

Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

JOHN HARRISON NAMED 2022 TENNESSEE FARMER OF THE YEAR

Philadelphia, Tennessee, the home of Sweetwater Valley Farm, was settled as part of a Revolutionary War land grant in the early 1800s. At the turn of the twentieth century, it became a dairy farm, with the original barn built in 1917. Seventy years later, John and Celia Harrison purchased interest in the farm and became the sole owners of Sweetwater Valley Farm in 1992. "It seemed like a natural fit," he said, "as my family's history in this valley goes back 200 years."

A native of nearby Loudon, Tennessee, Harrison grew up on a dairy farm and went on to graduate from the University of Tennessee in 1981 with a BS degree in Agriculture Economics and Business. He recalled, "I initially had the idea of studying medicine but came to the realization in my junior year that I was already well-placed to go into farming and, given my agricultural ancestry, already had a great opportunity to do so."

So in 1984, Harrison undertook his first dairy operation, renting a 350-acre farm with equipment and buying 80 cows. His father, Charles Harrison, gave him 25 heifers to help with the startup. It was the same year he met Celia, his future wife, on a blind date arranged by a mutual friend. She was a chemistry major from Auburn University and was attending the University of Alabama School of Medicine. They married in 1987. Currently Celia Harrison, M.D. is the Facility Medical Director at Sweetwater Hospital Association and serves on the board of directors of Our Place, an adult day center. The couple has five children: Mary Lyndal Harrison, 30; Sally Anna Harrison, 27; John William Harrison, 26; Charles Allen Harrison, 24; and Amy Elizabeth Harrison, 21.

In 1998, Harrison made the decision to produce cheese at the dairy by using milk from his cows, known as farmstead cheese. Throughout the early 2000s, both the herd of dairy cows and the cheese operation have expanded. In 2018, Sweetwater Valley Farm became Tennessee's first Lely LX Dairy Farm, milking 500 cows with robotic technology. It continues to be a diversified farming operation with both dairy and beef cows, as well as a source of crop production. There's a total of 4490 acres under operation, with 1200 rented and 3290 owned.

Sweetwater Valley Farm yields are as follows: 1200 acres of corn silage yielding 20 tons/acre; 600 double cropped acres of barley silage yielding 8 tons/acre; 200 acres of corn yielding 200 bushels/acre; 400 acres of soybeans yielding 55 bushels/acre; and 1600 acres of hay and pasture yielding 2.5 tons/acre for hay. It's also home to 2050 mature dairy cows; 1500 replacement heifers; 650 beef cows; and 450 beef calves.

Harrison's corn grain is used as dairy feed; any excess corn is stored on the farm and sold to local feed mills. The soybeans are roasted for feed at AgCentral Co-op. Currently Harrison is installing an on-farm roaster to reduce future feed costs. Beef calves are grouped and marketed at graded feeder calf sales. They use pasture acres not needed for the dairy operation and provide a use for refusal dairy feeds and lower quality forages. Culled dairy cows are marketed in Sweetwater and Athens.

In 2021, over 44 million pounds of milk was marketed through Dairy Farmers of America and transported to Mayfield Dairy Farm's plant in Athens, Tennessee. Sweetwater Valley Farm annually purchases back 10 percent of the raw milk (approximately 4 million pounds of milk) for cheese production.

That same year the farm produced 450,000 pounds of cheddar cheese. Displayed in mouth-watering photographs on Sweetwater Valley Farm's website, their products run the gamut from regular yellow and white cheddars (mild, sharp, and extra sharp) to Gouda to more exotic cheddar varieties like Buttermilk Cheddar, Italian Pesto Cheddar, Pimento Cheddar, and Habanero Cheddar, among many others.

Besides online sales, retailers, and several distributors, there is an on-farm store and the Seed to Sandwich Café with a delectable, cheese-based menu and milkshakes for the public to enjoy. The store features a variety of locally produced salsa, sauces, honey, jams, and jellies as well as over 24 flavors of cheddar.

Today consumers can participate in a guided tour of Tennessee's first state-of-the-art Lely XL robotic facility and a large viewing area for the public to observe the cheese making process. Harrison's son Charles Allen said, "Since we are a farmstead cheese producer, it means we are controlling the entire process from cow to consumer, starting with what we grow at our farm to feed the cows and then later down the road using our milk to produce our cheeses."

