

# Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

*Press Release*

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For Immediate Release

## **BRAD BLACK NAMED 2010 TENNESSEE FARMER OF THE YEAR**

A pioneer in the biofuels industry, Bradley M. “Brad” Black of Vonore, Tenn., has focused his farm on growing native warm season perennial switchgrass, a crop he hopes will be used for making ethanol year after year. He has also taken pains to insure that his family’s farmland will remain in farming for generations to come.

As a result of his success as a row crop and beef cattle farmer, Black has been selected as the 2010 Tennessee winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Black 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.

Black has farmed for 31 years. He farms 986 acres with 276 acres of rented land and 710 acres of owned land. Last year’s switchgrass on 183 acres yielded two tons per acre. He anticipates yields of six or more tons per acre when the stand is mature.

Last year’s other crops and their per acre yields included soybeans on 353 acres, 48 bushels; grass and clover hay on 100 acres, 2-1/2 tons; wheat on 61 acres, 41 bushels; wheat bale silage on 34 acres, six tons; and canola on 19 acres, 23 bushels.

In addition, he maintains a commercial beef herd of about 50 cows and heifers and sells calves as feeders at local auction markets.

He also has 150 acres in timber. He doesn’t like to cut his trees, but was forced to, twice due to pine beetles and once due to storm damage. He says four family households rely on wood from the tree stand to heat their homes, and he was able to use wood from his pines in the construction of his own home.

This year, Black increased his switchgrass plantings to 300 acres. He gets seed from a Texas company and plants six pounds of pure live seed per acre. Ken Goddard, a specialist with the University of Tennessee’s Biofuels Initiative, works with Black on the switchgrass. Goddard calls switchgrass “grassoline” because it is a new crop with potential to capture some of the \$600 billion U.S. consumers will spend each year on foreign oil.

“Switchgrass will be seven and a half feet tall when it matures in its third year,” says Goddard. “It is easy to grow once established, but establishment is tricky because its weak seedlings can’t stand shading from weeds. It’s also a good conservation crop with deep roots, and it can be a good forage crop.”

Using hay equipment to harvest switchgrass is a plus for Black. He sells his switchgrass to a tax-funded demonstration ethanol plant also located in Vonore and operated by the University of Tennessee and DuPont Danisco. He is paid \$450 per acre per year over three years to grow his first batch of switchgrass. Contracts for new plantings offer incentives for farmers to boost their yields. The new contracts pay \$250 per acre plus \$40 per ton for production during the second year and \$150 per acre plus \$50 per ton during the third year.

Black has harvested some switchgrass and wheat as round bale silage. He found a great conservation use for the bales he didn’t need for cattle feed by placing them in a badly eroding ditch. “We lined the ditch with used net wrap and then buried it under the chopped baleage,” he explains.

Conservation is a top priority for Black because he farms steep hillsides. “Since 1980, no-till planting has been the rule rather than the exception,” he says. He received cost-share funding last year from the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program to fence out stream zones and confine his cattle to designated stream crossings.

Black is also excited about canola as a possible replacement for wheat. He sold canola last year to a North Georgia firm for \$9.60 per bushel. He wanted to plant it again last fall, but ground conditions were too wet. “My doublecropped soybeans yielded very well after canola,” he adds.

“For 15 years, we grew tobacco,” says Black. “There was tobacco on this farm ever since I can remember.” He stopped growing burley three years ago due to its labor requirement and because he was disappointed in prices paid for the quality of his leaves. “I hated working tobacco as a kid, but now I miss it,” he adds.

His wife Kimberly “Kim” Black is his working partner. She doesn’t miss tobacco, but works hard on the farm and specializes in caring for the cattle. “The cows are Kim’s passion,” says Black. She spent 31 years building the herd. “We’re growing Angus-Hereford crosses, black baldies,” she says. Both Brad and Kim have earned Master Beef Producer and Beef Quality Assurance certifications. They’ve used state cost share funds to help buy bulls to improve herd genetics. “We’re real excited about our calves,” she adds. Under Kim’s care, the cows calve in a two-month period with a 94% calving percentage.

The Blacks spent their honeymoon and their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary at the Sunbelt Expo. They have shared their farm with researchers and have hosted many tour groups. They’ve been active in a host of organizations, including Vonore United Methodist Church, Farm Bureau, Cattlemen’s Associations and American Angus Association.

Legacy is an important concept for the Blacks. They've seen nearby land they farmed turned into a golf course, and they vowed not to let that happen to their land. They've worked long hours with attorneys and a Knoxville-based financial planning firm to develop a land trust for their property. It will insure the land will be kept in farming for three generations plus 99 years. If the land is sold, it must remain in farming for the length of the trust. They also organized a farmland legacy meeting for neighboring farmers to share what they're doing to preserve their land in agriculture.

The Blacks have three grown children, a daughter Amy and two sons, Adam and Thomas. Amy is a mechanical engineer, Adam owns a restaurant and Thomas is a chef. "All three of our children were involved in our legacy planning and agree with our decision to place our land in the trust," says Kim.

As Brad puts it, "We do not look at this farm as something we own. It is what God has given us to care for, just as our ancestors have done since the 1820's when they settled this place."

Tim Cross, dean of Extension with the University of Tennessee, is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Alice Rhea, area Extension farm management specialist from Maryville, Tenn., nominated Black for the award. She says the Blacks are "the kind of people we need in production agriculture. Just look at their production efficiency and what they've done to preserve and conserve their land, and with just two people on the farm. It is amazing."

As the Tennessee state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Black 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.

Previous state winners from Tennessee include: James R. Graham of Newport, 1990; Burl Ottinger of Parrottsville, 1991; Dwaine Peters of Madisonville, 1992; Edward Wilson of Cleveland, 1993; Bob Willis of Hillsboro, 1994; Bobby W. Vannatta of Bell Buckle, 1995; George McDonald of Riddleton, 1996; Jimmy Gaylord of Sharon, 1997;

Jimmy Tosh of Henry, 1998; Eugene Pugh, Jr. of Halls, 1999; Harris Armour of Somerville, 2000; Malcolm Burchfiel of Newbern, 2001; Ed Rollins of Pulaski, 2002; John Smith of Puryear, 2003; Austin Anderson of Manchester, 2004; John Litz of Morristown, 2005; Bob Willis of Hillsboro, 2006; Grant Norwood of Paris, 2007; Jerry Ray of Tullahoma, 2008; and Richard Atkinson of Belvidere, 2009.

Tennessee has had two overall winners with Jimmy Tosh of Henry in 1998 and Bob Willis of Hillsboro in 2006.

Black'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; and 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 Brad Black will be visited by the judges on Monday, Aug. 9 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The farm is located at 2590 Niles Ferry Road, Vonore, TN 37885. 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 Black by calling 423-884-6519.