

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

CARY LIGHTSEY NAMED 2009 FLORIDA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Located just south of Disney World, Brahma Island is home to 300-year-old oaks, ancient Indian settlements, wild game, 28 endangered species, 14 bald eagle nests and commercial beef cattle. This island, owned by Cary Lightsey of Lake Wales, Fla., and his Lightsey Cattle Co., is preserved in its natural state and will remain so through a perpetual conservation easement.

On the island and his other ranches, Lightsey raises 6,580 head of commercial cattle, 120 head of purebred Charolais, 220 head of Angus and 285 herd bulls.

As a result of his ranching and related enterprises, Lightsey has been named the 2009 Florida winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Lightsey joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 20 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

A sixth generation Florida rancher, each year he preconditions 2,250 yearlings. He sells 1,080 head through Internet and local livestock auctions. He retains 780 heifers for replacements. And he retains ownership on 1,710 head per year fed out in Texas feedlots. He operates 36,200 acres, including 17,800 rented acres and 18,400 acres of owned land. His crops include 420 acres of irrigated citrus, 300 acres of bahiagrass sod, 450 acres of bahia for seed and 2,800 acres of forage.

He sells 20% of the bulls he raises to other ranches. "We have \$800 invested in a bull at breeding age," says Lightsey. "That saves us a pile of money." Most of his bulls are Maine Anjou-Angus crosses with some Simmental blood. He also uses Charolais bulls to breed Brangus cows, while Angus-based bulls breed Brafordts.

He has achieved several production goals. For instance, his cows produce a 97.2% calf crop. He breeds heifers at 14 months and they produce a 95% calf crop.

"As a child, I went with my father on cattle drives and knew I wanted to be a rancher," he recalls. A few years after graduating from high school, he faced his biggest challenge. His father died without a will. As Lightsey and his brother took over the ranch, they faced estate taxes that were more than the entire value of their land. Determined to pay the taxes without selling land, Lightsey moved to a mobile home, and added commercial

hunting, citrus and vegetable enterprises. He no longer grows vegetables, but these ventures helped pay the taxes, save the ranch and set the stage for new growth. He says, “The estate tax case was in probate court ten years, but we finally paid it off.”

The guided hunts have been especially rewarding. Lightsey welcomes 700 hunters each year to his 2,300-acre Brahma Island in Lake Kissimmee primarily to shoot wild hogs and exotic deer. Hunters of note have included actors Johnny Depp and Bruce Willis, basketball star Shaquille O’Neal and Tampa Bay Buccaneers football players. He also offers Brahma Island ecological tours, and averages seven tours per year with 45 people per group. These tours showcase his environmental stewardship.

He was the first Florida rancher to use conservation easements. His property qualifies for easements because he keeps 40% in native land use. Now, 70% of his land is in conservation easements. With the easements, Lightsey is paid for development rights by conservation organizations, and he uses this money to buy additional land in Florida and Georgia.

Citrus plantings began in 1983. “Our citrus enjoyed a 12-year period when prices peaked,” he says. “There’s good demand for fresh citrus, and our trees yield 700 boxes per acre.” His fruit trees are near a lake at the headwaters of the Everglades. He removes nutrients by rerouting water from his groves into grassed marshes. This approach worked so well, water management districts started using it elsewhere in Florida.

He added other enterprises. For instance, he’s paid \$1,000 each to relocate threatened gopher tortoises onto his ranches, and he’s paid 36 cents per pound for hand-harvested palmetto berries that are shipped to France and made into a medicine aimed at preventing prostate cancer. His latest sideline is Wagyu beef sold in Japan. He expects a 30-cent-per-pound premium for his Wagyu crossbreeds. If that works, he may grow purebred Wagyu, and perhaps enter the Kobe beef market, producing steaks that sell for \$120 each in restaurants. “With niches like these we can make a good living for our family,” he says.

