides. We've provided cover crops and mulch to help prevent erosion along the creek banks and have worked with the county agent and neighbors to help control the problem of feral hogs in our area." He also has his private pesticide applicator's license and works closely with the county agent to properly spray chemicals and conduct soil tests to fertilize to expert standards.

Chris's operation has always used artificial insemination and embryo transfer in his herd. He has plans within the next three years to genomic test all of the purebred cattle to more accurately determine which animals produce offspring that will be beneficial to his customers. In order to lower the cost of feed sources Chris built a commodity barn in 2020. He said, "We also plan to expand our bulk feed storage to buy more feeds when prices are low and use them when prices and demand go up in the winter months."

Chris Sweat summed up his attitude about the direction his life has taken: "My family and I are extremely grateful to be in the agriculture industry. I've never focused primarily on making money as a farmer, but chose to invest in my family and farm community. I know that if any piece of my equipment broke down, my neighbors would be there to help, as I would be there for them. If I'm allowed to express a little pride, it's in the fact that I've been able to build on the legacy of my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father in terms of expanding acreage and diversifying our farm."

Stacey R. Stone, University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Research & Extension Agent and CEA Staff Chair, nominated Chris Sweat as Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo State Farmer of the Year. He said, "Chris has always been an innovator, especially with his work on the Sheep and Goat Station. He also started a new pen sale show at the state fair where he's volunteered many hours and served as the beef superintendent over the years."

Stone added, "Chris is a really sharp guy who has the gift of figuring out ways to do things with minimal effort that result in maximum results. We've done different projects together, including trapping feral hogs on his farm and soil testing that improved his fertilizing techniques. Chris's wife Denise has also been of immense help in all their agricultural undertakings."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Chris Sweat, along with the other nine state winners via zoom at a later date this summer. The judges include John McKissick, long-time University of Georgia agricultural economist at Athens, Georgia; David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; and Joe West, Tifton, Georgia, retired dairy scientist and assistant Dean of the University of Georgia Tifton Campus.