

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release
Contact: Janie Batson
704-788-7026
e-mail: jbbatson@ctc.net

For Immediate Release

BO STONE NAMED 2010 NORTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR

A dynamic young farmer, Michael “Bo” Thompson Stone of Rowland, N.C., has opened his farm to school children while building a thriving diversified row crop and livestock operation.

As a result of his success as a farmer, Stone has been selected as the 2010 North Carolina winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Stone 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 farmer for 14 years, he operates 2,218 acres of land. Major crops last year included corn on 800 acres yielding 135 bushels per acre, wheat on 800 acres yielding 65 bushels per acre, soybeans on 1,000 acres yielding 37 bushels per acre and strawberries on two acres yielding 17,000 pounds per acre. In addition, he feeds out hogs as a contract grower, producing about 10,000 head per year from six houses. He also has a beef herd of 70 cows.

Strawberries have been especially profitable. He picks most of the strawberries for sale from a roadside stand and for local deliveries. U-pick customers gather the rest.

Stone also has some 350 acres in timber. “A state forester helped him develop a management plan. He thinned timber two years ago and uses prescribed burning to reduce competition and improve wildlife habitat.

He grows swine for Murphy-Brown LLC. “We furnish the buildings and labor, and they furnish the feed and hogs,” he says. “We’re paid on per pound of gain and feed efficiency.” His commercial beef herd produces calves within a two-month period. He raises the calves for seven to 11 months, depending on market prices.

All crops except his strawberries are planted with no tillage. This allows him to tend 2,000 acres with two tractors. “Some fields haven’t seen a disk since I came back to the farm,” he says. “I don’t know if my best land is getting better, but I definitely see improvement in my marginal land.” He plants corn and soybeans in 20-inch rows, and grows soybeans and wheat as seed crops for Pioneer.

In 2006, he put in his first five-acre corn maze and has hosted 15,000 school children since then. “The maze is fun, but a lot of work,” he says. The children get to play in the maze and learn how food is grown. He also treats children to hayrides and gives them pumpkins to paint.

As an eight-year-old, his first farm job was picking up tobacco leaves from a custom-made harvester seat. “I’ve been involved in farming ever since,” Stone says. After earning two degrees from North Carolina State University, he worked for the Gold Kist cooperative, just long enough to develop a yearning to return to the farm. When he began farming in 1996, he developed a mission statement: to produce high quality food and farm products in a profitable and environmentally responsible manner. He bought his first farm in 1997 and a second one in 1998, the year he got married and faced a severe drought. “I represent the sixth generation of my family on this farm,” he adds.

He uses global positioning and takes soils samples by soil type. He applies pesticides and fertilizer with a guidance system, and last year he adopted variable rate application. He next plans to add variable rate planting. As he learns more, he may hire out precision farming services to other farmers

Stone recently bought equipment to pump sludge from hog lagoons and spread it as fertilizer. He used this equipment at one of his own lagoons and believes custom pumping and spreading could become a profitable sideline.

He added subsurface drip irrigation on 15 acres where he planted watermelons and sweet corn. He injects fertilizer through his drip lines to save on overall fertilizer use. He installed his first center pivot irrigation system last year, and will add more pivots in the years ahead.

Stone has 120,000 bushels of grain storage capacity on his farm. Grain storage also influences his marketing. “Marketing is the most important farm job I have,” he says. He checks prices daily and says his crop budgets and accurate yield predictions allow him to profitably use forward pricing.

He’s also taking part in the Conservation Security Program that rewards farmers for existing conservation practices.

Early on, tobacco was his major crop. “But the tobacco industry was changing, I saw the changes coming and I sold my tobacco equipment after the 2008 season,” he says. “I grew low-cost tobacco, but tobacco is labor-intensive, and I wanted to spend more time with my family. Also, the Conservation Security Program and my successful strawberry and corn maze enterprises convinced me I could transition out of tobacco without suffering significant financial losses.”

He has been active in several organizations, including county Farm Bureau, First Baptist Church and the boards of Southeastern Regional Medical Center and two private schools. He even served as a volunteer basketball coach at one of the schools. On the state level,

he has also been active in Farm Bureau. He served as president and in other positions with the N.C. Small Grain Growers Association. He's on Cape Fear Farm Credit's board and served on the Farm Service Agency state committee. In 2005, he won American Farm Bureau's Discussion Meet, and in 2006 he was runner-up in American Farm Bureau's Outstanding Young Farmer and Rancher Achievement Award program.

He has strong family support. His father Tommy Stone helps with the hogs and his grandfather Lyndell Stone often shows up to lend encouragement. Bo was especially pleased when he and his dad were able to buy farmland that once belonged to his great-great-grandfather.

Bo and his wife Melissa "Missy" Stone have three children, Sarah Grace, 9; Olivia Ann, 7; and Thompson Lyn, 3. "My parents gave me my opportunity to farm," Stone says. "Missy and my kids give me reasons to keep farming."

Scouts, soccer, school activities and the strawberry patch keep Missy busy. She has been active in Junior Service League, First Baptist Church and Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers and State Women's committees.

Ken Powell, director of field services with North Carolina Farm Bureau, is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Stone was nominated for the honor by Lycurous Lowry from Pembroke, N.C. Lowry is a fellow farmer who serves as president of the Farm Bureau in Robeson County, N.C.

As the North Carolina state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Stone 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 21st 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 North Carolina include John Vollmer of Bunn, 1990; Kenneth Jones of Pink Hill, 1991; John Howard, Jr. of Deep Run, 1992; Carlyle Ferguson of Waynesville, 1993; Dick Tunnell of Swan Quarter, 1994; Allan Lee Baucom of Monroe, 1995; Scott Whitford of Grantsboro, 1996; Williams Covington, Sr. of Mebane, 1997; Phil McLain of Statesville, 1998; Earl Hendrix of Raeford, 1999; Reid Gray of

Statesville, 2000; Rusty Cox of Monroe, 2001; Craven Register of Clinton, 2002; Frank Howey, Jr. of Monroe, 2003; Eddie Johnson of Elkin, 2004; Danny McConnell of Hendersonville, 2005; Tommy Porter of Concord, 2006; Bill Cameron of Raeford, 2007; V. Mac Baldwin of Yanceyville, 2008; and Fred Pittillo of Hendersonville, 2009.

North Carolina has had two overall winners with Eddie Johnson of Elkin being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 2004 and Bill Cameron of Raeford being named in 2007.

Stone's 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 Bo Stone will be visited by the judges on Tuesday, Aug. 10 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The farm is located at 525 Ashpole Church Road, Rowland, NC 28383. 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, or contact Stone by calling 910-422-8659.