



Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

HEATH CUTRELL NAMED 2023 VIRGINIA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Heath Cutrell of Chesapeake, Virginia, is a fourth generation farmer who grew up working alongside his father on his uncle's farm. Just after high school he showed early entrepreneurial skills by starting a small, successful hauling business. In 2006, he secured a rental agreement on 120 acres, got a loan for equipment, and started farming part-time. By 2010, he was fulfilling his dream of farming full time on 1,000 acres. In the ensuing seventeen years, his operation has grown to tending 4,985 acres with 4,980 acres rented and five acres owned.

Cutrell said, "My participation with the local Chesapeake 4-H programs as a youth gave me the tools needed to keep good records, understand profit and loss, set goals, and develop a strong work ethic. Today my dad still works with me part time. He's my closest neighbor, confidante, and behind-the-scenes advisor. I also have cousins and nephews who are involved in different aspects of my operation at different times of the year."

Cutrell grows soybeans, field corn, wheat, and sweet corn on acreage in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. Crop yields are as follows: 3,575 acres of soybeans yielding 68 bushels/acre; 1,400 acres of field corn yielding 256 bushels/acre; 530 acres of wheat yielding 88 bushels/acre; and 5 acres of sweet corn at 1000 dozen/acre.

He has farm storage on one farm with drying capabilities and storage for 90,000 bushels where he can dry 100 percent of his field corn to reduce potential dockage caused by moisture. He also stores his corn crop to provide flexibility in marketing and delivery scheduling outside of harvest season. Excess grain is stored by agreement with a local granary if necessary. "Every year is different, of course," he noted, "but I do forward price a portion of my corn, wheat, and soybean crop every year."

Cutrell uses grain trailers and dump trailers to custom haul for other farmers and suppliers, mostly grain and lime. It accounts for about 15 percent of his operation. He also makes himself available to other farmers on a custom hire basis for planting and harvesting. "This enterprise equates to roughly 20 percent of my total business and has become more and more routine as I'm able to update my equipment and technology to increase capability and capacity."

His passion for farming gained recognition in 2023 when he was pleased to become an ambassador and a cooperating affiliate with Extreme Ag. He noted, "This opportunity will allow



me a chance to try products as they become available as well as share my experiences—the ups and the downs—with my fellow farmers.” In 2022, he was featured on *Corn Warriors*, a television show that, as advertised, “gives an entertaining look inside an evolving industry as old as time.”

The achievement Cutrell may be the most proud of is his ability to maximize his dryland field corn yields, taking the following prizes: in 2015, 1st place in Virginia (269.7962 bu/ac); in 2016, 1st place in Virginia and Nation (347.2323 bu/ac); in 2017, 1st place in Virginia (333.4922 bu/ac); in 2018, 1st place in North Carolina and Nation (360.8030 bu/ac); in 2019, 1st place in Virginia and Nation (381.466 bu/ac); in 2021, 1st place in Virginia and Nation (391.3092 bu/ac); in 2022, 1st place in Virginia and Nation (394.0487 bu/ac). That figure represented the very highest yield in the United States. In 2021, he was awarded 1st place in Virginia for dryland wheat (111.6318 bu/ac). He was also awarded the 2015 Clean Water Farm Award.

On the county level, Cutrell is a Chesapeake 4-H Livestock Club Show and Sale Supporter; a Virginia Beach 4-H Livestock Club Show and Sale Supporter; a member of the Virginia Cooperative Extension-Chesapeake ANR Advisory Group; a member of the Green Level Hunt Club in Wakefield, Virginia; a member of the Chesapeake Farm Service Agency County Committee; a past chair of the Chesapeake Farm Service Agency County Committee, a past member of the Chesapeake City Farm Bureau Board of Directors; and a past member of Southern States Chesapeake Association Board of Directors. On the state level, he is a member of the Virginia Grain Association. On the national level, he is a member of the National Wheat Growers Foundation and a member of the National Corn Growers Association.

Cutrell has faced the same challenges most farmers encounter. He said, “My major issues are land, labor, and capital. When I started on my own in 2006, land was scarce and opportunities were few and far between. One landlord took a chance on me, and the rest is history.”

