

## 2016 Best Young Farmers, Ranchers

*Honorees Recognized for Innovation, Involvement in Home Communities*

By Dan Miller

CHICAGO (DTN) -- DTN/The Progressive Farmer's 2016 honorees in the America's Best Young Farmers and Ranchers Program were announced Monday at the company's annual Ag Summit in Chicago.

Honored in this the sixth year of the program were Martin Williams of Red Rock, Oklahoma; Bobby (Bo) Norris Jr., of Society Hill, South Carolina; Matthew Efird of Fresno, California; Cody Goodknight, of Chattanooga, Oklahoma; and Andrew Crush, of Lovettsville, Virginia.

"DTN and The Progressive Farmer have a nationally recognized reputation for their support of America's young farmers and ranchers," said Gregg Hillyer, editor in chief for The Progressive Farmer magazine. "The America's Best Young Farmers and Ranchers Program is an exciting extension of our appreciation for the innovation and imagination of our next generation of farmers and ranchers."

The America's Best Young Farmer and Ranchers Program recognizes leaders in production and management innovation, and also for their involvement in their home communities.

"They bring their same talents for farming and ranching to the challenges facing the rural communities where they make their homes," Hillyer said. "We view community involvement as important to future of production agriculture in the United States. If farmers and ranchers aren't advocates for small-town America and for their profession, who will be?"

DTN/The Progressive Farmer also announced nominations are being accepted for the 2017 America's Best Young Farmers and Ranchers Program.

Here are brief looks at the 2016 honorees. Full features will be included in a special section of the February 2016 issue of The Progressive Farmer.

### **Martin Williams, 34, M&C Farms, Red Rock, Oklahoma**

Martin Williams is a fifth generation farmer working outside Red Rock, Oklahoma. The operation includes 5,880 acres of winter wheat, winter canola, corn, grain sorghum, soybeans, winter barley and hay. Williams also operates a growing cow-calf business. The farm is 100% no-till.

Williams is planning for continual growth in his no-till operation, an effort made more efficient with one purchase -- a self-propelled row-crop sprayer. "No-till requires a lot

of time on the sprayer and the decision to split apply crop nutrients, in crop with that sprayer has proven to be the most financially rewarding thing I have done on the farm."

Williams intends to expand. "Being aggressive in my style of management and operation, it is easy to see that expansion is in my future," Williams said. "As capital allows, I intend to increase acres to a size where I feel comfortable with equipment and personnel ability."

Marketing crops in a timely manner has been a challenge. Williams has only 40,000 bushels of on-farm storage and local grain elevators with aging infrastructure, "I recognize the importance of investing in new, on-site storage." Williams is planning to build 100,000 bushels of new storage.

In addition to the farm, Williams is chairman of the board of his local church, he works with his local food bank and he supports the local backpack program. Williams also serves on the Noble County Conservation Board, Two River's Cooperative Board, Noble County Cattlemen's Association and the Noble County Farm Bureau Board.

Key to success is innovation, Williams said. "I'm willing to step out of my comfort zone and challenge old ways of thinking."

Williams is married to Crystal. They are raising two children, daughter Ava and son, Morgan.

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### **Bobby (Bo) Norris Jr., 36, Norris Farms, Society Hill, South Carolina**

Bo Norris farms some of the same dirt his ancestors worked 150 years ago. But they would never imagine how he farms outside Society Hill, S.C., today. He has been an eager adapter of technology. The 2,100-acre farm does all its own grid sampling and variable rate spreading. Norris has purchased RTK steering options for his planting tractors. He has auto boom section controls on his sprayers. And, the farm is moving toward deploying variable rate seeding and row command controls for his planters.

If there is a word to describe Norris Farms, it is change. "We changed our planting practices quite a few times to suit the land we have, and the land conditions we have," Norris explains. "In the long run, even though we burn a little more diesel fuel, we get more of that high-priced seed to where it can make us money."

Norris Farms produces corn, soybeans and wheat, rows of cotton, grain sorghum and canola. Norris also tends to oats, sells hardwood and pine from 300 acres of scattered timber stands and coastal Bermuda hay. He owns a couple of turkey houses, runs 70 Simmental brood heifers and their angus-mix calves, and has a custom farming arm.

Norris is a member of the Wallace First Church of the Nazarene. He is vice president of the Chesterfield County Farm Bureau and has recently retired from the Chesterfield County Farm Service Agency board. In 2004, he was selected as the South Carolina Young Farmer and Agribusiness young farmer of the year. In 2009, he and his wife, Patti were named the South Carolina's Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Rancher Achievement Award winners.

Norris is married to Patti. They have a daughter, Sunny.

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### **Matthew Efird, 38, Efird Ag Enterprises, Inc., Fresno, California**

Matthew Efird farms in California's central San Joaquin Valley, in the heart of that state's latest, and perhaps greatest, drought. The condition of his almond and walnut trees and grapes vines are a bit deceiving in the midst of the drought. The orchards and vines are green, healthy and productive.

That's because Efird has found that this drought can be managed -- even as the costs of managing it rise. The drought has presented opportunities to bring new technology and practices onto his farm.

