

2003 Commissioner's

Ag·Environmental

LEADERSHIP AWARDS



Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

CHARLES H. BRONSON, Commissioner



Dear Friends in Agriculture:



It is my great pleasure to recognize the winners of the 2003 Commissioner's Agricultural-Environmental Leadership Awards: Williamson Cattle Company of Okeechobee, Aquatica Tropicals of Plant City, and Sun City Tree Farm of Ruskin.

Agriculturists are by their very nature sincere environmentalists.

Depending on the land for their livelihood, they are charged with the responsibility of understanding and preserving the natural resources that make agricultural success possible. Florida's increasing population is putting ever greater pressure on those resources, and it is by the exemplary stewardship of these award winners that we see how agricultural and environmental interests in Florida are the same.

This is the 10th year the awards have been given, and there have now been 32 recipients. This year's winners have again been selected by an independent committee made up of representatives from environmental groups, agricultural groups, and government agencies. Nominees for the awards come from different parts of Florida's agricultural industry, but they all share a commitment to protect and preserve Florida's resources while continuing to provide agricultural products for our people.

I congratulate the 2003 Agricultural-Environmental Leadership Award winners. This booklet gives a brief overview of their achievements.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Charles H. Bronson".

Charles H. Bronson

Commissioner of Agriculture

WILLIAMSON

CATTLE COMPANY



Okeechobee, Florida

More than a half century ago, Frank Williamson Sr. founded the Williamson Cattle Company, and today the business is still a family operation. Frank “Sonny” Williamson Jr. and his son, Frank “Wes” Williamson III, run the 9,000-acre ranch and citrus operation in Okeechobee while Wes’ son,



John Williamson, runs another part of the cattle operation and a catfish farm in west central Alabama. Sonny’s wife, Betty, has helped with ranching activities over the years and was also involved in writing a book chronicling the historical agricultural development of the area.

“My father’s father came to Florida in 1896 and my father followed right after that, coming to Okeechobee in about 1941 and acquiring the land here about 1950,” Sonny said. “And the family has been developing the ranch ever since.”

Early on, the Williamsons also began growing citrus at their Okeechobee location, and in the 1970s bought additional land in Alabama on which they eventually decided to produce catfish as well as cattle.

The Williamsons’ diversification has been a solid strategy against the cyclic nature of agricultural prices. The ranch raises quality commercial

“My father’s father came to Florida in 1896 and my father followed right after that, coming to Okeechobee in about 1941 and acquiring the land here about 1950,” Sonny said. “And the family has been developing the ranch ever since.”

Brangus cattle for the feeder calf markets in the feedlot states. Its citrus groves produce red and white grapefruit for the fresh export market, primarily in Japan and Europe, and early- and late-season oranges for processed orange juice. Fluctuations in catfish market prices are buffered by increased production achieved by feeding high-quality food from an Alabama feed mill in which the company is a partner.

“My dad used to say, ‘When you’re on a mountain top, beware, because there’s a valley coming,’” Sonny said. “Our diversity helps to level out the month-to-month cash flow and also some of the vagaries of the commodity markets.”



The Williamsons' business decisions have always been made with an eye toward environmental concerns.

On their ranch, cattle have access to more than 9,000 acres, but only about 6,000 of those acres are grazable. Most of the hammocks, pine forests, and swamps on the property have been left in their natural state to assure the aesthetic value of the property and promote the abundance of wildlife. With deer, turkey, and otters viewable in their natural settings, the decision to retain their habitat was an easy one. Furthermore, some improvements made in

pasturing and foraging have not only increased the land's capacity for cattle, but its capacity for wildlife as well.

“We loved the way the land looked, and we saw that as sort of a bottom-line benefit, the way making money would be a bottom-line benefit,” Sonny said. “And when you can ride through a place and love looking at the animals and the woodlands, that’s a kind of a pay day, too.”

Growing citrus introduces other complexities, such as the large quantities of water needed for irrigation, a need that has been supported for nearly 10 years by an agreement with the Okeechobee



Utility Authority that lets the Williamsons use treated water reclaimed from the Okeechobee area. Studied and declared safe by the University of Florida, the water is clear and clean, and its use helps both agriculture and the local urban community.

