

# Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

*Press Release*  
Contact: Janie Batson  
704-788-7026  
e-mail: [jbbatson@ctc.net](mailto:jbbatson@ctc.net)

For Immediate Release

## **SHEP MORRIS NAMED 2010 ALABAMA FARMER OF THE YEAR**

A grower of conventional cotton varieties, Roy “Shep” Morris of Shorter, Ala., uses a stripper machine for harvesting, chicken litter for fertilizer, ridge tillage for planting and corn as both a rotation crop and as a cover crop. He has raised soil organic matter levels and produced excellent dryland yields.

As a result of his success as a row crop farmer, Morris has been selected as the 2010 Alabama winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Morris now joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 19 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

A full time farmer for 25 years, he currently farms 3,450 acres with 2,600 acres of rented land and 850 acres of owned land. His crop mix includes cotton on 1,500 acres yielding 800 pounds per acre, corn on 850 acres yielding 145 bushels per acre, soybeans on 600 acres yielding 40 bushels per acre. He also raises timber on about 500 acres and has about 100 acres in pecans production.

“My grandfather was a farmer, and my father was an aerial applicator,” he recalls. “I wanted to farm from an early age. My grandfather started farming in 1913 and grew his last crop in 1978.” Morris bought a tractor and used his grandfather’s equipment during his early years in farming.

He grew his first crop of cotton at age 18, and then followed his dad by becoming an aerial applicator. Eventually, he gave up the aerial application business to farm full time, but still puts out chemicals out by air because he can be timely.

“Crop rotation is one reason for our yields,” he says. “We grow no cotton where cotton grew the previous year. We use chicken litter to build soil organic matter. We also use an implement called a One Trip Plow behind our corn combine. It buries the stalks, builds a raised bed, and leaves a good place for growing cotton.” He says his crop planting method is a version of ridge tillage.

“Corn is our cover crop for cotton,” he adds. The One Trip Plow incorporates corn seed missed by the combine. This seed germinates and provides a growing cover until it is killed by frost. He plants Roundup Ready corn and uses Roundup in the fall to kill competing weeds in the corn cover crop. “Corn and cotton both help each other out,” he explains. “We wouldn’t be as efficient as we are if we had just one main crop.”

He farms both river bottomland and black prairie soils that hold moisture well. Planting on raised beds helps his crops escape damage from too much water. “If it is dry in the spring, I shave two inches of soil from the top of the bed so I can plant into moisture,” he explains. “If spring conditions are wet, I plant on top of the bed.”

Though his soybeans and corn are Roundup Ready, his cotton consists of conventional varieties. By relying on conventional cotton, he saves money he’d otherwise spend on seed technology fees. He uses the Syngenta AgriEdge program to track and manage seed costs and other inputs.

He harvests cotton with a Deere 7460 stripper. “Conventional pickers are expensive to own and maintain,” he explains. “We can use a stripper because we’ve reduced our nitrogen applications, so we grow short plants. The stripper is lightweight and fast. We harvest at six to seven miles per hour. The stripper also lets us to bring cotton to the gin that would otherwise be left on the ground.”

He markets cotton through the Autauga Quality Cotton Association based in Prattville, Ala. Morris sits on the Association’s board and serves on its executive committee.

His corn and soybeans are sold through FGDI, LLC, a division of the FCStone Group. He also markets soybeans through Hansen-Mueller Co. “We don’t store our corn or soybeans on the farm,” he adds. “We tend to book about 75% of our expected soybean production and then buy puts to protect from price declines. I like to sell corn in March and June when U.S. corn deliveries low and I tend to get better prices.”

Morris volunteers his time and talents to a number of organizations. For instance, 12 years ago he and a group of farmers saw a need for a modern cotton ginning facility. They formed the Milstead Farm Group and built an efficient state-of-the-art gin. Morris was instrumental in getting the ginning venture started and serves as its president.

He also serves on the board of a large agricultural lender, First South Farm Credit based in Jackson, Miss. In addition, he’s an owner and organizer of River Bank & Trust and sits on its board. He also serves as president of the Macon County Farmers Federation and is a supervisor with the Macon County Soil & Water Conservation District.

