



Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

KYLE OWEN NAMED 2023 TENNESSEE FARMER OF THE YEAR

Kyle Owen (born Jonathan Kyle Owen) realized his dream of farming full time in 2004 at the age of 21. His father was a local elementary school principal who had always grown a few acres of tobacco and had a small cow/calf operation. Early on, Kyle developed a deep love for the land and growing things. Working in construction after graduating high school, he made the decision three years later to forsake job security and go full-bore into agriculture.

Owen recalled, "I'd had experience growing tobacco but lacked land, equipment, curing barns, and capital. That left me with some knowledge and a whole lot of determination. After a few failed attempts, I eventually leased a 32-acre creek bottom piece of land on a livestock farm and, with the help of a few neighbors and rounding up enough equipment out of old barns and fence rows I was able to plant my first crop, which turned out to be profitable. By 2011, I bought my first farm with a full lineup of equipment and was growing nearly 300 acres of tobacco."

On October 11, 2012, Owen reached another landmark when he married Miranda Leigh. He recalled, "We'd known each other since childhood, and I'd have to say there was always a spark between the two of us." The couple has two girls who love to spend time helping out on the farm: Finleigh Mai, 6, and Nealee Rae, 2." In addition to her role as a mother, Miranda Owen works full time on the farm as the office manager. She does the accounting, bookkeeping, and payroll and handles the H2A and GAP compliance. Her husband said, "She's also a driving force behind our diversification into agritourism and helps operate and move equipment from farm to farm, filling in on other various duties as needed. We make all our important decisions together."

Realizing the need to diversify his operation and implement steady crop rotation, Owen leased an additional 350 acres, bought a combine and planter and began his phase of growing corn and soybeans. He said, "We've continued to grow and add new enterprises. And we've certainly been blessed with excellent landlords, crops, and employees. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my fellow farmers and to UT (University of Tennessee) Extension."

Kyle Owen Farms has increased its acreage over the years to a total of 6,340 acres, with 5,490 rented and 850 owned. His 2022 crop yields are as follows: 600 acres of tobacco yielding 1,800 lbs/acre; 2,800 acres of corn yielding 180 bushels/acre; 2,300 acres of soybeans yielding



60 bushels/acre; 1,500 acres of wheat yielding 75 bushels/acre; and 100 acres of watermelons yielding 50,400 lbs/acre.

Owen forward contracts enough of his crop to cover input costs. Much of the contracted corn and all of the wheat are sold to area cooperatives and feed mills. The corn he doesn't initially sell is stored (200,000+ bushels) to take advantage of seasonal market price fluctuations before selling it to Tyson. Soybeans are sold to Bunge, a processor/crusher/refiner in Decatur, Alabama. Tobacco is sold to four different companies to spread and mitigate risk: Japan Tobacco International, Philip Morris International, Hall and Cotton Tobacco Company, and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. He uses a number of different basis contracts and futures contracts to market his corn and soybeans. He's also used accumulator contracts and advance premium options to manage price risk. Owen uses basis contracts to lock in a basis price when it's most advantageous.

He added, "Last year was our first one growing watermelons. We worked with another local farmer, who had an established relationship with Kroger, to market our crop to their stores throughout the southeastern US." He plans to double the watermelon crop this year to 100 acres and add 25 acres of pumpkins.

Owen has implemented precision agriculture technologies like installing automatic boom and row shutoffs to avoid over applying chemicals. He uses variable rate technology when fertilizing, thereby decreasing the amount of material input that could potentially have a negative environmental impact. He uses no-till on 100 percent of his corn and soybean crop and was one of the first in his area to use strip-tillage in Burley tobacco production.

He said, "We also run Final Tier 4 on all our equipment, reducing the amount of particulate matter and nitrogen oxides released into the atmosphere. And over the last four or five years we've steadily increased our use of cover crops to prevent erosion, improve our soil's quality, suppress weeds, and supply nutrients. We've fenced off waterways to prevent erosion from livestock and have put in several miles of cross-fencing, giving more vegetative cover and improving soil organic matter. Another thing we've done is install water and sediment control basins that trap sediment and water runoff." He added, "We've increased fuel holding capacity to 24,000 gallons of storage which saves time and allows us to receive bulk discounts. Employees are given leadership opportunities on the farm and are compensated for finding efficiencies in the operation."

And finally, Kyle Owen Farms has four Environmental Quality Incentive Program contracts through the USDA designed to address erosion and water quality concerns. They conduct trials each year to test various fungicides, herbicides, and fertilizer products to measure their effectiveness.

