

Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

MARK BYRD NAMED 2022 ALABAMA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Mark Byrd of Byrd Farms in Danville, Alabama, bought a used tractor and hay baler when he was only fourteen years old. Inspired by a FFA vocational ag class in high school, after graduation he planted 15 acres of rented land with soybeans while working a full-time job.

Byrd recalled, "That first experience with farming was done with old, unreliable equipment and very little knowledge of row cropping. But I've always been the kind of person who hears 'no' and answers 'yes' when I want to achieve something. Success hasn't come automatically, and life's been a struggle at times, but that's not failure. Giving all you've got is the measure of success. And it's only possible through hard work, focus, and trust in the Lord to see you through challenges."

Byrd was raised on a small cattle farm in Falkville, Alabama, and met his wife, Sandy, at church in 1984. She grew up on a nearby poultry farm, and they were married just ten months later in 1985. Byrd was driving a truck for Walmart in 1993 when he and Sandy made the decision to sell everything they owned except for a new John Deere 2355 tractor. They borrowed money to purchase a four-house poultry farm with 100 acres that included a modest old residence.

Byrd remembered, "We were told by many people we were out of our minds, but we were confident it was the right decision for ourselves and our two sons, Perry and Rodney. We were blessed to have wonderfully helpful neighbors and friends around us who shared their farming knowledge and helped us in so many ways."

Byrd gives full credit when it comes to his wife: "Sandy is involved in every aspect of our farm and manages the poultry operation as well as operating all equipment as needed, including windrowing litter and repair work. She bales most of the harvested hay and keeps the farmstead landscape manicured. She also performs the duties of Farm Uber, parts runner, cook, equipment cleaner, and much more."

Mark and Sandy Byrd farm alongside their two sons, Perry, age 34 and Rodney, age 29. Perry has added to his skill set with degrees in Diesel Mechanics and HVAC. Rodney has honed his agricultural knowledge through a welding degree and is on top of anything that needs to be fabricated to make the farm work better.

Today Byrd Farms operates 1347 rented acres and 165 owned acres. Crop yields are as follows: 341 acres of winter wheat yielding 82 bushels/acre; 377 acres of corn yielding 175 bushels/acre; 790 acres of soybeans yielding 70 bushels/acre; 80 acres of hay yielding 8 tons/acre. The farm also owns 7 poultry houses yielding 1,225,000 birds per year and 22 brood cows and 1 Red Angus bull.

Byrd contracts approximately 15–20 percent of his corn, soybeans, and wheat before planting. He then contracts another 35–45 percent of grains in small increments as the growing crops progress and risks decrease. Corn is marketed to local end users. The stored corn is sold several months after harvest as markets rally. The remaining bushels of soybeans and wheat are sold at market price after contracts are filled.

Byrd Farms' poultry is grown through an integrator, Mar-Jac Poultry Company. Byrd receives annual seven flocks of one-day-old birds and keeps them 35 days until they are about 4.5 pounds each. He noted, "We consistently achieve one of the lowest costs of production among other farms in the complex, ranking in the top 10 percent of producers. Calves that aren't used for herd growth or replacement are grouped and sold throughout one of the local sale barns." Byrd chooses replacement heifers with a muscular body mass and structure. He also sells around 400 tons of hay per year to loyal customers and through social media efforts.

In 2014, Byrd built a grain storage facility on the farm and increased storage capacity in 2015 and in 2021. He said, "We are currently in the process of adding a \$250,000 storage expansion to enlarge our capacity by another 75 percent and add a grain drying system. It will give us the ability to harvest earlier and improve the quality of harvest crops as well as broaden our marketing opportunities with 106,000 bushel total capacity."

Poultry litter is sold to and used as fertilizer by their grain operation, Valley Boys, Inc., saving about \$35,000 a year in fertilizer costs. Byrd Farms also hauls around 250 loads of their own grain a year, resulting in a savings of nearly \$50,000 in transportation costs.

