

South Georgia

Ag Scene

September 2021

Sunbelt Expo returns

- 10 growers vie for Southeastern Farmer of the Year
- UGA researchers confront cotton virus
- Cairo woman joins national ag education team

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Sunbelt Expo bounces back

By Jack R. Jordan

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MOULTRIE, Ga. — The Sunbelt Ag Expo will celebrate its 43rd Anniversary show October 19-21.

After canceling last year for the first time in the Expo's history, North America's Premier Farm Show will return this year for its 43rd rendition.

"We are excited to be busy again and getting ready to host an in-person show. We hope everyone enjoys their visit to the show and will take time to fully experience all that the Expo has to offer," said Chip Blalock, executive director of the Sunbelt Ag Expo.

In years past, thousands of exhibitors, vendors and guests come to experience everything the Expo has to offer. This year will be no different, according to Marketing Director Becca Turner.

"Over 1,200 exhibitors will display and demonstrate products and welcome thousands of visitors to the 100-acre show site," said Turner.

This year will feature agricultural powerhouse John Deere's first public showing of their new CP770 cotton picker as part of the company's third generation round-bale cotton harvesters, according to Turner.

"We are honored to host the first public unveiling of the John Deere CP770 cotton picker in the field demos," said Blalock in a Sunbelt Ag blog post. "We have always prided ourselves on showing the latest technology that the marketplace has to offer to enhance our farmers' economic and environmental sustainability."

According to a press release by John Deere's



Sunbelt Ag Expo photo

The Sunbelt Ag Expo is known for its field demonstrations, showing off the latest farm equipment. The pictured John Deere cotton baler was front-line equipment when this photo was taken in 2017. This year's Expo will unveil the next generation of balers, John Deere's new CP770.

product marketing manager, Christopher Murray, the project began four years ago and included direct input from growers across the U.S. cotton belt.

During the event, more than 300 other seminars and demonstrations will be available from experts in the fields of beef, dairy, poultry, forestry, pond

management, equine and cattle management as well as many others, according to Turner.

"Farmers and ranchers attending gain beneficial knowledge on the latest in cutting edge techniques from industry leaders and university specialists," Turner said in a Sunbelt Ag blog post.

Turner said that the concern for its visitors in the face of the coronavirus pandemic remains one of its highest priorities.

"Right now we are still working on the guidelines and some things we are going to have to decide closer to the Expo. Right now we are making hand washing and sanitizing

stations readily available," said Turner.

While the threat of COVID hasn't gone away, Sunbelt Ag representatives are excited to bring back some old favorites. This year will again feature the Antique Tractor Parade, the Youth Educational Opportunities and the naming of the

On the cover

The Sunbelt Ag Expo features seminars and short classes on a variety of topics of relevance to a farmer, rancher, gardener or housewife, including the Sheep and Goats Seminars held daily during the three-day show.

Swisher/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year.

This year, the Farmer of the Year award will pick up where last year dropped it off. The 10 state winners who were announced last year before the Expo's cancellation will compete for the title at this year's competition. State winners are:

- Thomas Ellis, Alabama.
- Jamie Anderson, Arkansas.
- Raymond R. "Rick" Roth Jr., Florida.
- Samuel L. Nunn, Georgia.
- Stephen J. Kelley, Kentucky.
- Joe Edmondson, Mississippi.
- James L. Lamb, North Carolina.
- Robert "Rob" Martin Hall, South Carolina.
- Jay Yeargin, Tennessee.
- Charles Edwin Isbell Jr., Virginia.

See profiles of these state winners elsewhere in this issue.

The Sunbelt Ag Expo is open Tuesday through Thursday, Oct. 19-21, from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Tuesday and Wednesday and open until 4 p.m. Thursday.

You can purchase advance tickets at www.sunbeltexpo.com.

SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Thomas Ellis

Alabama Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

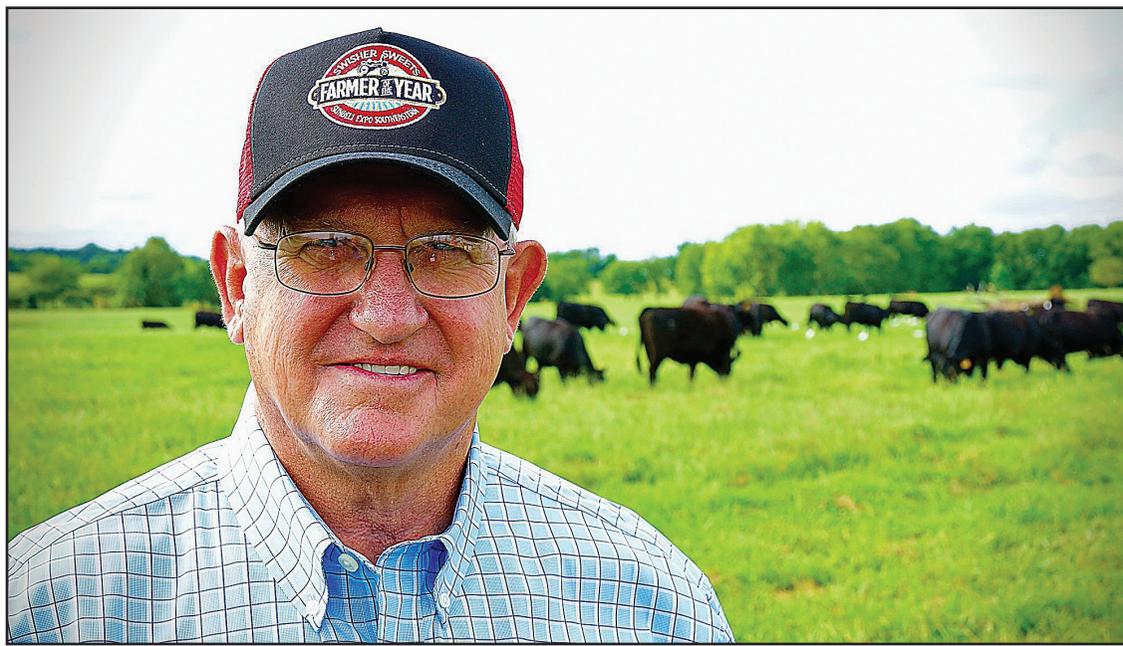
For 39 years Thomas Ellis has practiced agricultural diversification through his cattle, poultry, and pecan processing and manufacturing enterprises at Triple E. Farm and Priester's Pecans, Inc. A third-generation Lowndes County farmer, Ellis grew up on a dairy farm and studied marketing and agriculture at Auburn University. He purchased part of a commercial beef herd from the widow of a local cattleman in 1981 and began to rent pasture until he purchased his farmland in the fall of that year. Two years later, he and his wife, Melissa, built their first broiler houses.

Today their operation spans 1,000 acres of owned and rented land and includes annual production units of 45 cows and calves, six-to-twelve bulls, 1,000 head of stocker calves, and three poultry houses that produce approximately 400,000 chickens. Additional crops include 450 acres of grazing, 400 acres of mixed summer grasses, and 60 acres of rye grass and winter peas for baleage.

Back in the 1970s, Ellis's father was instrumental in developing a vibrant crossbreed of Italian Chianina and English Angus called Chiangus. He's also introduced a crossbreed of Indian Brahman and Angus cattle called Brangus and explained, "We're having good luck with their impressive growth potential, their ability to withstand heat, humidity, and cold, and their overall hybrid vigor."

Calves from cows are marketed through stockyard sales, board sales, or replacement heifer and bull sales. Bulls are sold primarily in conjunction with Meadow Creek Farm's annual "It's All Black and White Bull Sale" on the first Friday in December. Stocker calves are primarily contract-grazed for son Taber Ellis or sold through board sales if owned. The poultry are contract-grown with Koch Foods in Montgomery.

Thomas Ellis also owns



THOMAS ELLIS, ALABAMA FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

Priester's Pecans, Inc., a pecan processing and manufacturing business begun in 1935 by Thomas's grandfather, Hense Ellis, and L.C. Priester. The company cracks, shells, and processes more than 1.5 million pounds of improved gift-quality varieties of pecans per year. Samples of their products include gourmet candy, baked goods, and savory snacks, with such delicious specialty items as pralines, divinity, pecan pies, pecan cheese straws, blackberry pecan preserves, roasted pecan syrups, and honey-glazed and roasted pecans in small or bulk quantities.

Ellis recalled, "After my Grandfather Hense passed in 1965, my father, Ned Ellis, and his brother, John, shared 50 percent ownership in the company until 1978 when my father bought his brother's interest and became the sole owner. I began working with Priester's full-time in 1985 and served as vice president until 2002, when my sister and I purchased the business from our dad. On average, we have about 100 employees in our various operations."

He added, "In 2018, I became owner of the brand Priester's

Pecans as well as the pecan shelling and manufacturing business. We buy pecans directly from growers in Alabama, Georgia, and Texas. For 85 years, we've been able to provide a stable market for their commodity and therefore add value to their product through our processing and production capabilities."

Priester's sells its pecan products in a variety of ways: directly to consumers through catalog and website sales, through organized group fundraising programs, and through wholesale agreements to a broad range of companies that resell them. Thomas Ellis's sister and her family operate Priester's Retail, Inc. that manages a brick and mortar store as well. Annual sales for Priester's Pecans, Inc. currently top \$10 million.

Thomas Ellis's wife, Melissa, is the fulcrum of the agribusiness, the one who, as Thomas put it, "pulls us all together by taking care of our home and supporting all our efforts." She is from a cattle and forestry business family, and the two met in high school. They've been married since July 1979. She maintains the books and helps in

multiple other ways, including serving as Priester's corporate secretary/treasurer and supervising its product development and catalog design. Melissa has been an active member of the Lowndes County Cattlewomen's Association in the past, serving as president, vice president and secretary. She is also an active member of Hope Hull United Methodist Church where she is on the Board of Trustees.

Thomas Ellis is deeply involved in industry-related service organizations that include membership in the Lowndes County Economic Development Commission; Lowndes County Farmers Federation board member and current president; South Central Alabama United Appeal Fund chairman; Southeastern Livestock Exposition executive committee member; Alabama Cattleman's Association board member; Alabama Agricultural Development Authority member; Pintlala Water board member and Alabama Rural Water Association member; Economic Development Association of Alabama member; past board member of the National Pecan Sellers Association, and board

member of Dixie Electric Cooperative.

The Ellis's have three sons: Tyler, Stinson, and Taber. They, along with their wives, are all involved in the family farm.

Ellis believes strongly in the principle of land stewardship and said, "The proper use and maintenance of our natural resources is the key to the longevity of our operations and our economy."