On the state level, he chairs the Wheat and Feed Grains Committee of the Alabama Farmers Federation and is a member of the Alabama Cotton Commission.

His wife, Marguerite “Rite” Morris, is the daughter of a cotton farmer. They married in 1979. She helps out on the farm by scouting cotton for insects during the summer and

hauling boll buggies during the fall. Rite has been active in parent teacher associations and is an active member of St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church in Tallassee. She also serves on a fundraising committee for the restoration of the Mt. Vernon Theater in Tallassee.

They have three adult children. Their oldest, Shep, Jr., is a First Lieutenant in the Alabama Army National Guard and is serving as a Chinook helicopter pilot in Afghanistan. He will return to the farm when his deployment ends.

Their son J. W. is in the Marine Corps Reserves and has served two tours in Iraq. He is a student at Auburn University at Montgomery and works for an engineering firm.

Their daughter Beverly lives on the farm and is a registered nurse employed by Baptist Hospital East in Montgomery, Ala. She works in the hospital's emergency room and also helps out in the farm office on a part time basis.

“When we began farming, our soil organic matter averaged only one-half percent,” says Morris. “Through the use of cover crops, our corn-cotton rotation, conservation tillage and local chicken litter, our organic matter now averages about two percent. Our cotton farming system is different from most farms in the Southeast. We threw away the book, started from scratch and focused on driving down our costs. If we hadn't, we'd be out of business.”

Jeff Helms with the Alabama Farmers Federation is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Morris was nominated for the honor by David Cole of Montgomery, Ala., who works as an area organization director with the Alabama Farmers Federation.

As the Alabama state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Morris will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher International of Jacksonville, Fla., a jacket and a \$200 gift certificate from the Williamson-Dickie Company, and a \$500 gift certificate from Southern States.

He is now eligible for the \$15,000 that will go to the overall winner. Other prizes for the overall winner include the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year from Massey Ferguson North America, a custom made Canvasback gun safe from Misty Morn Safe Co., and another \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States cooperative. Also, Williamson-Dickie will provide another jacket, a \$500 gift certificate and \$500 in cash to the overall winner.

Swisher International, through its Swisher Sweets cigar brand, and the Sunbelt Expo are sponsoring the Southeastern Farmer of the Year Award for the 21<sup>st</sup> consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$804,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Alabama include: Ricky Wiggins of Anderson, 1990; George Kiser, Sr. of Foley, 1991; Allen Bragg of Toney, 1992; Sykes Martin of Courtland, 1993;

David Pearce of Browns, 1994; Glenn Jones of Blountsville, 1995; Raymond Jones of Huntsville, 1996; Dan Miller of Greensboro, 1997; Homer Tate of Meridianville, 1998; Eugene Glenn of Hillsboro, 1999; George T. Hamilton of Hillsboro, 2000; Bert Driskell of Grand Bay, 2001; Charles Burton of Lafayette, 2002; Bruce Bush of Eufaula, 2003; John B. East of Leesburg, 2004; James A. Wise of Samson, 2005; Glenn Forrester of Columbia, 2006; Billy Gilley of Holly Pond, 2007; Lamar Dewberry of Lineville, 2008; and David Wright of Plantersville, 2009.

Alabama has had one overall winner with Raymond Jones of Huntsville being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 1996.

The Morris farm, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges during the week of Aug.9-13. The judges for this year include James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000; Jim Bone, manager of field development for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.; and Charles Snipes, a retired Mississippi Extension weed scientist who is president and research scientist with Stoneville R&D, Inc., from Greenville, Miss.

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**Note to media:** The farm of Shep Morris will be visited by the judges on Thursday, Aug. 12 from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. His farm is located at 4740 Cross Keys Road, Shorter, AL 36075. If you would like to visit the farm during the judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at [jbbatson@ctc.net](mailto:jbbatson@ctc.net), or contact Morris by calling 334-727-4895.