

Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

KEITH ALLEN NAMED 2022 SOUTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Betty Allen Farms in Latta, South Carolina, has been in Keith Allen's family for nearly 200 proverbial lean and fat years. Growing from a modest holding in 1837 to 3800 acres today, the farm has experienced everything from near loss at auction in 1917 to two recent 1000-year floods and drought. After Keith's father graduated from Clemson University in 1950, he served his country in Korea only to return home to the driest year on record, with no rainfall until Hurricane Hazel hit in September of 1954. The resulting crippling debt forced him to seek other work as a teacher and then as a full-time Farm Bureau insurance agent just to keep crops in the ground.

From his childhood Keith recalled, "I don't remember not working on the farm in the summer. I started picking up tobacco leaves at the barn, driving mules, pulling drags, and then plowing with a Super A, then a D-17. When we got a 4230 John Deere, that was something else. There were no cabs in those days, but it was a great way of life, and I was grateful to have those opportunities."

Keith also went to Clemson University, earning a BS degree in 1978 in Agricultural Mechanization and Business. It was a momentous year in which he married his wife Libby and built a home with timber from the family property. The two had met as teenagers at a horse show in North Carolina near Libby's home town of Rowland. She came from a farming family as well and graduated from North Carolina State University with a degree in Speech Communications and Education.

Keith said, "Over the years we've worked hard to add quality farm acreage. I started a farrow to finish hog operation for more income that lasted 15 years until the row crop part became sufficiently profitable."

Today Betty Allen Farms consists of 3800 acres currently operated, with 2980 rented and 820 owned. The cotton crop of 950 acres yielding 1200lbs/acre; 1900 acres of soybeans yielding 48 bushels/acre; 600 acres of corn yielding 148 bushels/acre; 250 acres of peanuts yielding 4000 lbs/acre; and 500 acres of winter wheat yielding 75 bushels/acre.

Keith is aided by his use of RTK (real time kinetic), satellite-based tractor technology to plant and dig. It provides the highest level of accuracy, minimizes overlap and skips, and makes it possible to cover more acres with fewer hours of operation. Keith has updated equipment whenever possible over the years and uses strip till for conservation on most crops and no till on soybeans and corn. He added, "Clemson Extension and Farm Bureau have also been great resources on current agricultural issues and marketing information."

Most of his corn is sold to a feed mill because the basis is better. He prices some of the cotton himself and puts the rest in the pool with Staplcotn, the oldest and one of the largest cotton marketing cooperatives in the US. This company specializes in domestic and export marketing, ag financing, and cotton warehousing.

Keith says, "I try to figure my cost of production, and when the price is right, I try to forward contract or sell commodities in storage and crops I will produce. Sometimes I use basis contracts when I think the price is rising. I also use the DTN Ag Marketplace app for information and as a trading tool. Purchasing puts and calls on key commodities acts as a hedge to protect the downside of the market and offers potential profit on upswings. Sometimes you get it right, and sometimes you get it wrong; it's all part of the privilege to make independent decisions about family farming."

Working with Keith are two full-time employees as well as his nephew, Blake Allen, and his son-in-law, Caleb Miller, who is married to the Keith's older daughter, Katherine ("Kate"), 31. She earned a Doctorate in pharmacy and works at a hospital just over the state border in Lumberton, North Carolina. Last December they presented Keith and Libby with their first grandchild, Allen William Miller. The young family lives just across the road, so the grandparent-spoiling opportunities are close at hand. The Allens also have a younger daughter, Karen, 29 who is autistic but high functioning. She's a talented artist who works as an art teacher's aide at the local elementary school.

About his son-in-law, Keith said appreciatively, "He's taken a leadership role here on the farm and has great technology skills. So we plan to do more yield mapping and incorporate that with variable rate fertilizer applications. Precision agriculture is the future of making inputs more efficient. We're using grid soil sampling now, but we need to improve on the way we use the data. Technology-dealing sensors that detect plant health will help us more efficiently manage input costs in the future."