Ellis and his sons have applied a number of conservation practices on Triple E. Farm and at Priester's Pecans, Inc. Broiler litter from the poultry operation is used to build the soil in the grass and grazing land for the cattle. LED lighting has been installed through the poultry operation and other farm buildings, and the poultry houses were updated to solid-side walls with tunnel ventilation to stay current with good practices and conserve energy.

The entire farm has been converted to natural gas, creating a large savings in utility costs. They've also worked with the Natural Resource Conservation Program and used the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) to install additional water troughs for cattle on the home property as well as a compost barn for mortality on the poultry farm. Additional trees—cypress, Shumard oak, poplar, Nuttall oak, and elm—are being planted each year to promote wildlife habitat, provide shade for cattle, and help prevent soil erosion in low areas.

Carrying this work over into Priester's Pecans, Inc., Ellis noted, "We've built a storage area for pecan shells on the property that keeps any residue from the shell run-off out of drainage and streams surrounding the pecan shelling facility. The pecan shell is sold as mulch for trees and shrubbery or to saw mills that are using it for alternative fuel for boilers in making paper."

In the future Ellis hopes to purchase more land to accommodate expansion goals for cattle production.

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SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Jamie Anderson

Arkansas Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

Located just west of Lonoke, Arkansas, I.F. Anderson Farms, Inc. is the largest baitfish hatchery in the world. This premier aquaculture enterprise was started in 1949 by the late I.F. Anderson and his father, the late W.L. Anderson. Now, the third and fourth generations are in charge, with James Neal Anderson as president/owner, and his son, Jamie Anderson, as vice-president/co-owner.

Jamie Anderson began working in the family business 32 years ago, when he was just 12. He recalled, "Working alongside and learning from my grandfather and father — my true mentors — meant being part of a family heritage that's always been a great source of pride. And, because we've been around for so long, we have a reputation, tradition, and values to uphold, which we take seriously."

Jamie earned a BA in agriculture business at the University of Arkansas Fayetteville in 1998, where he met his future wife, Elizabeth. Their family histories had intertwined for a number of decades in the areas of finance and politics.

Jamie's day-to-day operational responsibilities at I.F. Anderson Farms, Inc. include employee management, production management, shipping, fish health inspections, customer relations, permitting requirements, and depredation control. Jamie said, "Through a lot of hard work we've become the nation's leading producer of golden shiner minnows. The majority of baitfish purchased at bait shops across our country is raised right here in Lonoke. We employ 52 workers (including three part-time interns) and ship to an average of 41 states per year by truck and by air."

He added, "We're number one in the production of baitfish, but Lonoke County is number one in goldfish, hybrid-striped-bass fingerling, grass carp, and species of game fish. We've also patented



JAMIE ANDERSON, ARKANSAS FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

the creation of the black salty that's very hardy, saltwater-tolerant, and the ultimate live bait for both saltwater and freshwater fishing."

As to yields, the hatchery facility at Lonoke, Arkansas has grown from an initial 70 water acres to 3,334 water acres, with 350 lbs./acre production or over one million pounds per year. It's capable of producing over one billion fry per season.

Jamie commented, "One of the many problems we've had to overcome in the last 71 years is the way we market our product. In the early years it basically sold itself, but with added competition came new ways to set up distributorships. Today we can airfreight overnight directly to consumers' doorsteps. We also service the needs of zoos, aquariums, wildlife rehabilitation centers, and research facilities."

He added, "Going from transporting bait in galvanized milk canisters to designing and building our own fiberglass tanks with liquid oxygen systems — has been quite an undertaking."

I.F. Anderson Farms has had to develop and manufacture much of the supporting equip-

ment for use in the handling, hauling, and grading of bait fish over decades.

A growing demand for more fry meant more brood stock, more acreage, more ponds, more water, and more labor. This led to the creation of the hatchery system, which took the aquafarm's hatching season from 4-5 months to 3-5 weeks and a fry hatching survival rate that increased from 2 percent to 95 percent."

Jamie noted, "The majority of our products are sold through wholesale distributors, but roughly one-third is also sold through retailers and direct to end users. The bulk is transported in over the road trucks with customized hauling boxes with air systems that primarily consist of liquid oxygen. And approximately 28 percent of our sales are sold and marketed as overnight direct, focusing on internet sales. The fastest growing segment of our business is the airfreight direct delivery portion, which has grown by 50 percent for two years straight."

He added, "In the late '90s, we sold the fish feed and other industry supplies part of our

business, but things have now come full circle. This spring we opened a new retail supply business focused on the hard-to-find fish handling and holding supplies that our retail customers need. It's become a predominantly web-based segment of the farm's business."

On the always challenging topic of adequate, trained labor, Jamie said, "It's been an increasingly difficult problem in small rural delta towns like ours. My intelligent, resourceful wife of 12 years, Elizabeth, is not only a fantastic mother to our two sons, Slater, 11, and Warner, 9. She has worked diligently to make major strides in our local school system to help solve this problem. She chaired a successful millage campaign that will raise \$15 million for a business academy in our hometown to train high school students for careers in aquaculture, agriculture, nursing, diesel mechanics, and other fields."

Local partnerships with Baptist Health, Arkansas State University at Beebe, and Agri Equipment dealers will coordinate support services in the areas of health, teaching, and

tools for local students who do not have aspirations or the money for college to be able to graduate high school with a career path in motion.

Elizabeth Anderson is also president of the Lonoke Community Foundation, president of the Youth Home board of directors, and president of the Lonoke Century League. She is deeply involved with activities at First United Methodist Church in Lonoke.

Jamie's sister, Katie Siever, is an attorney who serves as a vice president of the family business as well as corporate legal counsel. She currently resides in Fayetteville with her two small children, ages 5 and 7.

Jamie's father, James Neal Anderson, works full time on the farm in partnership with his son. He has also served for decades as a commissioner on the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission and has been instrumental in securing significantly increased line item funding for the Conservation Districts program. Major legislative initiatives accomplished during his commissioner tenure include passage of the Groundwater Protection and Management Act and creation of a state income tax incentive program for water conservation and development.

With such a large and growing aquaculture business, I.F. Anderson Farms has adopted a set of Best Management Practices developed with the help of industry cohorts and the Arkansas State Plant Board and Arkansas Bait and Ornamental Fish Growers Association. The association has a certification program designed to provide high-quality, farm-raised bait and ornamental fish that are free of certain diseases, undesirable plants, and animals, and other contaminants considered harmful to fish or fisheries. In 2019, Jamie was the first recipient of the Mike Clark Aquaculture Farmer Leadership award from the National Aquaculture Association.

SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Raymond R. 'Rick' Roth Jr.

Florida Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

Raymond R. "Rick" Roth Jr. is the only son of a very successful second-generation Belle Glade farmer, the late Ray R. Roth. He has been farming in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) in Palm Beach County, Florida for 44 years. Rick holds a BS degree in Mathematics from Emory University, graduating in 1976. His love for agriculture became apparent when he returned home from college to work for a season.

Roth recalled, "My dad never pressured me to follow in his footsteps but gave me the freedom to make up my own mind, a choice I appreciate to this day. I gave my son, Ryan, the same freedom to choose." That college break clearly showed him how dynamic winter vegetable farming was.

Roth recalled, "One of the most important things I got from Dad and Junior — the first African-American farm manager in the EAA — was how to treat people respectfully and honestly, regardless of race, level of education, or background. Dad also listened to his employees and appreciated innovative ideas about improving crop yields in a safe, efficient manner. He put together a diversified farming operation that remains the foundation of what we're doing now. What he meant to me as a man and to the business is incalculable."

Today Roth Farms employs 25 full-time staff and approximately 150 seasonal workers, both local and H2A labor. It is one of the most diversified farming operations in the state with some of the best soil anywhere. Roth explained what makes it so special.

"Muck is a high-nitrogen soil that holds moisture extremely well. We raise water levels in canals to irrigate and use overhead irrigation only for planting. These muck soils are part of the original Everglades, staying flooded 300 days per year before the influx of people into south Florida required the taming of Lake Okeechobee. Sub-tropical



RAYMOND R. "RICK" ROTH JR., FLORIDA FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

weather, water supply, topography, and homogenous soil make this the best farmland in the world."

Currently Roth Farms has 3,996 acres under production with yields as follows: 2,194 acres of sugar cane yielding 55.3 gross tons/acre; 910 acres of radishes yielding 353 cartons/acre; 775 acres of rice yielding 45.6 cwt; 640 acres of lettuce and leafy vegetables yielding 850 cartons/acre; 197 acres of herbs and greens yielding 950 cartons/acre; 110 acres of sod yielding 28,700 sq. ft./acre; 73 acres of Asian vegetables yielding 950 cartons/acre; 69 acres of celery yielding 900 cartons/acre.

Roth Farms uses three sales agencies to market its crops: Gary Norman Produce, Wilkinson-Cooper, and Ray's Heritage. Its rice has been processed and marketed by Sem-Chi Rice, Inc. since 1983. Its sod is sold through another grower in Belle Glade.

Roth remembered, "As early as 1994, I realized I needed to be at least a part owner of a packing house facility. That was the beginning of Ray's Heritage, LLC, named in honor of my father."

This state-of-the-art 60,000 square foot insulated concrete tilt wall packing house opened in April 2007. Roth noted, "Our packing house is the key to sustainable vegetable production. It allows us to maintain the crop rotation of vegetables, sugar cane, and rice that my dad started in 1980. It is the secret to higher yields, fewer inputs, and soil conservation."

Located in the Belle Glade Industrial Park, Ray's Heritage leases space to Roth Farms to grade, process, cool (using ammonia refrigeration), and pack 700,000 – 12 to 14 lb. per carton radish packages for Roth Farms and Frontier Produce. The facility also operates a wholesale green bean pack line. Lettuce, leafy vegetables, and herbs from Roth Farms and other growers are vacuum-cooled by the pallet, with each pallet holding 35 boxes. Once cooled, the produce is placed in cold storage rooms at 35 degrees F. and then trucked to distribution centers of major retailers in the eastern and central United States and Canada.

In 2019, Roth Farms started a new joint venture, Southern Growers, LLC with Hilliard

Brothers, Inc. and began harvesting sweet corn in 2020. Roth noted, "Diversification and joint ventures have a proven history of increasing production and lowering risks in the EAA."

On the county level, Roth is a board member and former president of Western Palm Beach County Farm Bureau (WPBCFB), a board member of Sugarcane Growers Cooperative, a member of Palm Beach County Ag Enhancement Council, a founding member and former president of the Florida Rice Council, and was named Palm Beach County Conservationist of the Year in 1993, and the WPBCFB EAA Farm Family of the Year in 2005.

