

# 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

## **MARTY EASLER NAMED 2010 SOUTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Longtime tobacco farmer Martin I. “Marty” Easler of Greeleyville, S.C., remains close to nature. He farms and hunts on pristine land near the Santee River, serves as a magistrate judge and wrote a Farm Bureau position paper that led to a major change in U.S. farm policy.

As a result of his success as a tobacco and row crop farmer, Easler has been selected as the 2010 South Carolina winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Easler 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 more than 30 years, he currently operates about 3,300 acres of rented land and 600 acres of owned land. Last year, his crops included 390 acres of tobacco yielding 2,400 pounds per acre, 2,500 acres of soybeans yielding 35 bushels per acre and 1,000 acres of corn yielding 100 bushels per acre. This year, he’s growing about a thousand acres of cotton.

He has begun using precision farming practices for soil sampling and fertilizer applications. “I farm more than 600 fields, and I do my own soil sampling,” he says. “I’ve been able to save money on tobacco fertilizer because some of my fields didn’t need potassium.”

“My grandfather was a farmer, my dad was a farmer and I grew up in this way of life,” he says. He started farming on his own while in college when his dad bought a tobacco warehouse and needed help running the farm. “I didn’t own any land. My dad didn’t own much either, so I started by renting land,” Easler recalls. Over the years he tried many crops: cotton, cucumbers, corn, soybeans, wheat, peanuts, tomatoes, string beans and hay. He even raised beef cattle and hogs before settling on his current crop mix. Yet each year he farmed, he increased the size of his operation.

He grows conventional soybean varieties and saves money on technology fees he’d pay to grow Roundup Ready beans. He’s eager to try corn in 15-inch rows. And for the past five years, he has used strip tillage to plant his corn and soybeans.

Two years ago, he tried growing burley tobacco. “There’s good demand for burley,” says Easler. “Burley is cheaper to grow than flue cured tobacco. You don’t need to control suckers, there’s not as much labor involved and it is less expensive to cure.” He proved to himself he could grow it, but it didn’t produce the weight that he wanted. Still, he’s not giving up on burley. He says, “With practice, I believe I can grow burley and make more money from it than from flue cured tobacco.”

Tobacco has a rich heritage in his family. His younger brother Chuck was a world champion tobacco auctioneer at age 18, and still works as a professional auctioneer. His father Harry Easler was a successful tobacco warehouse operator who died earlier this year, but not before he passed along valuable lessons to his farming son.

“My dad taught me how to farm and how to treat people,” says Easler. “He was my best friend, my consultant and my role model. I hope to pass along his values to my children. He also taught me to stay close to my state legislators, and not just when you need help on a particular issue.”

This advice paid off for Easler and other farmers when South Carolina allocated 25% of tobacco settlement funds to state tobacco quota owners. The settlement funds resulted from a lawsuit against tobacco manufacturers brought by state attorneys general. “We worked and lobbied hard to get that money for farmers,” adds Easler. He also lobbied Congress during deliberations over the tobacco quota buyout.

For the past eight years, Easler has served as an appointed part time county magistrate judge. As a college student, he was interested in law but opted to become farmer rather than a lawyer. He likes the magistrate job because of its emphasis on justice and truth. Being a judge taught Easler to listen carefully. “Eventually, the truth comes out,” he says. As a magistrate, he sells bonds, issues warrants and conducts preliminary hearings. He rules on civil cases for claims of \$7,500 or less, and on minor criminal cases such as traffic violations and marijuana possession.

In 1999, Easler wrote a Farm Bureau position paper that resulted in counter-cyclical payments to U.S. farmers. Easler advanced the concept that farmers need support during times of low market prices. His proposal was rewritten several times before it was presented at the American Farm Bureau convention. Yet Easler’s first statement remained in the final version. It said, “If we don’t do something for production agriculture, there will be no production agriculture in the U.S. in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” The idea was adopted by Farm Bureau and was included in the next farm bill. “It showed me that individual farmers can make a difference,” he says.

Easler is active in Williamsburg Presbyterian Church and has sat on the boards of Williamsburg County Farm Bureau and Williamsburg Academy. Philip Morris USA has recognized his tobacco production. He was named Conservationist of the Year for Williamsburg County and received a conservation award from Goodyear and the National Association of Conservation Districts. He was named Agriculturist of the Year

by the Williamsburg Hometown Chamber of Commerce. A former South Carolina governor also recognized him for creating jobs.

He served eight years on the Farm Service Agency state committee. He also served on a state commission appointed to regulate the hunting of deer with dogs. "That was the most controversial issue I've been involved with," he adds.

He and his wife Dargan have seven children, five girls and two boys. They are Billie, 6; Marti, 10; Mildred, 12; Harry, 13; Emma, 15; Kathryn, 20 and Jim, 23. "My wife takes care of all of us and is a stay at home mom," says Easler. "She drives the children to ball games, dancing, cheerleading, doctors visits and to school every day." Dargan and all of his children have worked on the farm, especially during tobacco season. "They can tell you how hot and hard the work is," says Easler. His mother, Rose Easler, keeps financial books for the farm.

Steve Meadows, interim chief operating officer with the Cooperative Extension Service at Clemson University, is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award.

Russell Duncan, area Extension agent in Williamsburg County, nominated Easler for the honor. Over his Extension career, Duncan has worked in four counties and has nominated six state winners of the Farmer of the Year award. "Marty is a person other farmers follow to see what he's doing," says Duncan. "He's involved in the community and he's just a good ambassador for agriculture."

As the South Carolina state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Easler 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 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 South Carolina include: C. E. Thrailkill of Fort Lawn, 1990; Charles Snowden of Hemingway, 1991; Robert E. Connelly, Sr. of Ulmer, 1992; Henry Elliott, Sr. of Andrews, 1993; Ron Stephenson of Chester, 1994; Greg Hyman of Conway, 1995; Randy Lovett of Nichols, 1996; David Drew of Mullins, 1997; Jerry Edge of Conway, 1998; Blake McIntyre, III of Marion, 1999; Raymond Galloway of

Darlington, 2000; W. R. Simpson of Manning, 2001; Gill Rogers of Hartsville, 2002; Harold Pitts of Newberry, 2003; Earl Thrailkill of Fort Lawn, 2004; Chalmers Carr of Ridge Spring, 2005; Steve Gamble of Sardinia, 2006; William Johnson of Conway, 2007; Kent Wannamaker of St. Matthews, 2008; and Thomas DuRant of Gable, 2009.

South Carolina has had one overall winner with Ron Stephenson of Chester being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 1994.

Easler's farm, along with 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 Marty Easler will be visited by the judges on Monday, Aug. 9 from 1:15 p.m. until 4:14 p.m. Easler lives at 196 Richburg Rd., Greeleyville, SC 29056. 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 Easler by calling 843-426-2557.