"We've been proactive in investing in irrigation technology," he said. "We've been all micro-sprinklers for 10 years." Irrigation water is no longer allowed to meander down the entire width of a tree or vine row. Instead, the water is applied directly to the berm where the roots can most efficiently use it. The sprinklers have cut his water use 30% to 50%, a new efficiency that cost \$1,500 to \$2,500 an acre.

The micro irrigation system also gives Matthew the capability to fertilize his vineyards and orchards at the end of an irrigation cycle; the timing of the application is important because it reduces the leaching of nutrients applied to the root system. He has been able to reduce his herbicide costs by 50% by treating only the watered areas for weeds.

Efird is a fifth generation farmer and vice president of Double E Farms with his father, Russel. The ranch grows 1,500 acres of almonds, walnuts and grapes sold as both raisins and for wine. Efird Ag Enterprises, Inc., of which Matthew is president, is the commercial operations branch of the farm. It includes a commercial harvesting arm with 2,500 acres under contract, a 15,000-ton-per-year produce transport business, and a business dedicated to shredding orchard prunings.

Efird has been accepted into the California Ag Leadership Program. He is one of 24 fellows accepted from hundreds of applicants who have embarked on a two-year journey of personal development, leadership training, and public speaking education.

Efird is married to Kelsey. They have a newborn son, Jameson.

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### **Cody Goodknight, 30, Goodknight Farms, Chattanooga, Oklahoma**

When Cody Goodknight's father, John was severely injured in an automobile accident, management of the farm was thrust upon him.

"I was pretty upset," Goodknight remembers. His father's reputation was an invaluable asset in those difficult days (he would survive). But more, Goodknight was ready. "My father instilled in me the desire to work hard and to be above average," he said.

Goodknight inherited his father's business ethic. "Ensuring that our customers get a fair deal is an integral part of Goodknight Farms' policy," he said. "Even though this may occasionally cost us a little extra monetarily, we hope to maintain that customer for years to come and the referrals follow."

Goodknight Farms is a 4,800-acre dryland farm, including 1,600 acres of native range and pastures. Its primary cash crops are wheat seed, cotton and milo. The farm has also raised sunflowers, sesame, oats, canola and winter peas. There is a custom farming enterprise, too. It includes no-till planting, spraying, seed cleaning, harvesting, and trucking. Cody does custom work on about 3,000 acres locally and has harvesting customers in Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas and Colorado.

The operation includes a beef arm that produces about 200 high quality replacement heifers every spring. The cattle operation also includes 800 wheat pasture stockers managed through the winter months.

Goodknight is vice-president of the Comanche County (Oklahoma) Cattlemen's Association. Last March, Cody was selected by the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association to represent them in Washington, D.C. at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association spring legislative conference.

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### **Andrew Crush, 40, Spring House Farm, Lovettsville, Virginia**

Spring House Farm has its roots in a 10-acre operation that was to produce meat and other homegrown products for the Crush family. But when they butchered one of their first hogs, raised in a woodland paddock, they discovered a quality of meat far above their expectations.

Friends and family pushed Crush to increase his production. Tapping into the farm-to-table restaurant movement, Crush sold his first commercial meat to the locally

owned and operated Market Table Bistro in Lovettsville, Virginia, his hometown. Today, he is selling pork to high-end restaurants up and down the East Coast, an area of eight million people living within three hours of Spring House Farm.

Crush has become a well-known proponent of whole-animal butchery, where customers, such as restaurant chefs use an entire animal in preparing adventurous and innovative dishes for their customers. To promote the concept, Crush provides chefs new to the concept help in learning how to take an animal apart and how to use the entire carcass in their development of new menu items.

Spring House Farm, today with 400 acres, operates a three-year-old Community Supported Agriculture venture with more than 100 shareholders. The CSA, in which shareholders share the same production risks as the producer, sells bi-weekly packages of pork, beef, goats, lamb, locally raised chickens and honey for up to \$669 for a three-month share. Crush delivers product to nine delivery points in Washington, D.C. and northern Virginia. He is contemplating an expansion into Maryland.

"Rather than selling our meats at farmers markets, with two active young children and busy day jobs in addition to our farming responsibilities, Liz (his wife is a teacher) and I decided that a weekday CSA delivery program worked better for us," Crush said. It has become a thriving business, he said, with an active Facebook community of more than 700 fans.

Crush is planning to build a butcher shop on one of his leased properties. "This will be a dream come true for us, as we are increasingly focused on educating consumers and restaurateurs about the importance of whole-animal butchery," he said.

And, Andrew is considering an idea that expands on the CSA business. "We are looking into setting up a beef cow-share program that would allow members to buy a cow, which we would raise and butcher for them, giving them plenty of healthy, locally-raised beef and allowing them to invest in our business from the ground up," he said.

Andrew and Liz are raising two children, Amelia and Wyatt.

Video presentations of each of the America's Best Young Farmers and Ranchers honorees can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmZGcD163KcaJrltNgg40mNeoPz6UuUN0>

<http://bit.ly/21KSdWz>