On the state level, Roth served as vice president of FFBF from 2000 to 2010. Roth has served as state representative, District 85 since 2016. He commented, "Agriculture in Palm Beach County has always been a key player in public policy and elections. I became very involved as WPBCFB president beginning in 1986. After our company underwent a major management reorganization and my son took on more operational responsibilities in 2015, I felt the time was right to

step up and run for public office."

Roth is a board member of Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association (FFVA), a co-founder of FFBF District 8 County Conference, a member of FFBF Trade and Sugar advisory committees, and a member of the Florida Ag Council (UF) as well as numerous other industry associations in the past. On the national level Roth served for many years on the AFBF Sugar Advisory Committee and Southern Farm Bureau Life Insurance Company Board of Directors.

Roth's wife, Carolyn Jean "Jeanie" Roth, was pursuing a college education and career in merchandising and marketing when the two met in 1974 by accident in her West Palm Beach neighborhood. They have been married for 42 years. She has been a Western Palm Beach County Farm Bureau member since 1978 and has served on the Women's Committee of the WPBC Farm Bureau since 2000.

Rick and Jeanie Roth have three adult children: Lindsay McKeen, 38, Ryan Roth, 37, and Ashley Alexander, 34, and three grandchildren, Hannah McKeen 9, Ezra McKeen 5, and Ella Roth 8. Daughter Lindsay and her husband, Jeremy McKeen, founded Truth Point Church in West Palm Beach four months after he graduated from Knox Theological Seminary in 2009. Daughter Ashley Alexander graduated from Nova Southeast College in 2015 and is now a registered ER nurse in Orlando.

Just after graduating from the University of Florida in 2005 with a BS degree in Food and Resource Economics, son Ryan Roth started working at the family farm in the leaf operation. His proud dad said, "Through the years, Ryan has taken on more responsibilities for the farm, and in 2013 he assumed the role of general manager of Roth Farms. Along with management duties, he is the crop protection chemical expert and makes all the crop management and vegetable harvesting decisions."

SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Samuel L. 'Lee' Nunn

Georgia Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

Samuel L. "Lee" Nunn has always been around farming. His grandfather owned and operated a dairy and row crop operation in Morgan County until 1986 and, after retiring, continued to keep a small beef cattle herd. At 87, he is proud that his grandson followed in his footsteps.

Nunn said, "As a boy, I used to watch my grandfather get up before dawn to milk cows, work all day in the fields tending his row crops, and then do the milking again in the evenings. His work ethic was something I admired greatly, a high standard I would strive to live up to."

Nunn attended Athens Technical College and afterward went to work as an assistant manager on a large cattle and recreational hunting plantation for three years. He recalled, "That was when I started my ag construction business," part of a three-pronged agricultural operation he now owns. "In 2005," he added, "a portion of my wife's family farm became available, so I rented 50 acres to plant my first crop of wheat and never looked back."

Today Lee Nunn Farms consists of Custom Farm Service, Ag Construction Company, a private trucking company, and 1,530 leased and owned acres under cultivation with yields as follows: 750 acres of wheat yielding 67 bushels/acre; 440 acres of soybeans yielding 38 bushels/acre; 380 acres of cotton yielding 985 lbs./acre; 360 acres of corn yielding 128 bushels/acre; and 140 acres of winter field peas yielding 42 bushels/acre.

Nunn said, "My cotton, which I've been growing for the last three years, is marketed solely with Staplco, a co-op that prices the crop throughout the year to achieve the best possible price for the producer. My wheat is forward contracted with Godfrey's Warehouse in Madison, Georgia."

Nunn's soybeans are direct marketed and sold to the end use of Cargill Grain. He forward



SAMUEL L. "LEE" NUNN, GEORGIA FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

contracts bushels during the growing season. His corn is sold through three local buying points in Morgan County: Godfreys Warehouse, Rose Acre Egg Farm, and Wildlife Foods.

Nunn commented, "I forward price the crop during the growing season. The last two years I've sold about 25 percent of my crop off the farm as deer corn in 50 lb. bags. This allows me to gain a substantial profit margin over wholesale price." His winter field peas are sold directly to Diamond Dog Food in Gaston, South Carolina, for a predetermined, set contract price before the growing season.

Besides his own farming, Nunn owns a custom farm service company and an agricultural construction company as well as a small trucking service. He and his four employees provide services to operations inside and outside of Morgan County. Nunn explained, "This business was created to help other local farmers who needed planting, spraying, tillage, crop rotation plans, soil testing, fertilizer application, and harvesting. These operations provide my farm with additional income and eliminate the need

for other producers to own expensive pieces of equipment."

The Ag Construction Company, founded in 1997, was formed to build farm structures and has four employees. Nunn noted, "My full-time crew foreman is in charge of this enterprise. We build horse, feed, seed, equipment, pole and RV barns as well as fencing and projects for USDA grants such as stack houses."

Nine years ago, Nunn became aware of a need for local agriculture transportation and started his own trucking service. He now owns two 18-wheelers and about a dozen and a half trailers. "I don't do any commercial hauling," he said, "but just wanted to alleviate the problem of delivering my own grain to market in a timely manner. And when I have the time, I try to be of help to some of my farmer friends when they need it."

Nunn met his wife, Sally, in high school, and they started dating after she graduated from the University of Georgia with a BA in early childhood education. Degree in hand, she began a 17-year career as a kindergarten teacher. Sally now works as

a teacher/advisor at Foothills Charter High School and is a past Women's Chair of the Morgan County Farm Bureau. She is also an active member of the Gibbs Memorial Baptist Church.

Nunn said, "My 17-year-old daughter, Claire, has been involved with FFA since the seventh grade. She entered and won the state competition for project achievement. She's involved with our church in numerous outreach and missionary activities as well as being a leader with Young Life Christian Club. My 13-year-old son, Mason, plans to be involved with FFA when he enters high school. He's currently participating in church activities, football, golf, baseball, and Wyldlife Christian Club." Nunn observed, "Just recently he ran a combine harvester by himself; that was a proud moment for me."

On the county level, Nunn is a board and past president and current treasurer of the Morgan County Farm Bureau, current board member and chairman of the Farm Service Agency, board member of Farmers Fire Insurance, member of the Morgan County /UGA Extension

Ag Advisory Board, president and founder of the Morgan County Row Crop Association, member of Gibbs Memorial Baptist Church, and councilman of the City of Bostwick. On the state level, Nunn is a member of the Georgia Cotton Commission and a member of the Georgia Corn Growers Association. On the national level, he is a member of the National Corn Growers Association and a regular attendee of the Beltwide Cotton Conference as well as the Ag Tech Expo in Indianapolis, Indiana.

In 2011, Nunn applied and was accepted into the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program. It sets up guidelines specific to his farm to be implemented throughout the five-year contracts. He uses GPS guidance to be more precise in application of sprays and in planting. He also takes soil and tissue samples that let him know how to apply the nutrients needed by the crops.

Nunn practices crop rotations that break the cycle of pests, nematodes, and diseases and employs controlled traffic patterns to decrease soil compaction across fields. One hundred percent of the farm land is fertilized with local poultry litter to meet crop nutrient needs. Biannual soil testing and plant tissue testing and crop scouting have reduced fertilizer and pesticide use by 30 percent. He also leaves borders for wildlife habitat such as quail, rabbits, and other species.

As to the inevitable problems that come with farming, Nunn observed, "In my early career, the most serious challenge was finding available quality farm land and access to capital with which to purchase equipment. Because I didn't inherit a farming operation and am located within 60 miles of Atlanta, land commands a premium price. But, little by little, I was able to acquire fields as other producers went out of business or retired. By putting a lot of work into increasing the fertility and productivity of the land, I've been able to make the land profitable."



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SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Stephen J. Kelley

Kentucky Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

Stephen J. Kelley was raised on a 60-acre farm, although his parents worked off the farm. Some of his earliest memories include raising hogs, cattle, and corn with his family. And they always cultivated a big garden at home. By middle school he was helping his older brother raise about an acre and a half of burley tobacco on their grandfather's 170-acre farm. In high school, he partnered with his brother to raise the tobacco on shares. He recalled, "My parents hoped that I wouldn't make farming a career, but my love of the land had been instilled early on, and farming became my goal."

Kelley went on to earn a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science degree in Agriculture from Murray State University and a teaching certificate for vocational agriculture. In 1970, while in college, he and his brother purchased a 600-acre tract of land that was grown up in bushes and had severe drainage problems. He remembered, "It wasn't a very desirable farm, and we were teased a great deal about its condition. I spent summers and weekends working the land and, after graduation in 1973, I came back to Carlisle County to farm full time." Although Kelley and his brother initially farmed as partners, Kelley has been farming independently for more than 20 years.

In the fall of 1973 that same year, Kelley married Melanie, the love of his life. The two had known each other since elementary school. He recalled, "We began raising cattle and growing crops because it was my passion. I also felt called to make a positive impact on our community and on our environment as well as establish a fitting way of life for our family. Melanie has always been my encourager in difficult times and my faithful helpmate to do whatever is necessary, from running errands for parts to helping move equipment around. She is also a wonderful mother to our two children."



STEPHEN J. KELLEY, KENTUCKY FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

Son Kristopher Kelley's entrepreneurship and aesthetics and society degrees from Washington University in St. Louis have helped him succeed in his career and in his own private ventures. He manages Woodland Farm, a 1,000-acre farm owned by Melanie's brother outside of Louisville, Ky. They raise bison, heritage hogs, free range chickens, and some cattle, along with growing vegetables and harvesting honey. The farm combines sustainable growing practices and heritage foods with a love of educating the community. While in college, Kristopher launched Kelley Green Biofuel to create biofuel out of cooking grease and has continued this business. He just opened Full Stop Station in January 2019 — his contemporary idea of a convenience store/filling station with electric car chargers, great coffee, and local food. Kristopher also manages a meat processing plant and oversees several land preservation projects.

Daughter Katie graduated from Centre College in Danville, Ky., with a BS in psychology and from the University of Chicago with an MS in social sciences.

For seven years she worked with college students at Dominican University in Chicago, both in residence life and student leadership/development. In 2015 she and her husband, John Kramer, returned to Kentucky where Katie is working to get back to her farming roots with the goal of raising bison in the coming years. John works remotely as a vice president and senior consultant for Northern Trust, a Chicago-based wealth management company. They have two daughters, Sara and Leah, ages 5 and 7 months.

