



Marion, Alabama Farmer Awarded the Hugh Hammond Bennett National Producer Award for Conservation Excellence



Auburn, Alabama. February 14, 2023 – Charles Holmes has been named the national winner of the Conservation Producer 2022 Hugh Hammond Bennett Award for Conservation Excellence for outstanding conservation efforts on his farm, Holmestead Company in Marion, Alabama. Charles and his wife, Jenny, now with their three sons (William, Webb, and Cooper), have managed the farm since 1972.

The Holmestead Company is the successor of the original farm that was founded in 1819 by Holmes' great-great grandfather William Moore from Newberry, South Carolina. Holmes' grandchildren are the 7th generation to work on the farm. The family farm and its historical and agricultural buildings are open as a teaching property and include 53 structures on the National Register of Historic Places. The farm is one of the oldest continuous working family farms in Alabama and is certified as both a Century & Heritage Farm by the Alabama /Department of Agriculture and Industries. The farm has been managed based on Hugh Bennett's belief that using the land according to its capability and treating the land according to its needs is the wisest form of stewardship.

The farm has changed through time from cropland, dairy, cattle, and forestry to mostly forestry and a new endeavor of agritourism. The first conservation plan was written in 1939 and has been updated several times as new conservation technology and information became available.

Ben Malone, NRCS AL State Conservationist, says, "Mr. Holmes has a commitment to conservation planning and implementation of conservation practices that is exhibited by the many recognitions he has received." His farm's designations as a Treasure Forest, Tree Farm, and Stewardship Forest are indicative of his planning and implementation of forestry practices.

Holmes and his family were named the recipient of the prestigious Helene Mosley Memorial Treasure Forest Award for outstanding achievement in multiple use management of forest land by the Alabama Natural Resources Council and The W. Kelly Mosley Environmental Awards

Program. One of Holmes' greatest honors was being recognized by the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) Governor's Award as Alabama's Conservationist of the Year. Claude Jenkins, AWF Wildlife Biologist, says "Mr. Holmes commitment to incorporate wildlife habitat considerations into his forest and farm management plans serves as a model for conservation while maintaining an efficient forest and farm operation."

Holmes received the Environmental Stewardship Award for the Southeast presented by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, an acknowledgement of his conservation ethic related to his cattle operation. Because of his attention to detail and planning, "Holmesgrown" all-natural grass-fed beef is sold to urban markets and restaurants in Alabama, a true testament to quality and sustainable production.

The family decided that typical agricultural production was not going to sustain the farm and changes were needed to diversify income generation by inviting others to experience nature on their farm. Dipping a toe into agritourism in this special part of Alabama, the Holmes family lists the Federal/Greek Revival style farmhouse known as the Hogue-Scott house for vacation rental for individuals that want to stay on the farm for relaxation or to observe wildlife and nature. Holmes' son, Cooper, also provides farm, historic, architectural and civil rights tours of the area. Additionally, five different hunting clubs lease parts of the property.

Youth education is another objective of Holmes in giving back to the community. Youth are introduced to forestry and wildlife practices as well as the operations of the farm overall. One of the annual events is "Classroom in the Forest," which is offered to all fifth graders in Perry County. Previously, the farm has hosted "Fall in Folsom" with music, hayrides, corn maze, and pumpkins. The day of history illustrated the operations of the farm in the 1800s alongside more current practices.

Holmes has a well-diversified plan for both conservation and sustainability of the farm. Holmes stated, "Jenny and I hope the next generation will take what we've been given and make it even better."

Holmes was an early adopter of soil health practices and knew the value of healthy soil as a young man because of the example of his predecessors on his family farm. His commitment to healthy soils over the course of time has never waned. Holmestead Company has evolved from a row crop operation to a more diversified crop, cattle, and timber operation, and finally, to the current forestry, wildlife, education, heritage and agritourism venture that comprises Holmestead Company today. In each iteration, Holmes has been committed to conserving the natural resources that are within his stewardship.

Holmes serves on his local Perry County Soil and Water Conservation District. His tenure with the district includes being recognized as the national winner of the United States Department of Agriculture's Earth Team Award. He received this for his dedication to conservation and outstanding efforts in the recruitment, training, and management of a superior volunteer program for the Perry County Soil and Water Conservation District. Sutton Gibbs, NRCS District Conservationist for Perry County states, "Charles manages his resource challenges, not as a threat but an opportunity to use innovative conservation planning to resolve his issues and to make tomorrow's traditions."

On a statewide level, Holmes is a past president of the Alabama Association of Conservation Districts, current Chairman of the Alabama Soil and Water Conservation Committee (ALSWCC), member of the Alabama Agriculture and Conservation Development Commission

and a board member of Alabama Treasure Forest Association. His efforts are often instrumental in bringing natural resource issues to the forefront at both the state and national levels.

Nationally, Holmes is known for his passion, dedication, and infectious laughter. He served for 28 years as a Director on the National Association of Conservation Districts Board. Holmes was presented the National Conservation District Board Member Award in recognition of his exceptional leadership and personal commitment to conservation and stewardship.

Dr. Carol Knight, NACD Representative from Alabama, summarized Holmes' contribution to conservation by saying, "No other person I know has made such improvements on his land and on his fellow man as Charles Holmes. He has served as a mentor for countless young conservationists across the nation but most notably in Alabama. His impact on our state cannot be measured in acres or any other tangible way, but he has influenced people—and that is the best legacy of all."

The Hugh Hammond Bennett Award is named in memory of soil conservation pioneer Hugh Hammond Bennett, the first Chief of the Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS) who led nationwide efforts to raise awareness about the critical importance of soil conservation and to help farmers recover after the Dust Bowl. Bennett believed that real and lasting change on the land comes from developing and following a conservation plan that is designed to meet the unique needs of that land and based on the available resources, natural resource concerns and producer's goals.

NCPP was established in 2015 to emphasize the critical role that conservation planning plays in advancing voluntary conservation efforts on private lands. NCPP consists of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Association of Conservation Districts, National Association of State Conservation Agencies, National Conservation District Employees Association and National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils. For more information visit www.ncpp.info.

Contacts:

Zoe Husnick, Natural Resources Executive Assistant
NCPP
zoe.husnick@usda.gov

Ashley Henderson, Director of Conservation Programs
Alabama Soil and Water Conservation Committee
ashley.henderson@swcc.alabama.gov

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