The beef industry in Okeechobee County has been under intense regulation with respect to the quality of water runoff from the ranches, and the water leaving the Williamson Cattle Company has the least amount of phosphorous per liter of any tributary in the basin. The Williamsons have worked with the University of Florida to change some of the regulations on phosphorous fertilization of pasture grasses, and have actually developed a phosphorous budget that keeps track of all the phosphorous that comes onto the property in feed and fertilizer and all that leaves the property in the form of exports, which is basically beef cattle.



Frank "Sonny" Williamson Jr.



Frank "Wes" Williamson III

"We found that we actually do a negative phosphorous balance, which means that we sell more phosphorous off the ranch than we bring in, in the way of fertilizer or minerals for the cattle," Sonny said. "That's a long-term goal that we should strive for in all of agriculture."

The family's catfish farming operation in Alabama requires stocking 8,000 to 10,000 fish per acre every year and feeding



them a high-protein, soybean-based feed throughout the warmer summer months. Chemistry of the nutrient-rich water must be carefully managed, which can mean weekly and daily checks. Especially critical factors such as the water's dissolved oxygen content are checked hourly.

The Williamsons have also been involved in many activities outside the Cattle Company. Sonny was on the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District for eight years, two as chairman. He is currently very active in civic and agriculturally related environmental committees as well as several university boards.





Wes is the current president of the Okeechobee Cattlemen's Association and is a frequent guest lecturer at the annual University of Florida Beef Short Course. He also chairs the steering committee responsible for directing rulemaking efforts for the Lake Okeechobee Protection Plan. John is a member of the Alabama Cattlemen's Association and the Alabama Farmers Association.

Balancing a successful agricultural operation with Florida's environmental concerns is a challenge the Williamsons have met head-on.

"We are a family-owned corporation, and we have a direction here," Wes said. "We feel we have a responsibility to the owners of the Williamson Cattle Company before us and the owners of the company after us."



SUN CITY

TREE FARM

Ruskin, Florida

Located in an area of Hillsborough County under critical water constraints, Sun City Tree Farm performed like an environmentalist's dream come true last year, as it used only 60 percent of its permitted amount of water.

The farm is owned and operated by brothers



J.C. Tort

Eric Tort

J.C. and **Eric Tort**, who have demonstrated that conservation efforts can readily go hand-in-hand with economic interests as they have expanded their tree farm from five to 150 acres over the past 16 years while also implementing a number of innovative practices that have significantly reduced water usage.

“As the farm has grown, our permitting has stayed the same, and so we have only the same amount of water,” J.C. said. “Over the years, we’ve had to come up with new systems to use less and less water and still grow trees better.”

The Torts’ many innovations range from developing a clamp and tether system that keeps trees from falling over in high winds while preventing injury to the trees, to adapting a root bag system that saves water by allowing tree roots to draw water from the ground.

Currently, 80 percent of their stock of approximately 100,000 trees is grown above ground in cloth bags as part of that root bag system, helping

“As the farm has grown, our permitting has stayed the same, and so we have only the same amount of water,” J.C. said. “Over the years, we’ve had to come up with new systems to use less and less water and still grow trees better.”

the Torts maximize the value of their plants while reducing the costs of fertilizer, weed control chemicals, fuel, irrigation, and labor. Trees grown in bags also show a faster rate of growth and are easily removed from the field for transport. A study done at the University of Florida over a two-year production cycle showed the profit on trees grown in bags to be approximately \$74 per tree, contrasted with \$15 per tree for those grown in traditional plastic pots. An economic analysis of Sun City done by UF-IFAS several years ago found it to be one of the most efficient tree farms in the state.

Each bagged tree is equipped with a drip emitter, which uses 30 percent to 50 percent less water than the conventional overhead



sprinklers commonly used for irrigation in the nursery industry. Trees are also closely monitored for nutrient and moisture levels that allow for precision application of water and slow release fertilizer. To limit the amounts of chemical controls needed, trees are routinely inspected for insect pests and spot treated only as needed.