Kelley said, "Both of our children are active members of the National Bison Association. They both deeply value having grown up on our farm — one of the great blessings of my life — and we continue to stay connected as we work together to make future plans. They will collaborate to manage our land when Melanie and I are no longer running things. Their goals align with ours in that they will continue to focus on sustainability and preservation."

Kelley Farms owns 2,504 acres with Kelley personally farming 1,275 of those acres. Crop yields

at Kelley Farms are as follows: 210 acres of corn yielding 175 bushels/acre; 70 acres of soft red winter wheat for grain yielding 70 bushels/acre; 815 acres of soybeans produce 55 bushels/acre; 600 acres of wheat cover are also planted. In addition, the farm has a 160kW solar electricity system. Eight hundred acres are leased for hunting duck, deer, and turkey, and 190 acres are allotted for timber to produce saw logs. A final source of revenue is the growing of seed stock soybeans, which can, depending on the quality, sell at a premium over commercial beans.

Kelley commented, "By reading marketing commentaries and farm publications, as well as talking with grain merchants, we gain a better understanding of the local and global grain markets. Having nearby an ethanol plant, two chicken feed facilities, a soybean processor and two river ports delivers more opportunities to maximize our grain prices. We use basis contracts, hedge to arrive contracts, cash sales, and option contracts to price our grain. When we can lock in an acceptable profit, we forward price some of our grain

crops. Having sufficient grain storage allows us to sell the remaining grain on rallies in the market."

Kelley Farms uses no-till planting to protect soil and water and save on fuel and labor. Kelley said, "Finding solid, dependable labor is very difficult these days. But, when necessary, we do contract help with harvesting. We prefer the no-till method of planting because it is less labor intensive than conventional land preparation for planting, i.e., disking and harrowing. To combat soil erosion, especially in recent times of torrential downpours, we plant cover crops in the fall."

Kelley also uses GPS guidance to apply fertilizer, plant, and harvest his crops. This keeps overlap to a minimum and saves inputs and energy. Spraying is contracted out to an agribusiness, also saving time and labor costs. To further conserve soil, water, and nutrients, they've installed grass waterways and dry ponds that hold and slowly release water.

Another innovative technology Kelley uses is solar energy. He said, "In 2012, we were the first in the Purchase Area to install solar panels on our farm. We enjoy producing electricity from a renewable resource. We like to say our farm is 'powered by the sun' because we produce both electricity and crops with its energy. Tennessee Valley Authority and Western Kentucky Rural Electric Cooperative Corporation contract with us to purchase the electricity produced by our solar systems. This environmentally friendly practice is very gratifying."

This past year Kelley enrolled in two additional conservation programs. The first is the Conservation Stewardship Program that helps, through incentives, to build on existing conservation efforts while enhancing the farm. The second is the Precision Conservation Program, which helps to identify conservation solutions that will impact the farm financially and reduce management risks.

Cargill, Continental Grain purchasing Sanderson Farms

Staff Reports

LAUREL, Miss. -- Cargill, Continental Grain Company, and Sanderson Farms, Inc. announced Aug. 9 that they have reached a definitive agreement for a joint venture between Cargill and Continental Grain to acquire Sanderson Farms for \$203 per share in cash, representing a total equity value for Sanderson Farms of \$4.53 billion.

A press release announcing the sale did not address specific Sanderson Farms properties, such as the feed mill in Adel and the processing plant in Moultrie.

The purchase price represents a 30.3% premium to Sanderson Farms' unaffected share price of \$155.74 on June 18, 2021, the last full trading day prior to media speculation about the potential sale of Sanderson Farms; a 22.8% premium

to the Sanderson Farms 30-day volume weighted average price ("VWAP") as of June 18, 2021, and a 15.2% premium to the all-time high share price as of June 18, 2021. Upon completion of the transaction, Cargill and Continental Grain will combine Sanderson Farms with Wayne Farms, a subsidiary of Continental Grain, to form a new, privately held poultry business.

The combination of Sanderson Farms and Wayne Farms will create a best-in-class U.S. poultry company with a high-quality asset base, complementary operating cultures, and an industry-leading management team and workforce, the companies' joint press release said. The new company will be well positioned to enhance its service to customers across retail and food service and drive organic growth in an industry fueled by afford-

ability and key consumer trends around the health, sustainability, and versatility of chicken, the release said.

The new company will have state-of-the-art operations and will continue to invest in its workforce and in employee safety, according to the press release. Operations will include poultry processing plants and prepared foods plants across Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas.

Cargill expects to support the new joint venture with its longstanding relationships with retail and foodservice customers. Wayne Farms, part of Continental Grain's food, agriculture and commodities investment portfolio since 1965, has roots in the poultry industry that go back more than a century.

Cargill, Continental Grain, and Sanderson Farms are committed to ensuring operational excellence, workplace safety, and the highest quality of product for the U.S. poultry industry, the press release said.

"Cargill and Continental Grain have long histories of investing and partnering

with American farmers and are dedicated to strengthening the food and agriculture industries for the benefit of consumers and growers," the release said. "Their shared culture, built on the principles of supporting farmers and communities, complements Sanderson Farms' reputation as one of the industry's most respect-

ed operators. Sanderson Farms' strong brand, reputation, and best-in-class assets will remain a core part of the combined company. In addition, Wayne Farms' deep customer relationships across the food service sector complement Sanderson Farms' diverse grocery and retail relationships."



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SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Joe Edmondson

Mississippi Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

From both sides of his family Joe Edmondson inherited a passion for farming the land around Vardaman, Mississippi. Fueled by the untimely death of his father when Joe was only 10, he began in earnest to assume the responsibility of making the family farm as productive as possible.

“Can’t” was a word he didn’t allow himself to say. Joe remembered, “At the age of 15, I went to court with my mother to waive my minority rights so that I could purchase my first 40 acres of land. From that point on, I never looked back.”

In those days the Edmondsons grew cotton, corn, and soybeans. They also owned and operated a cotton gin for over two decades. A couple of years after graduating high school, Joe married Melissa Morgan, a nursing student, who also grew up in a farming family. They were blessed with three children, a daughter, Brandi, and two sons, Trent and Cody.

Joe recalled, “In the early years of marriage, my wife would go out into the fields and drive tractors and supervise and even labor alongside six or eight other hands on our 150 or so acres.”

Today, besides being a devoted wife, mother of three, and grandmother of seven, Melissa is deeply involved in the business side of Topashaw Farms in which she is a full partner. She also raises money for and helps plan the week-long Vardaman Sweet Potato Festival that takes place in November. Melissa is the music director and Sunday school teacher at College Hill Baptist Church and is a member of the Mississippi and United States Sweet Potato Councils. This past January she was the biggest fundraiser for the Mississippi-sponsored Potato Farmers Seminar that took place in Nashville.

Currently, daughter Brandi works in the office in accounts payable and receivables. Her



JOE EDMONDSON, MISSISSIPPI FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

husband, Shaun Parker, is the manager over the packing warehouse line. Son Trent oversees the planting of the corn and soybeans in the spring and the harvesting of the potatoes in the fall. His wife, Lauren, is a nurse but helps out with minor injuries that happen on the farm. Son Cody manages the planting of the sweet potatoes in the spring and helps with the grain harvest in the fall. His wife, Lindsey, also works in the packing warehouse office and manages H2A paperwork, trucks, and sales. Trent and Cody are also involved with working the farm’s cattle.

In 1995, an agricultural disaster struck the Vardaman area. According to Joe, “Worms hit up here in these hills and we lost the entire crop — everything. That’s when we made the decision to switch gears, diversify, and start growing sweet potatoes, mostly of the hearty Beauregard variety. We were blessed to survive that major setback.”

Today, Topashaw Farms owns 2,227 acres, rents 4,293 acres, and has 275 mama cows, 13 bulls, 250 calves, and five horses. Sweet potatoes have

become their staple crop with 2,905 planted acres yielding 490 bushels per acre. Corn is planted on 871 acres with a yield of 146 bushels per acre. Soybeans constitute 2,743 acres with a yield of 61 bushels per acre and 910 acres total are irrigated. The storage capacity for sweet potatoes has reached 2 million bushels, with 600,000 bushels under refrigeration.

Their corn is stored in bins at harvest (260,000 bushels storage) and mostly sold to the local feed mill at a later date. Soybeans are stored in grain bins of the same capacity at harvest and then later hauled to grain elevators in the winter months.

Joe commented, “Having our own grain elevators helps increase harvest time due to decreasing downtime from loading and unloading.”

Calves are normally sold in August through September in large groups at 550 to 600 lbs. Sweet potatoes are stored and marketed year round with #1 grade being sold to upper-end grocery store chains and #2 grain shipped to Farmers Markets, restaurants, and other grocery store that prefer a good

quality sweet potato at a reduced price. The #1 petite grade potato sales are beneficial for individuals who want smaller potatoes for baking and cooking and the jumbo potatoes (over 3.5 inches) are preferred by many restaurants and/or bakers because that size works well for large baking needs. They also market an individually wrapped microwavable potato and a 3-lb. bag.

Joe added, “Our processed grade potatoes are made into various cuts of fries, wedges, and canned products with clients including Lamb Weston, Simplot, McCain Foods, McCalls/Bruce Foods, Pictsweet, and Gerber Baby Foods.”

In 2009 another natural disaster happened when 21 consecutive days of rainfall started the second week of September. Joe remembered, “We had to leave the entire crop in the ground, and I learned once again that I’m not in charge in the big picture. Catastrophes can, and will, happen in agriculture. All you can do is have faith, endure, and overcome them.”

That’s when Topashaw Farms came up with another strategy to build a sweet potato packing

warehouse to market their potatoes. They opened Topashaw Farms Packing in July 2010 and surpassed their initial goals in the first year. Since then they’ve been expanding and building more storage units with automated, climate-controlled heating and cooling, now at a level of 11,634,000 lbs. storage capacity.

Joe said, “We completed our second packing line in August 2019 to use in peak seasons like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. This line allows us to create more jobs and increase production for processed and fresh markets year-round. We also have our own planer mill and sawmill that allows us to build all our wooden bins for our sweet potatoes and those of other local growers. They’re high quality, proven durability boxes that last through the harvest, transport, and storage phases. At present, we’ve built close to 100,000 storage bins to use in our operation.” The farm’s sawmill also provides lumber to build and maintain livestock facilities, the office, the packing warehouse, and all H2A labor housing.

When asked about the biggest challenges of farming in today’s environment, Joe responded, “Technology is definitely one that comes to mind. Big John Deere tractors these days are so technically complex that it takes someone with good computer knowledge to operate them, and those kinds of workers aren’t easy to find.”