He raises nine forage species. Some of these include ryegrass for winter backgrounding, and Floralta limpgrass and Jiggs bermudagrass, both warm-season perennial grasses. He says Floralta efficiently takes up nutrients and promotes water quality. Jiggs is adapted to poorly drained land. He was the first to bring Jiggs to Florida from Texas, started with one-fourth acre sprigged by hand, and now has 2,800 acres in both Florida and Georgia. He has also sold Jiggs sprigs for planting 5,000 acres to other Florida ranches.

Lightsey’s cattle also eat other feeds such as bakery byproducts mixed with citrus pulp, and sausage casings mixed with dried distiller’s grains from a Georgia ethanol plant. This past winter, citrus byproducts helped get his cattle through a major drought.

“We use environmentally safe biosolids to replace fertilizer,” he says. As treated sewage sludge, biosolids are tightly regulated. “We’ve used it on half of our grass patches, and we saw a 30% increase in citrus yield after we used it there,” he says.

“People wonder how we got so big so fast,” he says. “It was a matter of good planning and good timing. We bought at a time when land values were going up.”

He also avoided his father’s mistake. “We have estate planning for the next two generations in our family,” adds Lightsey. “About 70% of our land is in a limited liability partnership to protect the interests of our children and grandchildren.”

His environmental stewardship has been recognized by the Florida Cattlemen’s Association, the state’s ag commissioner and the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. Lightsey is a member of local, state and national Cattlemen’s associations. He has been a 4-H and FFA supporter and active in Lake Wales Lutheran Church.

He married his childhood sweetheart. His wife Marcia handles ranch bookkeeping and is active in local, state and national CattleWomen organizations. The Lightseys have three grown children, daughters Lori and Leigh Ann and son Clinton. All have their own cattle herds and are involved on the ranch with their families.

Danny Raulerson, director of field services for Florida Farm Bureau, is state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Ray Crawford, Florida Farm Bureau assistant director of field services, nominated Lightsey for the award. “Cary and Marcia are two of the nicest people you’ll meet,” says Crawford. “They’re super environmentalists and cattle producers.”

“We love what we do,” says Lightsey. “My brother Layne and I are best friends. We work as a team. Other than my family and my health, what I’m most proud of is how we saved this ranch after my dad died.”

As the Florida winner, Lightsey will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo in Moultrie, Ga., 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 goes 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 20th consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$764,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Florida include: Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1990; Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1991; Wayne Wiggins of Plant City, 1992; Leroy Baldwin of Ocala,

1993; Billy Long of Apopka, 1994; Richard Barber of Ocala, 1995; Al Bellotto of Lakeland, 1996; Rex Clonts of Apopka, 1997; John Hoblick of DeLeon Springs, 1998; Doug Holmberg of Valrico, 1999; Damon Deas of Jennings, 2000, Gene Batson of Mount Dora, 2001; William Putnam of Alturas, 2002; Sonny Williamson of Okeechobee, 2003; Dale Sauls of Anthony, 2004; Louis “Red” Larson of Okeechobee, 2005; Damon Deas of Jennings, 2006; Alto “Bud” Adams of Ft. Pierce, 2007; and Randy Strode of Longwood, 2008.

Florida has had five overall winners: Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1991; Leroy Baldwin of Ocala, 1993; Rex Clonts of Apopka, 1997; Doug Holmberg of Valrico, 1999; and Louis “Red” Larson of Okeechobee, 2005.

Lightsey’s ranch, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges during the week of Aug. 10-14. The judges for this year include Elwyn Deal, a retired Clemson University Extension leader from Anderson, S.C.; James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000; and Jim Bone, field development manager for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.

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Note to media: Cary Lightsey’s ranch will be visited by the judges on Tuesday, Aug. 11 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The ranch is located at 14001 Sam Keen Road, Lake Wales, FL 33898. If you would like to visit the operation during the judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at jbbatson@ctc.net, or contact Lightsey by calling 863-969-2257.