A related business enterprise is a small excavating company using equipment originally purchased for use on the farm. Starting off small, this operation has grown to have three full-time employees doing general excavation work for the public. They use their equipment to manage a water and sewer utility for a local township in an adjoining county. In addition, Kyle Owen Farms has invested in over two hundred storage units, bringing its total climate-controlled and non-climate-controlled units to over three hundred. Owen noted, "We estimate



a ten-year payout on this investment and plan to use the future income for our retirement years.”

As for day-to-day challenges, Owen said that the number one issue is a shortage of labor to work with the tobacco and watermelons, as well as truck drivers and heavy equipment operators. In 2022, he employed 32 H2A workers and will increase that number this year to 45. “To accommodate them,” he said, “we completed a 5,200 square foot housing structure on the farm and have used larger equipment to try to compensate for the lack of operators. We are fortunate, however, to have a number of long-term, consistent employees with substantial responsibilities on the farm.”

Another major bump in the road came when Owen, trusting in his extensive research, the merits of diversification, and his contacts in the tobacco industry, made a sizeable investment in planting fiber hemp and CBD hemp. The 2018 fiber hemp crop was planted on 250 acres and the second crop of CBD hemp was planted in 2019 on 22 acres. Both harvests should have delivered a total of \$1,100,000—significant profits. But, as Owen recalled, “Our contracts weren’t honored, so we have yet to receive payment for either one and will probably never recover a dime. Despite these setbacks, we remain optimistic about the future because we’ve maintained a strong balance sheet and have opportunities for expansion in other areas.”

The goal of Kyle Owen Farms is to increase corn and soybean acres to 7,500 by 2025. They’re also working on a million-dollar grain storage expansion that includes two new elevator legs, a new energy-efficient mixed-flow vacuum dryer, new overhead load out bin, and truck scales. Along with plans to build a new 20,000 square foot shop and office facility, they are exploring the addition of an agritourism component to the farm involving pumpkins, straw bales, and dried corn bundles as fall decorations. “U-picks, farm-to-table dinner, and photographs are all options we plan to offer on the farm in the next couple of years,” Owen said.

On the county level, Owen is on the board of directors of Smith Farmers Co-Op, Smith County Soil Conservation District Board, and Smith County Farm Bureau; he is a member of Smith County Extension Row Crop Advisory Council. He participates in Farm Bureau Ag in the Classroom and hosts UT Extension Haylage & Cover Crop Field Days as well as being an Altria Summer Internship Host Farm. He is also the Smith Utility District Commissioner. On the state level, Owen has in past years served on the TN Farm Bureau Tobacco Council, the TN Farm Credit Advisory Board, and has participated in several studies sponsored by the UT Extension Crop Fertility program. He is also a member of the Tennessee Corn Growers Association. On the national level, Owen is a member of the Farm Credit Mid-America Advisory Council, the National Corn Growers Association, and the National Federation of Independent Business.

On the county level, Miranda Leigh Owen has participated in the Smith County Leadership Ag Day program as well as Smith County Ag in the Classroom. On the state level, she and her husband were members of TN farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers.

The Owen family attends Gordonsville United Methodist Church. In their leisure hours they enjoy their swimming pool at home and take occasional Sunday afternoon trips to nearby Center Hill Lake. Once a year they rent a condo or a beach house in different parts of Florida where they simply kick back and relax on the beach.



Farming, for Owen, is truly a calling. He enjoys the fact that, on any given day, he could be doing something different: mechanical work, like welding or fabricating, driving a tractor, moving equipment, hauling seed, or performing office chores. What it's taught him is that hard work and dedication are the two most important prerequisites for a prosperous enterprise. He said, "Since I basically started from scratch, sometimes I wonder how we've been able to grow our business to this extent in twenty years."

He added, "Another thing that's helped me is having been on both ends of the spectrum in terms of employer versus employee. Those first few years of doing construction work taught me a lot about dealing with others. Hopefully that experience helped make me a better employer. Treating people fairly—with trust, respect, and understanding—is vital to any success in agriculture."

Kyle Owen was nominated to be the 2023 Tennessee Farmer of the Year by Katie Martin, County Director of UT Extension for Smith County. She said, "I'm proud to be able to nominate Kyle for this honor. He is a willing risk-taker, makes smart and timely business decisions, and maintains a constant focus on efficiency. He is also committed to sustainability and is an excellent steward of the land."

She added, "Very few people can build what Kyle has built as a first-generation farmer. The way he has diversified and grown his farm inspires all those young people who dream of a career in production agriculture. Having faced many challenges, he has overcome each one with grace, grit, and innovative thinking."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Kyle Owen, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, the week of August 14–18. The judges include David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; Joe West, retired Assistant Dean UGA Tifton Campus; and Darren Parker, Vice President, Massey Ferguson North America.