

GIBB STEELE

Named Mississippi's Sunbelt Farmer of the Year



Bob Ratliff

By Karen Templeton

Growing up on a 160-acre sheep farm nestled among cotton and soybean fields in the Mississippi Delta, Gibson "Gibb" Steele III dreamed of becoming a farmer. Today, Steele has far surpassed his childhood dreams; not only is he a successful rice and soybean farmer, he was also selected as the 2008 Mississippi winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year Award.

The Farmer of the Year award is bestowed upon leaders in the agricultural community and industry. Since its inception in 1990, the award has evolved into one of the most prestigious honors in the nation, with 147 outstanding agribusiness leaders honored for their excellence in agriculture.

Steele is a fitting recipient due to his commitment to the development of innovative techniques that not only protect his business, but also contribute to the agricultural community as a whole.

Steele learned about farming at a very young age. His father, C.G. Steele Jr., was a sheep farmer and a land appraiser for the Federal Land Bank. When Steele entered Mississippi State University, his father sold the 160 acres in Greenwood and bought 500 acres of row-crop and pasture land near Calhoun City.

Steele spent his college years working on his father's land on weekends and during the summers. Now, on 7,300 acres of land scattered throughout Washington County, Steele farms on heavy clay gumbo soils.

Steele's land is almost all precision land-leveled which allows for better irrigation.

"Once you get rice irrigated, it generally makes a good crop," said Steele.

When faced with a challenge, Steele finds a solution. In the 1970s and 1980s, his operation was producing low soybean yields. Steele set out to double his yields and accomplished this goal through land forming, irrigation and no-till farming.

Originally, Steele planted soybeans in July because of the fall ruts and spring tillage, but he decided to start planting earlier varieties.

Flotation tires on tractors, combines and grain carts, as well as the use of no-till and early-spring glyphosate applications, allowed Steele to finish planting by the last week in April. Early planting allowed the soybeans to get tall enough so that they could be irrigated without damage.

"Our goal is to do no conventional field work or tillage in the spring," Steele said. "All we do is plant, and we want to be through planting both rice and soybeans by the end of April."

Steele's recognition is also due in large part to how he handles labor management. To improve employee retention, he provides housing and other benefits to his employees. This not only allows him to keep his existing employees, but also to recruit new ones.

"Employee management is more of a science," said Steele, whose employees stay with his operation for an impressive average of 15 years.

Employing techniques that contribute to protecting the environment has been a priority for Steele. He built raised turn rows around all of the irrigated farmland and installed drainpipes with risers. During the fall, he plugs the pipes to hold water for waterfowl.

To keep pesticide use to a minimum, Steele uses automatic steer and shut off on his sprayers and uses air-induction tips on spray rigs to reduce off-target drift.

Steele never forgot the MSU community and has given back by volunteering his time and land to the university. His dedication to sharing knowledge with the agricultural community has proven to be an asset for MSU Extension and the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. He has provided approximately 6 acres of his hearty land for university testing of more than 200 varieties of soybeans.

"Steele is a strong supporter of MSU's agricultural programs," said Robert Martin, director of the Issaquena County Extension Service. "He does a great job managing our soybean trials, and we are fortunate to be able to work with him."

Steele and his wife have one son, Gibson, who is taking on more of the day-to-day management of the farm.

"I plan on being active during planting and harvesting, but I want my son to be responsible for most of the decisions," Steele said. "I have lived my dream of being a farmer. You never go to work when you love your job. My hope is that my son enjoys his life as a farmer as much as I have."