Daughter Mary Lyndal is Sweetwater Valley's marketing director and café entrepreneur. Younger sister Amy also helps out part-time in various capacities, including running the farm office.

An annual event hosted by Sweetwater Valley Farm is 'Farm Day' when over 500 fourth graders in the county come to Sweetwater Valley Farm to learn, through over 20 stops, about the different aspects of agriculture. It's part of Harrison's passion for agricultural education and heightening community awareness about where their food comes from.

As to the innate difficulties of farming, Harrison commented, "If you can't turn problems into opportunities, then farming is probably not the best way to make a living." He added, "More than half the dairies in Tennessee have gone out of business in the last ten years. I've made it a practice to hire multiple former dairy producers as key, valued personnel. We also survived the bankruptcy of two major purchasers: PET Dairy in the early 90s and Dean Foods in 2019 (holding company for Mayfield Dairy Farm). Fortunately, we got our receivables in the latter case, so we were able to weather what might have been the perfect storm."

The COVID-19 pandemic also created a number of problems for the farm and Seed to Sandwich Café, which was forced to close for months, along with the farm tours. Labor and supply chain issues and volatile markets added to the challenges. Harrison and his team responded by engaging in digital marketing, virtual sales, virtual tours, and delivery and pickup options for store products so that revenue could continue to flow.

On a personal note, Harrison reflected, "Farming is such a life-consuming enterprise. When you have a large family, it can take a toll because it requires such a huge commitment. Since my wife Celia isn't from a farming family, it was a brave adjustment to this reality of never-ending time demands. Fortunately, she has amazing organizational skills. Also, when the children were young, as an emergency room physician, she could schedule her shifts in order to balance family and work duties."

As for Sweetwater Valley Farm's conservation and sustainability practices, they center on its agritourism operation, use of solar panels, upcycling dairy waste, recycling sand, and engaging in minimal tillage to minimize soil compaction, erosion, and cropping cost. Multiple solar arrays on the farm have reduced farm utility expenses by 50 percent.

Harrison has also tackled manure management by implementing a comprehensive nutrient conservation plan to properly spread manure on crop and pasture at a maintainable rate as well as to reduce the need for commercial fertilizer. The farm has participated in a number of National Resources Conservation Service projects, one of which is a sand separation system. Since sand bedding is the best for cow comfort, the farm uses it in the freestalls. It is, however, the most expensive type of bedding and is harsh on the waste water system. The sand separation system allows the farm to remove the sand from the waste water to recycle bedding.

Participating in and contributing to industry organizations is a consistent thread that runs through the fabric of John Harrison's personal ethics. On the county level, Harrison is involved with Loudon County 4-H and FFA, hosts County Farm Day, has served multiple terms on the Board of Directors of Ag Central Co-op, is a member of the Loudon County Cattlemen Association, the Loudon County Farm Bureau, the Loudon County Industrial Development Board, the Chamber of Commerce and is chair of the Sweetwater Creek Watershed. On the state level, Harrison is a member of the

Tennessee Dairy Products Association, the University of Tennessee Extension Advisory Council, the Tennessee Dairy Producers Association, the Tennessee Farm Bureau, the Tennessee Farmers' Cooperative, the Tennessee Cattlemen Association and the Farm Credit Mid-American Advisory Council. On the national level, Harrison is presently a member of the Dairy Farmers of America, the Southeastern Council of Dairy Farmers of America, the National Cattlemen Association, and is an alternate member of the Dairy Cooperative Marketing Association.

At the start of his days, Harrison rises early, tackles some chores, and then goes to his "breakfast group" of roughly twenty gentlemen in the community who catch up with each other's news over breakfast at various local restaurants. He said, "We tell stories, laugh together, and enjoy some fellowship."

The Harrison family is active in the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia and likes to go boating and water skiing on nearby Tellico Lake. Harrison said, "We've also taken annual snow skiing trips out West in the past. We were planning a trip to the James River in Virginia to explore some family history when Covid hit. It's still on the bucket list. Right now I'm trying to shift into a lower gear. We'll see how that goes," he added with a chuckle.

When asked about life lessons he's learned by farming, Harrison responded, "Patience comes to mind first, and staying calm in times of potential or real crisis. Also, you have to develop the skill of managing opportunities that present themselves and stay positive through everything. Life can be hard, so you need to savor the good moments, the ones that get tucked away in the treasure chest of your memory."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit John Harrison, 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.