He prides himself on having clean, well-maintained equipment and strong relationships with his landowners. Word-of-mouth keeps his operation in a steady upward direction as far as land goes. He added, “Drainage, fertility, and soil quality are always important in my area. Drainage has taken time to address, but with a well-developed and implemented plan, we have improved all of the farms as of last year.” He’s also fortunate to have three full time and two seasonal employees and feels that having top-notch equipment helps to maintain the necessary labor supply he needs.

With regard to capital, Cutrell said, “I saved profits from my hauling business over the years to get started, and even then 100 percent of my inputs and equipment were financed. I’m gradually becoming less dependent on financial institutions and currently have my indebtedness at less than 7 percent. As I begin to purchase land myself, my goal will be to stay debt free as much as possible.

On the subject of environmental awareness, Cutrell said, “I no-till 100 percent of my double crop soybean and, depending on the year, some full crop soybeans as well. Fertilizer placement is the widest practice I’ve adopted on all my crops and all my acreage. For my wheat acres, I break up my over-the-top nitrogen application, commonly called split application of nitrogen.”



He added, "With my corn crop, I use starter 2x2x2 and do in furrow pop up to reduce volatility and potential for any nutrient loss. I side dress my corn with Y drops on a high boy sprayer and apply fertilizer via airplane." Fungicide and insecticide are applied (if needed) on his soybeans by plane as well. He has used poultry litter as a nutrient source and to assist with Chesapeake Bay water quality improvement efforts.

Cutrell said, "I also value my relationship with Virginia Cooperative Extension and have worked with my local ANR agents to do on-farm research to address the importance of stand emergence on corn. My farms are always available to VCE, and they have used my crops for corn earworm surveying, corn earworm moth trapping to forecast the flight between corn and soybeans, as well as worked with the VCE grains' crop pathologist on frogeye leaf spot on soybeans."

In the future Cutrell plans to expand his land acquisition with the goal of having at least 20 percent owned within the next six to seven years. "I've been making verbal agreements over the years with landowners and with farmers approaching retirement age for first right of refusal on their farms. Since I was able to purchase my on-farm storage facility in 2022, expanding that to a minimum capability of storing 75 percent of my corn crop is what I plan to do within five years. I'm also starting construction on another building to house my expanding fleet of equipment. The goal is to get 100 percent of my machines under cover."

He added, "I'm just so grateful to have been able to work in partnership with great landowners. Without their generosity, cooperation, and trust, none of these accomplishments would've been possible."

Since Cutrell lives only about fifty miles from the Virginia coast, he takes a week or two each summer to enjoy the refreshing atmosphere of the Outer Banks. He said, "I stay in a little beach cottage in Kitty Hawk and just let the ocean waves do their magic. It's important to get farming out of my sight and let my body, mind, and soul do some relaxing." With friends he likes to hunt bear and deer in season and annually attends big farm shows in Louisville, Kentucky and Raleigh, North Carolina. "Last year in August," he said, "I traveled to South Dakota to be on an Ag PhD (agriculture information) radio program and will be doing that again this year. The country out there is really beautiful with all those rolling hills of soybeans and corn."

On that fact that he's farmed his entire life, Heath Cutrell reflected, "Working on the land has taught me this: there's always something beyond my control. If it's not the weather, it's labor challenges or financial risks. So I've had to learn humility and acceptance. Even with what my valuable employees and I have been able to achieve through decades of hard work, I try to walk a little softer around people and act in ways that keep my conscience clear." He added, "I'm also grateful to have learned so much from my fellow farmers. We trade off ideas with one another and share productive, innovative practices. Those relationships are built on mutual respect and trust earned over time—things you can't put a price on."

Heath Cutrell was nominated Virginia Farmer of the Year by Virginia Tech Extension agents Roy Flanagan and Nathan Sedghi who wrote, "Heath Cutrell is the complete package as a farmer and role model. His story shows that even kids who did not inherit a farm can grow up to create a successful farming operation and make it an attractive career option."



They added, "Heath is constantly innovating and achieving extraordinary yields to grow as much food as possible on limited land. His drive to bush the boundaries on his yields, his business acumen, his service to the farming community, and his willingness to serve as a positive role model are all reasons he is a phenomenal candidate for this honor."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Heath Cutrell, 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.