

Five compete for Kentucky Farm Bureau's top honor

News release

LOUISVILLE, KY — Kentucky Farm Bureau (KFB) has named three finalists for its 2026 Kentucky Farmer of the Year award. This annual program recognizes an individual for their outstanding agricultural operations, as well as their service and leadership both on and off the farm.

The three finalists are: Terry Brown of Hopkins County, Mike Jones of Mercer County, and Steve Rogers of Hardin County. Finalists were selected after a rigorous application process that included a letter of support from each applicant's county Farm Bureau and a visit to each farm by state judges. Applicants must be a Farm Bureau member to be eligible for the award.

"Kentucky Farm Bureau is proud to recognize Terry, Mike and Steve," said KFB President Eddie Melton. "Each has built a successful farming operation while giving generously of his time to his county Farm Bureau and community. They share a deep commitment to agriculture and a desire to leave the land better for the next generation of farmers."

The finalists were recognized during KFB's Country Ham Breakfast at the Kentucky State Fair on Aug. 27. The winner will be announced Oct. 12 and then recognized during the organization's annual meeting in Louisville in December.

MORE ABOUT THE FINALISTS
Dr. Terry Brown has

farmed for 55 years and today works 4,600 acres in Western Kentucky. His family's farm near Hanson dates to 1886. The operation raises yellow corn, soybeans and wheat, with a large share of the corn marketed to Tyson Foods in Sebre.

His start came early. "In 1970 at the age of 13, I had my first dark tobacco crop of two acres," Dr. Brown says. "I raised dark tobacco for the next five years and paid for my undergrad degree at Murray State University."

For two decades, Dr. Brown balanced two full careers, practicing dentistry while managing row crops, hay production, beef cattle and goats.

"His work ethic and passion for farming were so evident that many knew him just as well for his presence on a tractor as in a dental office," says Brian Welch, agriculture teacher at Madisonville North Hopkins High School and Hopkins County Farm Bureau Vice President.

Since retiring from dentistry, Dr. Brown has turned his full attention to the farm and to conservation. He maintains 300 acres of CRP and filter strips, and has invested in diversion ditches, drop structures, waterways, and water and sediment basins. In the last 10 years, he has placed field tile in 1,450 acres.

"We have noticed a 10% increase in yields when I have used field tile along with other conservation efforts," he says.

Labor has been his most persistent challenge. It has "always been a major issue

in accomplishing tasks," he says, and he has "assembled a good staff of operators and mechanics."

The farm is a family operation. Dr. Brown's wife, Jamie, whom he calls the farm's CEO, handles daily activities including the garden, landscaping, running parts and helping move equipment. Their oldest daughter, a CPA and attorney, helps keep the operation running smoothly. Dr. Brown has served as Hopkins County Farm Bureau President since 2022 and has served on KFB's state tax committee, member benefits committee and county improvement advisory committee.

Mike Jones and his wife, Debbie, raise beef cattle, hay, burley tobacco, pigs and meat goats on 433 acres in Mercer County, near Salvisa. The couple started 22 years ago on a 137-acre hill farm and now work two farms, one of them a 116-acre place at Munday's Landing.

"My wife grew up on a 350-acre dairy farm, where she played an active role in milking 65 Holstein cows twice daily," he says. "When we purchased our first farm, her experience proved invaluable."

The family raised tobacco on the farm's bottom ground in those early years, setting, chopping and suckering the crop together while contracting out the harvest. With support from their lending institution and the Burley Tobacco Buyout Program, the Joneses bought their first brood cows and began building the livestock operation that

anchors the farm today.

"My wife remained actively involved in managing the cattle, while our three children took responsibility for the goats and pigs," Jones says. "This division of labor allowed us to operate efficiently while instilling a strong work ethic and agricultural foundation in our family."

Jones spent 33 years as an agriculture teacher at Mercer County High School alongside his farming.

"The influence he has had on encouraging young people to pursue careers in agriculture is immeasurable," says Tess Caudill, Mercer County Farm Bureau President. She also recalled the family's summers on the livestock show circuit: "In the summer, you would often see Mike and Debbie traveling around the state showing pigs with their three children, Ashton, Aubrey and Alexis."

Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Joneses have installed four automatic waterers across the two farms, fenced off two ponds on the Munday place, built a concrete feed system to limit field damage in wet weather and laid geotextile fabric in areas prone to runoff. They are now working toward expanding the brood cow herd, renovating pastures and intensifying a rotational grazing system.

Since retiring from teaching, the Joneses have taken part in the Kentucky Farm Bureau Beef Tour and the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service Master Haymaker Pro-

gram. Mike Jones has served on the Mercer County Farm Bureau board since 1991 and is a past County President.

Steve Rogers grows corn, soybeans and wheat on 1,800 acres he owns and 1,500 acres he rents in Hardin County, near Glendale.

"We are proud to have supplied Weisenberger Mills with white corn since the 1980s, when my father first began hauling to them," Rogers says. "Our family name can be found on their cornmeal packaging today."

"I began farming in 1978, during my junior year of high school, by renting 38 acres from my dad, who just began farming three years prior after working for NASA and the Federal Aviation Administration," he says.

He rented a neighbor's 66-acre farm the following year, later bought it, added another neighbor's 140 acres and baled straw to help pay his way through the University of Kentucky, where he earned a bachelor's degree in agronomy.

The Rogerses embraced no-till early, using their own shop to improve early renditions of no-till equipment when the practice was still considered new and risky. Today, the operation is nearly 100% no-till, and it was an early adopter of full-season no-till soybeans.

Irrigation systems went in during the persistent droughts of the 1980s to stabilize yields. Rogers was also among the first farmers in the area to adopt center pivot irrigation. He has since added 2x2 fer-

tilizer placement and Y-drop technology to place nutrients closer to the plant.

Infrastructure has kept pace. A grain leg went in during the 1990s, followed by major grain handling and dryer expansions in 2014 and 2023. An existing barn was converted into a 96-by-112-foot farm shop with space for equipment repair, precision fabrication, parts storage, and a break room.

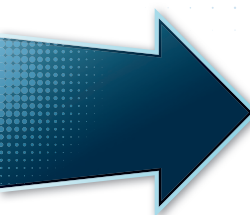
"Each challenge was met with a forward-looking approach, resulting in a resilient and adaptable operation positioned for long-term success," Rogers says.

Rogers and his wife, Ann, raised three children. Phillip and Adam returned home to farm after graduating from Western Kentucky University. Sarah graduated from Eastern Kentucky University and works for Nutrien Ag Solutions as a division safety, health, and environmental advisor. A formal succession plan has been initiated, and the sons are taking on more decision-making each year.

"A first-generation farm is transforming into a multi-generational farm that provides the very paradigm for Farm Bureau's definition of a family farm," says Richard Preston, a Hardin County Farm Bureau board member and Rogers' neighbor. "The way this family has survived hard times and thrived in good times is a testimony to the resilience of the modern family farm."



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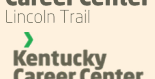
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