As to overcoming challenges, Keith observed, "Through the years I've analyzed productivity and problems with some of the rented land and had to let some go because of wet fields and problems with wild hogs and deer." Then, between 2015 and 2018, South Carolina had some of the worst flooding in the state's history. "Hurricane Joaquin in 2015, Hurricane Matthew in 2016, and Hurricane Florence in

2018 were the worst," he recalled. "Recovering from them was difficult because we had large losses on cotton and peanuts in 2016 and in 2018 and struggled to cut costs to stay in business."

When it comes to environmental issues and practices, Keith acts as chairman of his county conservation district and has been in the Conservation Stewardship Program for fifteen years. Along with using strip till and no till on his acreage, as well as a no till drill for more than thirty years, he has used CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) for quail habitat buffers to increase the quail population. He's planted tree borders to reduce runoff and erosion, adding, "I have beehives to help with pollination and use low drift nozzles when spraying to try to protect off-target weeds or insects. This year I'm also trying some cover crops."

As to professional organizations and county-level involvement, Keith currently serves as the president of the Dillon County Farm Bureau and is a member of the Dillon County Soil and Water Conservation District, the Dillon County Economic Development Board, and the Clemson County Agent Advisor Committee. On the state level he is vice president of the South Carolina Farm Bureau Federation, serves on the South Carolina Farm Bureau National Legislative Committee, the South Carolina Farm Bureau Foundation Scholarship Committee, and the South Carolina Farm Bureau Ag in the Classroom Committee. He is also on the South Carolina Cotton Board and is a member of the South Carolina Soybean Association. Nationally Keith is a member of the AFBF Policy Advisory Committee and has lobbied for twenty years in Washington, DC on behalf of various farm bills and on the tobacco buyout.

Libby worked for thirty years as a substitute mail carrier and has been active in special needs issues for children as well as local community fundraisers. She worked to get legislation passed to help with accommodations for special needs children in schools. She also sees to the very practical and helpful daily needs of errand running for equipment parts and delivering lunches for everyone during harvesting and planting. As Keith summarized, "She is the rock that keeps me going, and I would be lost without her."

Over the years Keith has enjoyed collecting old farm equipment including John Deere tractors. Locally the family supports the Miracle League of Florence County that produces sporting events for special needs children. The Allens also have a beach house in North Myrtle Beach that was built by Libby's family in 1958.

Keith recalled one memorable road trip eight years ago that included his wife, both daughters, and his son-in-law. "We drove to the John Deere Factory in Iowa together and visited the Louisville Slugger baseball bat plant and the American Pickers' facility on the Mississippi River. We even stopped to talk to the occasional farmer on the side of the road and visited the famous 'Field of Dreams' of the Kevin Costner movie fame.

That's because our daughter Karen is wild about baseball and consistently ropes her dad into cheering and supporting all the local teams."

Reflecting on a successful, 44-year farming career, Keith had this to say: "As a fifth-generation farmer on this land, I look forward to one day handing Betty Allen Farms over to the next generations. This includes my nephew Blake Allen and his son Palmer and my son-in-law, Caleb Miller, and his son Allen." He added, "But over and above all the operational demands of farming, the most important thing is paying attention to your family. I try not to say I'm too busy for them or their concerns. The farm chores will always be waiting and aren't nearly as important as some memory-making moments the whole family could experience and treasure."

Keith Allen was nominated as South Carolina Farmer of the Year by David Dewitt, Agriculture Agent at Clemson University. He commented, "I've participated with Keith Allen in various leadership groups and research projects over the years. He's an outstanding example of someone who's open to innovative ideas, practices, and technology, and making the difficult but necessary adjustments when major farming trends change." Dewitt added, "As a long-time legislative member of Farm Bureau, Keith's been an excellent advocate for South Carolina agriculture on the state and national levels. He also has the ability to achieve expansion and maintain quality yields through careful tillage and conservation practices. And, most impressively, with all his professional demands, he is committed to giving back to others in the farming community and prioritizing time with his family."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Keith Allen, 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.