He added, “Our other challenge has always been labor because every sweet potato seedling is hand planted mid-May through mid-June, and every mature plant is then cut by hand. We could never accomplish this without our H2A contract workers, all 229 of them this year. Many have been coming back to us for 20 years and are like family now. We also have 35 great full-time employees in our packing shed and eight full-time employees on the farm itself, not including family members.”



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SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

James L. 'Cookie' Lamb

North Carolina Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

As a boy growing up in Sampson County, North Carolina, James L. "Cookie" Lamb was curious about everything pertaining to farm life. Long before he was old enough to do so, he yearned to drive a tractor or a truck, take care of animals, and understand how farm tools and equipment worked. It was the beginning of a lifelong devotion to the land — land to which his grandfather and father dedicated their lives. The Lamb family's cash crop on their 75 acres had traditionally been tobacco, but they also grew cucumbers, okra, corn, and soybeans and raised hogs and a small herd of cattle.

Lamb remembered, "My dad was originally intent on a US Army career and was on the path to becoming an ROTC trainer when my grandfather's health declined, and he could no longer do heavy work. My dad abandoned his own dream and came home to help out. Looking back, I guess his decision was pivotal in my life because it enabled me to grow up on the family farm and discover my true calling."

That calling would be put to the test when his father died in an automobile accident when Lamb was only 16. Suddenly the heavy responsibility for the farm — much of which he'd assumed by the age of 12 — fell on his young shoulders. Lamb dug in his heels, worked all the hours God sent, and graduated high school. With the plan of continuing to work at the farm on weekends, he enrolled in North Carolina State University's School of Ag Engineering, obtaining his B.S. in Agriculture and Environmental Technology in 1996.

In 1994, while still in college, Lamb had interned with a North Carolina company called Prestage Farms and learned about the various stages of pork production. He realized quickly how drawn he was to the nursery operation. Offered a number of positions upon graduation, his



JAMES L. "COOKIE" LAMB, NORTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

choice was to go with a local enterprise that would allow him to stay in Sampson County.

He said, "Prestage Farms was the ideal fit because it is a family-owned and operated business that has 260 contract pig farms and as many turkey farms. They are big enough to be a major industry player and yet small enough to call you by your name."

So Lamb built a pig nursery farm on the same 75-acre tract in Clinton where he grew up. He and his family manage the nursery operation and grow corn, soybeans, millet, and Bermuda grass and raise a few cattle. Over the years Lamb has constructed two swine barns to house his animals and purchased three new tractors and attachments.

He receives weaned pigs at 21 days of age from Prestage's trucking staff and keeps them for seven weeks or until they're about 50 pounds, and then forwards them to finishing farms until they reach their market weight. At the nursery barn, pigs are provided with ample ventilation and supplemental heat of approximately 82 degrees.

Lamb explained, "Here we

have an eight-week cycle or turn that includes a week to clean the facility before the next turn begins. There are approximately 3,040 pigs here at any given time. Given our six-and-a-half cycles or turns per year, this amounts to around 20,000 pigs annually."

The yields on Lamb's contract farm are as follows: 4.29 acres of irrigated Bermuda hay yields 6,900 lbs.; 5 acres of millet are grazed by the farm's cattle; 2 acres are planted with sunflowers as a wildlife habitat; and 22 acres of corn and soybeans yield 160 bushels/acre and 40 bushels/acre respectively. There's also an acre and a half of cultivated garden space. The farm has seven brood cows and one bull. Seven calves per year are raised to approximately 400 lbs. and then sold to market in Smithfield, NC, where they are sent on to a feed lot in the Midwest and grown to a finishing weight of 700 to 800 lbs.

In the early 1990s, Bill Prestage, owner of Prestage Farms, perceived how the regulation trends in the industry were moving, so he decided to employ someone in the capacity of environmental specialist. With his practical experience and educa-

tional background, Lamb was the perfect fit, and he assumed this full-time responsibility in 2003.

He said, "I handle environmental compliance for all of the company's hog operations across NC and one in SC, conducting annual inspections of those 61 farms. I also deal with more than 200 contract growers, assisting them with their compliance, irrigation calibration, and sludge surveys — roughly 385 lagoons.

"I've worked to develop a 'sludge boat' that helps farmers navigate these lagoons faster, and I assist producers in creating waste plans and help them fill out their annual reports. All this activity has given me a deeper understanding of how to improve my own operation."

Lamb Family Farms is a team effort that has happily evolved over time. James met his future wife, Felicia, while the two were attending Union High School and started dating at the tender ages of 16 and 17. With aspirations to go to law school, Felicia enrolled in Campbell University but ended up becoming a teacher, first for eighth graders, then fourth graders. James and Felicia were married on Valentine's Day in 1998 (a

day after, James remembered, he received his first pig delivery!). She went on to earn a Master of Arts degree in reading and now works as a reading specialist with second graders at Union Elementary in Clinton. She was honored as Teacher of the Year in 1998 and as the Walmart Teacher of the Year, Clinton, NC, in 2003.

Daughters Maegan and Kinsley came along in 2001 and 2006 respectively. Maegan has finished her freshman year at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, majoring in pharmacy studies. Proud Dad exclaimed, "She's maintained a 4.0 GPA all through her first year, even with the added stress of the coronavirus pandemic and the need to do her last classes online." Kinsley graduated eighth grade this spring and will begin high school next fall. She has inherited her mother's interest in pursuing a law career. James's mother, Thelma, at the age of 89, lives in the old homestead across the road from the Lambs' house and still helps her son daily with chores on the farm.

In his role as the environment specialist for Prestage Farms, Lamb enforces a strict biosecurity program at the nursery including air filtration to prevent airborne diseases, mandatory shower procedures for farm personnel, and disposable boots and coveralls for farm visitors. Pest control programs ensure the reduction of insects, rodents, and wild animals. If animals require treatment, they are subject to FDA withdrawal periods and treated by a veterinarian. The farm maintains certifications with Pork Quality Assurance, affirming its commitment to implementing best practices. Not to mention those morning and night-time walking inspections by James and his mom, Thelma.

Lamb added, "One of the big misconceptions is that people think we pump our animals up with hormones to make them grow fast. The reality is, legally, nobody can use growth-promoting hormones in the United States when raising hogs."

ABAC student selected for National Teach Ag Ambassadors

Staff Reports

TIFTON, Ga. — Erin Pearce, a junior agricultural education major at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, is one of 18 students nationwide selected as a National Teach Ag Ambassador for the 2021-22 year.

“Serving as a National Teach Ag Ambassador is a way to encourage and inspire others to become agriculture teachers,” Pearce said.

A native of Cairo, Pearce found her passion for agricultural education during her time at Cairo High School.

“I want to give to the kids of the future what my agriculture teachers gave to me,” Pearce said. “I want to give knowledge of the industry that affects more lives than any other. I want to give a haven to



ERIN PEARCE

those that don't have one but also to those who do.”

The 18 ambassadors began their training this summer to become advocates for agricultural education at the 94th National FFA Convention in Indianapolis on Oct. 27-30. These students will represent the National Teach Ag Campaign at the convention as they

promote agricultural education as a career choice. Ambassadors will utilize enthusiasm and personal stories to spread the mission of Teach Ag.

Pearce's involvement in the children's ministry at her hometown church sparked her interest in teaching, which she said is one of her two passions in life along with a love for agriculture. After graduation from ABAC, Pearce wants to be employed as an agricultural education teacher near her hometown. She said she would be happy teaching any grade level of students.

The National Teach Ag Ambassador Program was developed as an effort to address the current, nationwide high demand for agriculture teachers.

“The need for agricultural teachers has only grown,” Pearce said.

“Therefore, the Teach Ag campaign, along with the ambassador program, was formed.”

The need for agriculture teachers in the United States is the result of retirements, current program growth, new programs opening, and current teachers who leave the profession to explore other oppor-

tunities. The ambassadors work to promote the need for high-quality and diverse agriculture teachers while at the National FFA Convention and throughout the following year at the state and local levels.

“We are extremely proud to have high-achieving student leaders like Erin in our program,” Dr.

Sallie McHugh, assistant professor of Agricultural Education at ABAC, said. “She is the fourth ABAC student in the past four years to be selected for this leadership position. Our students have stepped forward and become leaders, not only in our college, but on the national level as well.”

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SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Robert 'Bob' Martin Hall

South Carolina Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

York, a small town nestled in the hilly Piedmont region of South Carolina, is home to Bush-N-Vine Farm, a fruit and vegetable-growing enterprise owned and operated by Robert "Bob" Martin Hall. His career began 41 years ago on land that's been in his family for a century and a half.

Bob said, "My early love of gardening came from having spent much of my childhood helping my grandfather with his peach orchard and helping my father survey land. A couple of my uncles, one of whom ran a truck farm with peaches and tomatoes, were also great mentors."

After graduating from high school in 1976, Bob enrolled at Clemson University to study horticulture and obtained his B.S. degree in 1980. Meanwhile two cousins, who were sisters and retired school teachers, had been living in the John Quilla Hall homestead. It was at a time when the sale of farm land for quick profit to speculators and developers was prevalent. But the sisters decided instead to commit the future of their father's farm to agriculture. Bob's desire to grow crops and directly market fresh fruits and vegetables was the fortunate link to their wish, one that allowed him to begin farming the family land again.

Bob remembered, "We started Bush-N-Vine Farm at that point with 75 acres and converted the old 1930s peach packing shed into our retail market stand in York. Over the years, it has served us well, and we have many memories associated with the building."

From the 1940s through the 1950s, peaches were shipped from such sheds to places like New York. From the 1960s on, when the shipping business faded away, the Hall family shifted focus to roadside market sales. Living within an hour's drive of Charlotte, NC, what had been an exclusively agricultural community for most of the 20th century



ROBERT "BOB" MARTIN HALL, SOUTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

gradually became a suburban one which, according to Bob's wry sense of humor, "seemed to grow houses more than anything else."

So, in its unique setting, Bush-N-Vine Farm has developed into an agricultural oasis, one that offers the highest quality fresh fruits and vegetables to an entire region. It has also become a destination point for individuals and families to visit, enjoy a day in beautiful rural surroundings, and sample the farm's tasty bounty.