Byrd and his mechanically astute, equipment-handy sons have updated all of their poultry houses over the years to be as energy efficient as new builds. He explained, "We've swapped to natural gas, replaced the heaters for more efficient radiant brooders, added spray foam insulation and re-insulated the ceilings, and added stir fans, recirculating cool cells, and LED lighting throughout. In 1996, we used EQIP (Environmental Quality incentive Program) to build a litter storage and compost facility,

thereby eliminating an incinerator and the gas usage for disposing mortalities for the poultry houses. In 2010, we expanded the litter storage and composting facilities.”

Byrd uses cover crops and no-till and minimum-till conservation practices to maximize soil preservation and maintain clean water in the streams and ponds. GPS technology is applied to fertilizing, planting, spraying, and harvesting. Annual soil testing is also conducted for optimal soil health.

The family’s five-year plan includes building a store along Alabama highway 157 so they can sell farm products and home-grown goods that include market grain-fed beef raised on the farm as a part of Sweet Grown Alabama. Byrd also has in mind to add a grain bagging facility to sell grains directly to end users and to invest in corn vending machines where customers can purchase bulk corn.

As to overcoming the inevitable challenges inherent in farming, Byrd said, “As first-generation farmers, our biggest obstacle to overcome was generating enough capital to purchase equipment and to find quality farm land. In 1996, we sold the timber off the farm to build our brick home on a small budget, doing most of the work ourselves.”

Then a three-year drought between 1998 and 2000 hit the Byrd’s row-crop operation hard. Byrd recalled, “We owed a lot of money but we had a semi-truck, so I leased it to a local trucking company and personally hauled freight three days a week. When planting season came, we hired a driver to keep the truck rolling. Thereafter we added three more trucks and drivers, managing the trucking company to pay off the money we owed.”

Byrd added, “In 2008, the gas company was changing out a defective propane tank and dropped a thousand-gallon tank that was half-full of propane, causing a huge explosion. Three of their employees were severely burned and one of them died. We lost one of our newly constructed poultry houses in the fire. Despite cutbacks and holds on new construction, we were allowed to replace the house because of our performance history. Through this tragedy, God showed us that life can be unpredictable, and we must put our full trust in Him in every circumstance. And that our primary mission here is to take care of each other.”

He added, “The other lesson we’ve learned through farming is to be flexible about which direction to take when events and challenges come along that rock your world up and down and side to side. Over the years, being able to diversify under difficult circumstances has proved invaluable.”

At the county level, Byrd is currently a board member and president of the Morgan County Farmers Federation; past member and chairman of the Morgan County FSA Board of directors, past member of the Morgan County State Products Mart Authority and a member of Temple Baptist Church. On the state level, he is serving on the state

board of directors of the Alabama Farmers Federation, has held posts with their poultry committee, and has been an advisory trustee of Alabama Farmers FarmPAC. Byrd also hosted the Auburn College of Ag Spring tour in 2018 and has been the organizer and host of the North Alabama Gospel Fest. On the national level, he has served as a member of the Southern State National Young Farmers Board and a voting delegate to the AFBF Annual Convention.

When the Byrds take a little free time, they enjoy short trips to the beach at Gulf Shores or Panama City. But the number one weekend activity at the Byrd household is Mark's ministry through song. For 28 years he has been the bass singer for a gospel group called Living Faith Quartet. He said, "We travel all over the Southeast to sing for audiences and conduct worship services at churches and other venues in about twelve states a year, including the Farm Bureau annual meeting."

Byrd was nominated for Alabama Farmer of the Year by Barrett Gilbert, Area Director for Alabama Farmers Federation. He said, "Mark Byrd is the perfect example of how hard work and dedication can achieve the American agricultural dream. Along with his wife, Sandy, Mark has built a farm legacy that few first-generation farmers ever achieve. More importantly, Mark has self-made his operation while keeping impeccable character as evidenced in his close, mutual assistance relationships with his many neighbors."

Gilbert added, "Mark and Sandy are efficient in their work methods, diversified in their operation, and through their work ethic and strong beliefs, they are an inspiration and blessing to others. Mark is also a talented singer whose testimony can be heard in song on local Christian and bluegrass radio stations."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Mark Byrd, 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.