“When the problem is small, you can really hit the target with minimal damage to the environment,” Eric said. “When you wait

too long, you have to use so much pesticide that the whole environment suffers.”

The Torts are also investigating the release of natural insect predators and biological control agents to naturally manage pest populations.

Another part of Sun City’s operation is a second site of 20 acres that is irrigated solely by surface water from rain and storm water collected in a two-acre storage pond, eliminating the need for a



well and for groundwater withdrawals, which in turn saves water while also minimizing the negative impacts of saltwater intrusion to underground aquifer levels.

Still other environmental considerations in use at Sun

City include leaving grass walkways between tree rows to increase the infiltration of rainwater and prevent soil compaction while also reducing



the need for herbicides.

Around the farm's first site, a windbreak of trees was planted to create shelter for birds and other wildlife, while the second site is encircled by six acres of vegetative buffer to maintain natural habitat.

Recycling is a regular part of the farm's routine, with even the cloth root bags reused as protective wrap on tree trunks during transport.

Always trying to learn ways to operate more



efficiently, the Torts have some trees growing in other types of pots in order to compare tree growth, plant vigor, water use, root production, ease of handling, and other characteristics. The use of new pot designs, water monitors, irrigation flow meters, surface water/irrigation reuse, and other water management tools put Sun City Tree Farm on the cutting edge of available and affordable technology, a place they want to stay.



“The state is growing tremendously, and more people are getting into tree farming and so the competition is getting tighter,” J.C. said. “We have to be innovative and grow good quality trees, and I think our future will be great.”

Born in Morocco, J.C. and Eric are now proud to be United States citizens and active members of Hillsborough County’s agricultural community, where J.C. has served two years as president of the

Tampa Bay Wholesale Growers and as the Tampa Chapter president of the Florida Nursery Growers Association. J.C. has said that everything he knows he learned from someone else. Now, he says, it is his responsibility to reciprocate, and so the Torts encourage other growers to visit their farm where they freely share information on their operation and production systems.



“The greatest reward is when other growers, who have the same problems we do, walk onto our farm and compliment us about our operation,” Eric said. “After all our hard work, this is the best thing we can hear.”

A large number of small, light-colored fish, possibly goldfish or similar species, are swimming in a dark blue tank. The fish are densely packed and appear to be of various colors, including white, yellow, and light orange. The background is a deep blue, and the lighting is bright, highlighting the fish's scales and fins.

AQUATICA

TROPICALS, INC.

Plant City, Florida

Raising fish has always been a big part of Marty Tanner's life. He started working on a fish farm at age 20, and just six years later began in the fish farming business for himself on eight acres east of Plant City.

Marty and his wife, **Sue**, expanded that farm and purchased a second one, a 13-acre facility



in Lakeland. Today, his company, **Aquatica Tropicals, Inc.**, is a high-tech, ornamental aquaculture production facility using state-of-the-art technology with facilities in Plant City, Lakeland, and a new one under construction in Ruskin. Between the three sites, the company currently is producing and marketing 150,000 to 200,000 fish a week.

Even with its impressive growth, the company is still run as a family business, with the Tanners overseeing the day-to-day operation while their children help out during summers and on school holidays. The company's 20 employees are also treated like family and take great pride in their work.

“The single key element to our success is the people who work for us,” Tanner said. “They are responsible, conscientious and hard working. We think of them as coworkers rather than employees.”

Another reason for Aquatica Tropicals' success has been its use of indoor facilities to breed and raise fish. On the Plant City farm, Tanner

“The single key element to our success is the people who work for us,” Tanner said. “They are responsible, conscientious and hard working. We think of them as coworkers rather than employees.”

constructed a 12,000-square-foot building that produces as many fish as 30 acres of outdoor pond culture. Working indoors also allows the creation of a controlled environment that reduces the danger of weather damage, so for example, when the freezes of 2001 caused fish farm losses near 80 percent in Central Florida, the indoor facilities at Aquatica Tropical were essentially unaffected.