Bush-N-Vine Farm's land under cultivation has doubled since the early 1980s and now supports three direct marketing fruit stands: the large main one in York is open year round, and the ones in Rock Hill and Lake Wylie are seasonal. Produce is grown in three ways: in open fields, high tunnels, and greenhouses. On the fruit production side, strawberries have been the farm's core crop with 10 irrigated acres yielding 17,500 lbs./acre, 15 irrigated acres of peaches yielding 320-400 bushels/acre, 8 acres of cantaloupe and melons yielding 18,000 lbs./acre, 3 acres of blackberries yielding 9,000-10,000 lbs./acre, 3 acres of blueberries yielding 8,000 lbs./acre.

Vegetables grown at Bush-N-Vine Farm include 10 acres of sweet corn yielding 500 dozen ears/acre and 25 acres of a wide variety of vegetables whose yields vary depending on the crop. These include crowder peas, sugar snap peas, butter peas, broccoli, cauliflower (regular and specialty orange and purple), cabbage, kale, kohlrabi, cilantro, arugula, summer squash, lima beans, and tomatoes. Fresh market production takes place on 25 acres; high tunnel production accounts for 130,680 square feet housed in fourteen 25-by-400-foot structures for all-season crops. Greenhouse production, including newly added hydroponic tomatoes, accounts for 44,850 square feet and continues to expand.

All these enterprises are part of a collective family effort. Bob Hall has been married to Susan Templeton Hall for 37 years, and they have five children — Sam, Benjamin, Elizabeth Martin, Ruth Anne Melchers, and Mary McKay — and 13 grandchildren. Wife Susan is the secretary/treasurer of Bush-N-Vine. As Bob said, "I call her my CFO because she holds my feet to the fire when it comes to expenses. She has all the

talent and qualities for managing the business side of things so that I can concentrate on growing things."

Susan is a long-term member of the York County Farm Bureau and an active member of the Women in the Church group at Filbert Presbyterian Church. She said, "I've loved being able to raise our children on the farm. Each one took part in its day-to-day activities and chores. We all love seeing the fruits of our labor, especially at various harvest times. And we endeavor to treat our full-time and H2A program workers like family so that everyone has a sense of fulfillment."

Bob has been a member of the York County Farm Bureau for the past 40 years and the South Carolina Farm Bureau Board of Directors since 2010. He's also currently serving on its Labor Committee. He's a member of Certified South Carolina Grown, South Carolina Agri-Tourism Association, and South Carolina Specialty Crop Association. He's also FSMA (Food Safety Modernization Act) certified.

In the last decade, son Sam and his wife, Lindsey, and their three children have been living

full time on the farm. A 2010 graduate of Clemson's Agriculture Economics program, Sam wears a lot of hats in his full-time job at Bush-N-Vine Farm.

He said, "I grew up helping my dad and realized from a very early age that I wanted to be a farmer. I guess you could say it's in my blood. Farming isn't easy, but I can't imagine doing anything else."

To the main York store location, built in 2014, the family has added picnic tables, swings, rocking chairs, a one-mile hiking trail through meadows and a cow pasture, and even an old John Deere G2 cylinder tractor that Bob and his great uncle bought to restore when he was 12 years old.

Bob said, "It's our main retail outlet and serves as a place for our workers to eat and use as a break area. We conduct farm tours there for senior and school groups in the spring and fall.

And, until recently with the virus pandemic, we had a large U-pick program for strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, peaches, and pumpkins. We also like to feature live music groups for our customers to enjoy while they're sitting back, nibbling on strawberry ice cream, or eating fresh watermelon. In the fall we have a bounce house and hayrides to the pumpkin patch."

To maintain an eco-healthy, productive farm Bob implements crop rotation for strawberries. He first plants peas in the summer of the first year and oats and clover over the fall and spring. He plants strawberries the following fall.

Bob said, "By keeping something growing on the land we reduce soil erosion and help protect the environment. We follow all pesticide record keeping laws and regulations and try to limit pesticide applications as much as possible. We also implement several bio-controls, including a beneficial mite that helps reduce the damage from a destructive spider mite. We've done other beneficial insect releases as well and utilize organic matter by windrowing it and then mulching the rows in between our strawberry rows."

SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Jay Yeargin

Tennessee Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

After graduating from high school, Jay Yeargin purchased a 60-acre farm with a USDA loan for beginning farmers, which allowed him to finance 100 percent of the land. He recalled, "Over the ensuing years, I bought more farm land by working with the USDA and began to lease land as it became available. Knowing my career goal was already set, I enrolled at the University of Tennessee at Martin and earned a BS degree in agriculture in 2004."

After graduating from college, Yeargin's paternal grandmother deeded her farm of 100 acres to him and his paternal grandfather also gifted him 75 acres. He noted, "I've gradually increased the number of row crop acres and, out of the land I rent, 80 percent is on crop shares and the balance is cash rented. A few more hundred acres of neighboring land opened up over time, which helped me expand quickly when it was profitable to do so."

Yeargin now operates his multi-faceted agricultural business in Weakley County on 2,700 acres with yields as follows: 1,100 acres of yellow corn yielding 145 bushels/acre; 1,000 acres of soybeans yielding 55 bushels/acre; 600 acres of commercial soybean seed yielding 45 bushels/acre; and 600 acres of wheat yielding 75 bushels/acre. Custom dozer and track hoe work and mowing; 300-500 hours per year; 60 head of bulls, cows, and heifers; and 700 round rolls of hay/forage/year.

He commented, "As cow calf producers, we market whatever animals are not needed for herd replacement. Calves are weaned and vaccinated before being sold by trailer lot loads to get more from direct buyers and a higher price per pound at between 450 to 650 pounds. We take pride in selling healthy cattle, taking bids on them from buyers, or selling them through organized pre-conditioned sales using associations such as Tennessee Livestock Producers."

Yeargin's calves are born



JAY YEARGIN, TENNESSEE FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

in two separate time windows: October/November and January/February, with the largest portion of the herd calving in the winter months. He has solved the problem of time management during the heavy requirements of calving season by using a fixed breeding season to ensure calves are born when the farm is not planting or harvesting a crop.

Yeargin Farms uses several different ways to market its crops. They deliver their grain to the best market using their own trucks and have ample grain storage on site. Delivery locations include ethanol facilities, poultry feed mills, and local grain elevators, as well as barge points on the nearby Mississippi River. Yeargin added, "Storage gives us more options and allows us to have our three full-time employees and three part-time employees so we can deliver grain all winter long."

Yeargin likes to have 20 percent of the crop sold before planting and then sell in increments of 5 to 10 percent as the crop progresses and production risk declines. Typically he sells 50 percent of his crop before

harvest begins. He said, "We use forward contracts, HTAs, basis contracts, options, and cash sales on grain. We also use a broker, Top-Third Marketing, to help us make marketing decisions and increase our grain price."

In 2004, Yeargin installed a grain dryer, enabling him to begin harvesting his corn crop at 25 percent moisture and dry down to approximately 17 percent moisture. He explained, "By doing this we can harvest more bushels in August when prices are \$.20 to \$.30 more and manage the discounts we receive on corn."

Several years later, Yeargin Farms began the process of growing commercial seed soybeans. He said, "This undertaking helps us capture a price premium that would otherwise be a bulk commodity. The return from the premium outweighs the extra work of handling seed."

As for the other businesses Yeargin operates — custom dozer, track hoe work, and mowing — they add another 10 percent annually to the bottom line. He observed, "Our area is one in which clay is mined extensively. I approached one of the local

clay companies about providing reclamation work for them — an important part of their industry due to government regulations — and they agreed."

When clay mines are closed, he returns the land to a natural state by grading, sloping, liming, fertilizing, seeding, and mulching. And he's done erosion repair on sites that were previously reclaimed. Yeargin also provides custom mowing, particularly on Conservation Reserve Program land belonging to some of his neighbors. He said, "Some landowners hire me to mow pastures and fields, and if they don't need all the hay from those fields, I can bale the forage for my own use. The extra hay is helpful in the winter for our livestock and helps reduce overall feed costs. If we happen to have an overage of hay, I sell it to other livestock owners."

All of these efforts are shared jointly by Jay Yeargin's wife, Alice Ann, whom Jay met in college through their respective fraternity and sorority activities. They married in 2005 after Alice Ann graduated from UT at Martin with a BS in business. She works part-time as a book-

keeper for a local bank and helps out with every segment of the farm business, contributing her specific educational background and skills to its financial health.

Coming from a farm family in Athens, Tennessee, Alice Ann has been an active member of the Farm Bureau Young Farmer & Rancher and Women since 2005, winning their state Outstanding Young Woman award in 2013. She and Jay also won the State Farm Bureau Young Farmer & Rancher Environment Stewardship award in 2011. Alice Ann enjoys community activities involving the county Chamber of Commerce, the local city advancement association, the First Presbyterian Church's Women's Circle group, and her college sorority. She also helps plan and host farm tours and volunteers at the local fire department auxiliary.

In 2015, the Yeargin's welcomed son Patrick to the family. His proud dad said, "He's already following in our footsteps as far as taking a keen interest in farming. He spends a lot of hours 'helping' out with chores and asking a lot of questions. We look forward to a time when Alice Ann can dedicate all her time to the farm and family. My parents also actively work with us on a daily basis and assist us with educating the public about agriculture through our tours and at other functions."

At the county level, Yeargin is a member of the Weakley County UT Extension Ag Committee, is a Farm Bureau director, a vice president of County Cattleman's Association, serves on the University Vet Tech Advisory Board, is a director of the County Soil Conservation District and is a member of the Farm Credit Advisory Board. Yeargin is a member of First Presbyterian Church in Greenfield and serves as a deacon. He's a lieutenant with his local Volunteer Fire Department as well, making weekly equipment checks, attending monthly meetings, and responding to about 50 calls a year.

SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES

Charles Edwin 'CJ' Isbell Jr.

Virginia Farmer of the Year 2020-2021

From the Sunbelt Ag Expo

Charles Edwin "CJ" Isbell Jr. is carrying on a 70-year family tradition at Keenbell Farm in western Hanover County. His grandparents, Joe and Kathleen Isbell, purchased the original 175 acres in 1951. Today, at 340 owned and leased acres, the farm specializes in grass-fed beef, pasture-raised pork, free range poultry, turkeys, eggs, and specialty non-GMO grains. Isbell recalled, "All that was on the property back in the early '50s was a two-story wooden house with daylight showing through the boards and an old corn crib."

Starting out with laying hens, Keenbell Farm expanded over time into a feeder pig and cattle operation and eventually branched out into production of hay, corn, wheat, barley, and soybeans. His grandfather retired in the '90s after selling the vast majority of his operation. But his grandson continued to study and explore agricultural methods to bolster his dream of creating a viable and sustainable family farm. Following a business plan he developed with his father, Eddie, and equipped with just one heifer and \$250 in savings, he and his dad began renovations on a couple of acres in 2006. The goal was to resurrect the land from the toll Mother Nature had taken over the years.

