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featured

Mark Smith named Farmer of the Year

By MARA KNAUB SUN STAFF WRITER

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The award for Ag Communicator of the Year went to Jon Dinsmore for his use of social media as a platform to share information about agriculture. Dinsmore, a native of Yuma County, and his family own and operate Desert Premium Farms.

COURTESY OF JON DINSMORE

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series on the awards presented by the Yuma County Farm Bureau. This story focuses on Farmer of the Year Mark Smith and Communicator of the Year Jon Dinsmore.

The Yuma County Farm Bureau recently recognized individuals who have promoted, served and dedicated themselves to the agriculture industry and the organization.

Mark Smith was named Farmer of the Year. The award for Ag Communicator of the Year went to Jon Dinsmore. The award for Lifetime Service to Farm Bureau was presented to the late Kevin Rogers. And Art Allen and his late wife, Peggy, were honored with the Lifetime Service to Agriculture award.



FARMER OF THE YEAR

Mark Smith, president of Smith Farms Co., was named Farmer of the Year for his efforts to expand broadband access in rural Yuma County.

Paul Brierley, who presented the award, explained that Smith “grabbed” onto broadband about five years when he noticed that Yuma was not getting the broadband speeds paid by customers.

“He started wondering why, and he went the political route. He actually got the chairman of the (Arizona) Corporation Commission interested in this, and we had meetings with, through him, with the representatives from the Governor’s Office, congressional representatives, all sorts of stakeholders in Yuma,” Brierley said.

The commission chairman started asking broadband companies: “Why are you not investing in Yuma? Why are you charging them for service they’re not getting?”

“Some of them kind of stuck their nose up and didn’t want to come. We found out real quick, there’s no government oversight or regulation like there was on telephone, there’s not on broadband companies.”

Smith’s efforts led to a coalition involving the local municipalities, schools, business community, economic developers and agriculture. They learned that funds for broadband projects were available from the federal and state governments, but they needed a shovel-ready project.

Smith pitched the project to the county supervisors, who agreed to set aside \$20.7 million of American Rescue Plan Act pandemic relief funds to begin construction of a fiber broadband middle-mile network to lower the barrier for private companies to come in and offer service.

“We have the perfect environment where we can develop ag tech and implement ag tech, but you’ve got to know that you have broadband,” Brierley noted.

The project also received \$10 million from the state, and ALLO Communications was selected to build the network, which recently kicked off construction.

“This project is going to bring fiber broadband service, not just to agriculture but when you start getting it out in those rural areas, now you’re serving the underserved, the tribal communities and immigrant communities and everybody else has trouble getting the broadband that we all know is so important,” Brierley said.

He explained that the Farmer of the Year award goes to individuals who have done something in the past year that significantly impacts agriculture.

“Yuma County is about to become one of the most connected counties in the country in large part thanks to Mark Smith,” he said.

Brierley also noted that “without Mark bulldogging this thing the whole way, literally learning how to map things and draw maps of where this fiber would go based on where things need to be serviced, we wouldn’t be where we are.”

AG COMMUNICATOR OF THE YEAR

John Boelts noted that this year the Ag Communicator of the Year went to Dinsmore for his use of social media as a platform to share information about agriculture. Dinsmore, a native of Yuma County, and his family own and operate Desert Premium Farms.

“Many are familiar with Jon’s beautiful photography that highlights the many facets of Yuma agriculture,” Boelts said. “His photos and videos along with attention-grabbing captions have been shared far and wide on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.”

Last year, commenters on one of Dinsmore’s TickTock videos began debating whether the lettuce fields in the background were real or a green screen. “And so Jon leaned into the concept and began setting up his shots specifically to create this effect. The idea worked. The ensuing videos went viral, bringing a lot of attention to Yuma agriculture,” Boelts noted.

Dinsmore now has over 337,000 followers on TikTok and generated 12.3 million likes.

Additionally to being called “The Farmer Jon,” he’s also known by the hashtag #GreenScreenFarmer which had never been used before 2021.

“Very few people, in particular farmers, are willing to be in the public eye,” Boelts said.

Dinsmore explained that he went on social media to share photos “because I love taking pictures and I’m very blessed to be in Yuma where it’s always beautiful even when it’s hot.”

He added: “The more I started to share photos and more people were engaging, I realized that something that I’ve grown accustomed to seeing, I mean I’m four generations here in the Valley, so many other people in the world have never seen it ...

“In Farm Bureau, what do we always talk? Share your message, share your story, and I thought instead of the message, I’m going to share me. I’m a little squirrely, I’m a little dorky. Thank you, honey, for allowing me to do that. I jumped on TikTok to make my children cringe and I think I succeeded.

"It's been so fun to be able to capture some of the joy and beauty that Yuma has and being able to share that with other people."

The next story, to be published the following Sunday, will feature the honorees of the awards for Lifetime Service to Agriculture and Lifetime Service to Farm Bureau.

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