

# 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

### **JOE NICHOLS NAMED 2010 KENTUCKY FARMER OF THE YEAR**

As a 17-year-old, Joe Nichols saw his parents being forced to sell their farm. “My parents faced 18% interest rates, they had no crop insurance and their lenders just slammed the door on them, so they had to sell their farm,” he recalls. Today, he has built his own large and successful row crop farming operation near Cadiz, Ky. With a focus on the bottom line, he’s making sure his farm will never suffer the fate of his parents’ farm.

As a result of his success as a row crop farmer, Nichols has been selected as the 2010 Kentucky winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Nichols 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.

Nichols started farming 16 years ago. His Seven Springs Farms now encompasses 136 separate farms in five counties. He deals with 97 landlords and farms 306 fields. His farm includes a total of 19,242 acres with 14,242 acres in crop production. He rents 18,342 acres and owns 900 acres.

He produced some impressive crops last year. These include soybeans on 7,400 acres yielding 51 bushels per acre, yellow corn on 3,949 acres yielding 194 bushels per acre, white corn on 3,116 acres yielding 238 bushels per acre, wheat on 3,950 acres yielding 74 bushels per acre and dark fired tobacco on 71 acres yielding 3,200 pounds per acre. He’s a five-time winner of National Corn Growers Association yield contests.

After high school, he worked at a local John Deere dealer, and became a mechanic. In 1992, he opened his own repair business, but closed it in 1995 to return as general manager of the Deere dealership. Then, in 2000 he resigned to farm full time.

He makes extensive use of precision farming technology. For instance, he uses variable rate planting, determined by soil type. “Soil type reflects the water holding capacity of the soil,” he says. “Some soils are more productive than others, and the more productive soils get the higher plant populations. In sports terms, we play defense with our less productive fields and play offense with our more productive soils.”

He also uses global positioning and auto-steering on his equipment for swath control during planting, spraying and applying fertilizer. “This cuts down on over applying and

wasting money,” he says. “We strive to protect the environment and be the best stewards of the land and water that we can be.”

He believes his farm is at an efficient size. He says his next big investment will be to add irrigation. He installed two center pivots last year, is installing six more pivots this year and will add five new pivots over the next 18 months. “I expect to have 2,700 acres under center pivot irrigation within the next 24 months,” he says. He’s already using pivots to apply nitrogen to his corn.

Using specialized equipment, he conducts his own test plots. This frees up his larger machinery while still providing vital information on the merits of new farming practices

“The expertise needed to run our operation has increased as we have expanded,” he says. “For example, we employ a certified public accountant who acts as our office manager. We have our own agronomist on staff who focuses on crop production. We also hired a computer management specialist to handle our data. So when we finish planting, applying fertilizers or spraying chemicals, we can instantly review the maps on all farms to ensure full coverage. We have embraced technology in our operation.” Seven Springs Farms has 35 full-time employees and Nichols credits much of his success to Michael Oliver, a business partner who manages the crops.

By hiring experts, Nichols is able to focus on marketing. He sells white corn for export to customers in Latin America where it is used in food crops. He sells his dark fired tobacco to Swisher. “Burley tobacco is easier to top, requires less management and less attention in the barn than dark fired tobacco,” he says. “Dark fired tobacco is cured using fire from the burning of wood and sawdust.”

In marketing his grain crops, he make extensive use of futures trading. “If you understand the markets and the futures, you can become an above-average farmer,” he says.

An extensive, modern grain storage system also helps in marketing his crops. “We have 1.9 million bushels of grain storage capacity and the ability to dry 5,000 bushels of 25% moisture corn per hour,” he says. “We can store 100% of our crop each year.” Electronic controls and automated fans allow him to dry and store grain in peak condition, and he’s able to monitor his grain bins and center pivots from his office computers and cell phones.

“We have 152,000 gallons of fuel storage on our farm,” he says. “This will hold up to a year’s worth of farm diesel, highway diesel and gasoline. I’m able to take advantage of lower seasonal prices and purchase fuel in bulk.”

Nichols constantly focuses on the bottom line. For instance, he got out of the cattle business because the cattle lost money two years in a row.

He also has several profitable farm-related sideline businesses. One is a construction company with bulldozers, dirt pans and track hoes. He does custom planting and

harvesting on 750 acres for local farmers. He also provides custom grain and rock hauling. In addition, Nichols sells crop insurance.

“The goal I started with was to build an operation from scratch that could someday be viewed as one of the best, well-managed farming operations in North America,” he says. “This overarching goal is what drives me each day.”

He is a graduate of The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers at Texas A&M University and is a member of this program’s alumni group. Nichols serves on an advisory council for Farm Credit Services of Mid-America. He is a major donor to the Imagination Library Program conducted by the Cadiz/Trigg County Rotary Club. He has been a sponsor of Ducks Unlimited. He is a strong supporter of the Trigg County Youth Leadership Program. He is also a member of the Kentucky Soybean Association.

“I am fortunate to work each day with my spouse who is an integral part of our operation,” he says. His wife KaDonna works in his farm office. She has been a supporter of local schools, FFA and Relay for Life. She has also been a strong supporter of cheerleading at Trigg County High School and for the Bluegrass Cheercats, a competitive cheering team.

Joe and KaDonna have two daughters, Heather and Jillian. Heather attends Western Kentucky University as an agricultural business major and plans to return to the farm upon graduation. Jillian plans to attend the University of Kentucky and join their championship cheerleading squad. Both girls work on the farm during their summer breaks from school.

Jay McCants, director of Young Farmer programs with Kentucky Farm Bureau, is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Nichols was nominated for the honor by David Fourqurean, county Extension agent for agriculture & natural resources in Trigg County, Ky. Fourqurean is impressed with the size and the efficiency of Nichols’ farm, how he put it all together over a short period of time and his use of latest technology. “He has worked hard for what he has achieved,” adds Fourqurean.

As the Kentucky state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award, Nichols 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 also 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.

Kentucky farmers became eligible to compete for the award in 2006. Previous state winners from Kentucky include Sam Moore of Morgantown in 2006, Scott Travis of Cox's Creek in 2007; Loretta Lyons of Tompkinsville in 2008; and Doug Langley of Shelbyville in 2009.

Nichols' 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:** Seven Springs Farms owned by Joe Nichols will be visited by the judges on Wednesday, Aug. 11 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The farm is located at 602 Blackhawk Rd., Cadiz, KY 42211. 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 Nichols by calling 270-522-3424.