As Isbell explained, "Up to that point my dad hadn't been able to have a farming career, financially speaking, but worked full-time in the construction business. I was also doing my full-time job as a firefighter. But, with his invaluable help at night and on the weekends, we slowly and carefully converted land that had been leased for conventional grain farming and put it back into pasture for our natural meat operation. We formed an official partnership in 2008 with the idea of placing quality above quantity and integrity above profit."

He added, "We also began growing specialty non-GMO



CHARLES EDWIN "CJ" ISBELL JR., VIRGINIA FARMER OF THE YEAR, 2020-21

grains — in particular, food grade heritage or heirloom varieties — grains that are now grown, harvested, cleaned, tested, and packaged on the farm. The timing was also right in terms of the growing 'farm to table' and 'buy local' movements."

Today Keenbell Farm acreage is split between livestock and specialty grains. Livestock numbers are: 110 beef cattle; 100 pigs; 1,100 head of laying hens; 3,000 head of broiler chickens and turkeys. Major crop yields are: 115 acres of corn yielding 100 bushels; an average of 25 acres a year of popcorn yielding 1,500 lbs./acre; an average of 50 acres of winter wheat yielding 65 bushels/acre; 35 acres of rye yielding 35 bushels/acre; and 150 acres of multi-species cover crops yielding 3 tons/acre.

Isbell said, "All our products are sold as close to the end consumer as possible, which allows maximum retention of each enterprise's value. Our livestock species are marketed as finished animal proteins, cut and packaged, and sold at our on-site retail store, at local farmers' markets, and at several area gro-

cery stores in central Virginia. We've also invested time and resources in a website and use various social media outlets."

Keenbell Farm has an inspected poultry processing facility and uses an off-farm processor for beef and pork. In addition, they have contracts with regional distilleries and millers, offering smaller retail packaging for select grains. All of its "seconds" (cracks/splits) are retained during the cleaning process and used as a component in the feed ration for their pigs, reducing waste and off-farm inputs.

In all these aspects of his farming enterprise CJ Isbell has had the support of his wife, Jessica, for the last 14 years. From different counties, they met when both were working at an IHOP during high school. Isbell noted, "Jessica has made so many sacrifices throughout our marriage, dedicating her time, talents, and energy to raising our two children, Faith, 13, and Landon, 10, managing our farm store, and performing a hundred other farm-related tasks on a daily basis."

He added, "She is the corner-

stone of our family foundation and an integral part of Keenbell Farm's success." Jessica has been a member of Virginia Farm Bureau Young Farmers program since 2009. She's also active as a team mom for the Beaverdam Bobcat football team.

On the county level, Isbell is a member and former board member of the Hanover County Farm Bureau and does volunteer work with County 4-H groups. He has worked extensively with Hanover Caroline Soil & Water Conservation District in their outreach and field day events as host and speaker. Isbell also actively supports various local charities, including Montpelier Center for Art & Education, Rockville Ruritan Club, Little Sisters of the Poor, and South Anna Elementary PTA.

On the state level, Isbell is an alumnus of the inaugural class of VALOR (Virginia Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results), an adult educational, leadership, professional and public speaking development program. It allowed him to spend two weeks in Argentina in 2014, studying farming and ranching methods in a country with topography

as diverse as pampas, glaciers, and rain forests. He is a founding member of the Common Grain Alliance, and a member of the Virginia Association of Biological Farming (VABF). He also hosted and spoke at the 2019 USDA State Agronomist Conference and won the 2019 Hanover County "Legacy Farm Award" that same year. On the national level, Isbell has been a member of the Virginia Farm Bureau Young Farmers program for eleven years.

In the area of stewardship, Isbell noted, "Protection of the environment is the core value of our farm and one of the keys factors we use when evaluating management decisions. Being in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, we decided to install exclusion fencing — at twice the minimum buffer from water — to keep livestock out of the farm's lake and streams and to stimulate wildlife refuge areas."

Keenbell Farm practices intense rotational management of all livestock raised. Most are moved daily, but at a minimum of every three days, allowing for natural distribution of manure and preventing the buildup and potential runoff of nutrients. They also installed more than 12,000 feet of underground water lines and 40,000 feet of fence line. Isbell has worked extensively with NRCS, the local Soil and Water Conservation district, and Virginia Cooperative Extension to showcase practices recommended by each entity and their benefits to soil health.

Isbell added, "We use precision agriculture with grid sampling and variable rate fertility application as well as planting multi-species cover crops to sustain a living cover and as a key component in our crop production cycle that has nearly eliminated the need for routine chemical applications. Through these measures we've been able to practically double soil organic matter, reducing erosion and increasing water/nutrient holding capacities and reducing runoff potential."

Cantaloupe juice — the next big thing?

By Courtney Cameron
University of Georgia

Summer in Georgia yields a bounty of fresh fruit and vegetables. In fact, Georgia is one of the top producers of cantaloupe in the U.S., and Georgia-grown watermelons and cantaloupes are the stars of summer grocery stores and farmers markets.

However, the shelf life of these fruits is short. Besides the fresh market, there isn't another outlet for watermelon and cantaloupe growers to sell their produce. Now UGA researchers are stepping in to help find novel uses for the juicy orbs.

Food waste and access to nutritious food is a growing concern throughout the U.S., and the development of new methods of

processing and value-added products is critical for the future stability of the agricultural industry.

To help Georgia growers, researchers in the Department of Food Science and Technology (FST) at the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES) are conducting studies to test new products using these fruits.

"The long-term goal of our research is to extend the shelf life of fruit juices while preserving natural levels of beneficial molecules and sensory quality," explained Lida Araghi, the doctoral candidate who is leading the juice study.

This study examines the use of refrigeration and high pressure processing methodology to make the juice as fresh as possible. Using high pressure



University of Georgia photo

The study examines the use of refrigeration and high pressure processing to retain the juice's nutrients and maintain freshness.

instead of other conventional methods allows for the fruit to retain its nutritious profile.

"A nonthermal technology like high-pressure processing offers an alter-

native to conventional thermal processing to meet consumer demands for convenient, high-quality, natural nutrients and minimally processed products," stated Araghi.



University of Georgia photo

Taija Stoner-Harris, left, a master's degree student in the Department of Food Science and Technology, helps principal investigator and doctoral candidate Linda Araghi process cantaloupes for a study finding new product uses for Georgia-grown cantaloupe.

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Take the elementary STEM challenge

Staff Reports

MACON, Ga. — Georgia elementary classes in third through fifth grades are encouraged to put their science, technology, engineering and math skills to work to explore the role healthy forests play in creating healthy communities by protecting our air, soil and water resources.

Elementary teachers and their students may enter the Fall '21 Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities STEM Challenge by Nov. 12 for the chance to win a prize package totaling \$350 for their class.

The top grade-winner from the third, fourth and fifth-grade entries will win a prize package. Winners will be announced later in

November.

The Georgia Association of Conservation Districts, a non-profit organization that promotes the conservation of natural resources, is sponsoring the statewide competition, which is being coordinated by the Georgia Foundation for Agriculture.

Teachers interested in participating in the Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities STEM Challenge may visit www.gfb.ag/stemchallenge for more information and to register for the program.

Once teachers register their class, they will receive access to a digital resource toolkit that equips the class for participating in the forestry



Submitted photo

Please see **STEM**, Page 21 Trinity Christian School, Dublin, Ga., won the fourth grade category of the spring STEM Challenge



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Continued from Page 20

STEM

STEM challenge.

The purpose of the challenge is to encourage elementary teachers and students in grades 3-5 to explore aspects of Georgia agriculture by applying their STEM skills to solve real-world problems that farmers face in producing our food and fiber. Participating classes will be asked to use their STEM skills to answer a real-life question pertaining to forestry and create a video presentation highlighting what they learned.

Almost 50 classes registered for the Spring '21 Soil Health Explorers STEM Challenge, which the GACD sponsored. Winners were announced in May. Roopville Elementary's "QUEST Kids," taught

by Jennifer Carroll, won the third-grade prize. Trinity Christian School's "Fourth-Grade Crusaders Team," taught by Nona Dasher took top honors in its division. Dallas Elementary's "Venture Soil Detectives," taught by Stephanie Atkinson won the fifth-grade competition.

Teachers of each winning class received a \$250 classroom supply grant and an educational conservation resource kit donated by GACD.

Each class that participated in the spring STEM Challenge answered the question, "How can we improve soil biodiversity and overall soil health?" Visit www.gfb.ag/spring-21GAESTEMwinners to see the spring awards presentation and the three

winning video presentations.

The Georgia Foundation for Agriculture is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to preparing Georgia agriculture's next generation of leaders. The foundation offers scholarships to students pursuing agricultural careers, manages the Georgia Ag Experience mobile classroom, funds leadership development programs and projects that increase students' and the public's understanding of agriculture. Visit www.gafoundationag.org to make a tax-deductible donation or learn more about the foundation and its programs.

For more information contact Lily Baucom at lrbaucom@gfb.org or 478.405.3461.

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Bridges: Project lets ABAC 'step into the future'



Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College

This rendering shows the new Agricultural Technology Center at ABAC which will include an open air pavilion and an enclosed space for teaching and demonstration activities for ABAC students.

Staff Reports

TIFTON, Ga. — With funding secured for the construction phase of a \$14.4 million agricultural facilities project, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College President David Bridges said ABAC is ready "to step into the future of agriculture."

"Agricultural technology is the future of agriculture at ABAC," Bridges said. "These new facilities will allow us to train ABAC students with cutting edge technology in state of the art facilities, making sure that ABAC graduates are ready to go to work. Agriculture continues to be Georgia's largest industry, and we want to be a part of fueling the future."

Bridges said Georgia legislators approved \$1.1 million in planning

money for the agricultural facilities enhancement project in the 2021 fiscal year and then followed that up with \$11.8 million in construction funding for the current year. He hopes that lawmakers fund \$1.5 million in equipment costs in Fiscal Year 2023 to complete the \$14.4 million project.

"We're supporting a portion of these students with aging buildings that were not designed for the scope or scale of programs today. Some of our students go to classes in facilities designed for the ABAC enrollment in 1971 when the Chambliss Building was constructed."

Dr. Mark Kistler, dean of School of Agriculture and Natural Resources, believes the renovation of the Chambliss Building and the construction of the new Agricultural

Technology Center broaden the foundation for programs that are already on the move.