The Plant City facility has a heating and cooling system that controls water temperature and a water recirculating system that continually cleans and reuses more than two million gallons of water each day. The use of such a closed system eliminates potential pollution from surface or ground water while also dramatically reducing the need for ground

water pumping. The system also saves labor in an industry that is labor intensive, and allows Aquatica Tropicals to use less than half the labor of a conventional fish farm. Still another benefit of indoor fish rearing is the elimination of losses to wading bird predation, which is a severe problem in outdoor pond culture.



Most of Tanner's innovative practices are not regulatory requirements, but a combination of business sense and environmental conscience.

"Although I like to think of myself as a viable business person, I'm also very environmentally sensitive," Tanner said. "Seven or eight years ago, we were in a drought situation and not able to water lawns or wash cars, and I asked myself 'How can I morally use the amount of water we are using to produce fish?' The decision to go to the recirculation technology was as much a moral issue as a business decision."

Even more far-reaching than their local environmental practices are programs entered into with the University of Florida and other



Marty Tanner

research facilities. Aquatica Tropicals has assisted in the pioneering of new spawning techniques that allow the reproduction of the popular neon tetra fish on local farms, an operation that replaces the practice of wild capturing, thus eliminating most of the stress and diseases that affect wild-captured fish. Producing locally grown fish also removes the threat of reducing wild tetra populations in their native countries.



“There is always a certain amount of loss associated with harvesting fish from the wild,” Tanner said. “From both an economic and environmental standpoint, if we can do the research, do the



reproductive physiology work, and provide the means to produce the fish internally instead of taking them from the wild, the aquarium industry is going to be better for it.”

In addition to running Aquatica Tropicals, Tanner helps the industry by serving on several advisory boards and committees. He is president of the Florida Aquaculture Association; a member of the Hillsborough Community College’s Aquaculture Education Advisory Committee; on

the advisory board of the Southern Regional Aquaculture Center; on the board of the Florida Sea Grant IAC; and chairman of the University of Florida Tropical Aquaculture Lab Advisory Committee. He is also on the Board of Directors of the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau.

Aquatica Tropicals regularly offers tours to legislators, environmental regulators, school groups, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts. The company also

participates in their community's school activities by sponsoring students and donating to fund-raising events.

Tanner's view of the future of the Florida fish industry is rich with potential, including the use of his state-of-the-art fish producing facilities to branch into the biotech industry by growing strains of fish to be used in areas of advanced medical research.

"When you look at our industry in general, and at the ornamental industry in particular, we can better ourselves by raising a better quality fish, by raising a better quality product line, and by being more competitive in the marketplace," Tanner said. "The industry will benefit, and the environment will benefit. It will be a win-win situation for everybody."



Previous Winners

2002

Holloway Irrigation Systems – Leesburg
Daniel A. Botts – Orlando
Sanwa Growers, Inc. – Wimauma

2001

Carlton 2x4 Ranch – Arcadia
Barthle Brothers Ranch – San Antonio

2000

Pacific Tomato Growers Ltd. – Palmetto
Evans Properties, Inc. – Vero Beach

1999

Two Rivers Ranch, Inc. – Thonotosassa
Lykes Bros., Inc. – Okeechobee
Suwannee Farms – O'Brien

1998

Longino Ranch – Arcadia
V & W Farms – Avon Park

1997

Anclote River Ranch – Odessa

1996

Edward "Jack" Campbell – Homestead
Citrus World, Inc. – Lake Wales
Ekkwill Waterlife Resources – Gibsonton

1995

Schroeder Manatee Ranch – Bradenton
Burt McKee – Tampa
Davie Dairy, Inc. – Okeechobee
O.F. Nelson and Sons Nursery – Apopka
Bright Hour Ranch – Arcadia
Deseret Ranches of Florida – St. Cloud
Fulford Farms, Inc. – Monticello

1994

Rafter T Cattle Company – Avon Park
A. Duda and Sons, Inc. – Oviedo
Babcock Florida Company – Punta Gorda
Gustafson's Dairy Farm – Green Cove Springs
Jon's Nursery, Inc. – Eustis
Adams Ranch, Inc. – Fort Pierce