"The new Agricultural Technology Center provides much needed facilities for our growing Agricultural Technology and Systems Management program," Kistler said. "The covered, open-air multi-purpose space can be used for numerous types of teaching and demonstration activities."

"The Chambliss renovation will provide a home for the Agricultural Education and Communication Department which will include a state-of-the-art agricultural sciences classroom/laboratory; upgraded space for our Agricultural Engineering faculty, staff, and Agricultural

Please see **ABAC**, Page 23



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Continued from Page 22

ABAC

Technology experiential laboratories; and improved space for our Georgia Agricultural Education partners.”

ABAC Director of Facilities and Land Resources Tim Carpenter said the project includes 28,000 square feet of new construction and renovation of the 22,215 square-foot Chambliss Building.

Carpenter said the new construction includes a pre-engineered steel structure with brick veneer containing three elements including a high-bay clear span shop to support the large-scale equipment necessary for modern agricultural engineering technology, precision agriculture, and forestry program operations; a high bay clear span covered structure for livestock and animal science instruction, youth

programs, equipment operation and display, and other related activities that would benefit from a covered open air venue; and central connector space including restrooms, service space, instructional space, office and service space, and facility storage.

“The renovation of the Chambliss Building will include enhanced specialized labs to support smaller-scale equipment and materials involved in agriculture, technology, forestry, and agricultural education programs,” Carpenter said. “Upgraded shop functions will include welding, hydraulics, engine, machine, and fabrication. The renovation will also include classrooms, offices, and service space.”

Bridges is quite familiar with the facilities involved in the renovation since

they were in use when he was an ABAC student in 1978.

“The facilities involved in this enhancement project are woefully undersized and unable to accommodate modern equipment,” Bridges said. “Agriculture is a complex, high technology business that requires leaders with general knowledge and keen problem-solving skills. Mastering these abilities requires hands-on learning.

“Courses in agricultural engineering, agricultural technology, and mechanization are critically important for students in Agricultural Technology and Systems Management and in Agricultural Education. This upgrade will probably prolong the life of these facilities another 30 years.”

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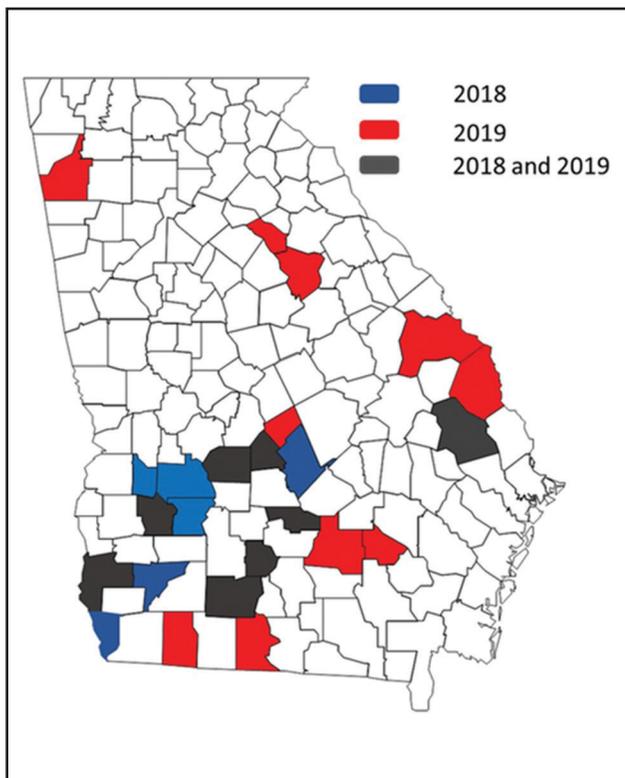







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University of Georgia map

The UGA cotton research team identified 24 Georgia counties where the presence of cotton leafroll dwarf virus has been confirmed from commercial fields and UGA research farms during 2018-2019.

UGA researchers target new virus threatening cotton crops

By Maria M. Lameiras
University of Georgia

While aphids aren't a direct threat to cotton plants, they can carry a persistent virus that is difficult to control and can cause significant losses in one of Georgia's most important crops.

First identified in Alabama in 2017, cotton leaf roll dwarf virus (CLRDV) — which causes leaf reddening, crinkling and curling, as well as deformation of cotton bolls — started spreading quickly. By 2019, it had been detected in every state of the cotton-producing region east of Texas, including Georgia. CLRDV is related to the virus that

causes cotton blue disease (CBD), which has been endemic in cotton crops in Argentina and Brazil, causing yield losses up to 80%.

To better understand the genetic diversity of the CLRDV population, the team mapped the near-complete genomes of six virus samples from Georgia and one from Alabama to compare with samples from other areas in the U.S., South America and China.

While CLRDV has not caused as much yield loss in Georgia as CBD has in other cotton-growing regions, avoiding the virus to prevent potential yield loss is an important focus of research for Sudeep Bag, assistant professor

of crop virology in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES) at the University of Georgia's Tifton campus. In March, Bag published a paper describing the virus in the journal *Crops and Soils* with UGA Cooperative Extension entomologist Phillip Roberts and UGA plant pathology professor Bob Kemerait.

Because the virus has spread rapidly throughout the Cotton Belt and has been detected in both symptomatic and asymptomatic cotton plants — and because there are not yet reliable chemical controls for either the aphids that carry the disease or the virus itself — Bag said

avoidance and removal of alternate hosts are currently the best recommendations based on the team's research.

"Until we had knowledge of the virus, aphids had not been a problem to cotton growers. It's not the pest — it's the virus that is the problem," said Bag, adding that research into chemical control for the virus is not developed enough to help producers currently dealing with the disease.

Since 2018, the researchers have tracked the virus extensively in Georgia cotton fields and have discovered that the virus is able to survive in

Please see **COTTON**, Page 25

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Cotton

harvested cotton stalks in the field over the winter. It is a common practice to leave cotton stalks in the field after harvest, then till them into the soil before the next season's planting. But it appears to be time to rethink that practice.

"Many growers leave the cotton stalks in the field after all of the bolls are harvested. The general thinking is that winter will come the freezing weather will kill the plant and the virus, but based on what we have learned in the past year, winter temperatures are often not cold enough to kill all of the virus in south Georgia," Bag said.

Field testing over the past year has shown that winter temperatures were not enough to kill all of the plants, allowing the virus to remain viable. Once those stalks are tilled

under and new cotton is planted, the virus is then able to infect the new plants.

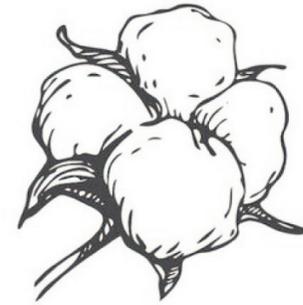
"Growers should remove those stalks as soon as possible after harvest. We understand this adds an extra expenditure for growers in an already expensive farming operation, but it is about trying to avoid a virus and minimizing its inoculum in nature, which could cause heavy losses in the next crop," said Bag, adding that his team found that the virus had survived in 75% of the cotton stalks left in one field tested for the study.

Additionally, researchers have identified at least 23 common weeds that can carry the virus between crop plantings.

"Through alternate host studies, we found

that there are 23 species of weeds where the virus survived outside of the cotton plants. These weeds are not all winter weeds, some fall across the seasonal and calendar year. Apart from the cotton plants, the virus is surviving on those plant species growing close to the cotton fields," Bag said. "Growers need to avoid or control those weed species in their cotton fields."

The results, published this summer in the journal Crop Protection, recommend weed control, conservation tillage and field sanitation by removing spent cotton stalks to help growers avoid or mitigate the virus. The research is a combined effort of the UGA Extension Cotton Team, with researchers from the CAES departments of plant pathology, entomology, and crop and soil sciences.



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Ashburn native installed as president of the CAES Alumni Association

By Maria M. Lameiras
University of Georgia

After earning her undergraduate degree in regional economic development, Sarah Cook joined the Georgia Department of Economic Development's Center of Innovation for Agribusiness on the University of Georgia Tifton campus. It was there that she fully grasped the importance of Georgia's No. 1 industry.

While working with small food-processing companies to help them establish their businesses, Cook took the opportunity to re-enroll at the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES), where she completed her master's degree in agricultural leadership in 2014.

On July 1, Cook was installed as president

“Agriculture, more than almost any other industry, has a familial aspect to it. It is a hugging industry instead of a handshake industry. It is naturally familial, and I want to keep those ties up not only in the industry, but at the college.”

Sarah Cook
president, CAES Alumni Association

of the CAES Alumni Association for the 2021-22 term.

As director of domestic and international trade for the Georgia Department of Agriculture, Cook assists Georgia producers in marketing and distributing their products to foreign and domestic buyers and through national trade shows.

“I have worked with about 100 companies over past three years, and we have about 300 companies

in our database,” Cook said. “I primarily focus on value-added food products — jams, jellies, pickles — but we also work with produce. When we attend the big produce trade shows we take about 20 companies with us, as well as growers’ associations, like the Georgia Pecan Growers Association.”

The position is an ideal fit for her combined experience in regional economic development and agricultural innovation

— as well as her personal background growing up in rural Ashburn, Georgia.

“Our family was from a small town in rural south New Jersey. My parents were entrepreneurial, and they saw an ad for a house for sale in Better Homes and Gardens. My father was a tow truck driver and junkyard operator, which is a 24-7 job,” Cook said. “They knew they wanted to move further south. They found a house in Ashburn and decided it was good for our family.”

Her father started a business then took a job as the local zoning administrator while her mother stayed at home with Cook and her sisters before serving in several volunteer positions once the children were in school.

“They were always civically minded and really fostered our love for community,” Cook said.



SARAH COOK

Cook became involved with the CAES Alumni Association soon after graduating and appreciates the additional connections it provides to others in the agriculture industry.

“Agriculture, more than almost any other industry, has a familial aspect to it. It is a hugging industry instead of

a handshake industry,” she said. “It is naturally familial, and I want to keep those ties up not only in the industry, but at the college. Because of where I am in the industry, this is where my ties are. This is where my network comes together, so it is a natural alignment to support the college through my service to the Alumni Association.”

CAES Alumni Director Suzanne Griffeth added, “We are excited to have Sarah leading the board of directors for the next year. She brings years of service to the college — and a lifelong love for agriculture — to this role and will have a unique perspective on the alumni association’s mission to connect, engage and celebrate.”

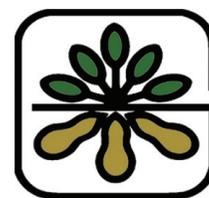
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