Ford Farms, *Jackson County*

Larry Ford graduated from the University of Florida in 1967 and started working for Farm Credit. In 1970, he started farming on his own when he bought 80 acres with a house, and rented an additional 220 acres of crop land. Today, Ford Farms is a diversified operation producing cotton, peanuts, corn for grain, purebred cattle bred to produce F1 Brahman/Angus replacement heifers, and timber on more than 3500 acres of land.

Larry is known as an innovative farmer because of his willingness to try new technology, varieties and management practices. While he has not always been the first to try something new, he has certainly been an early adopter of technology that could make his farm more efficient. When asked what technology had the greatest impact on his farm, Larry said it was "irrigation". In 1972, he started irrigating with a couple of portable, tow-irrigation rigs. Six years later Larry purchased his first center-pivot irrigation unit. Today, 80% of his row crop acres are irrigated, greatly enhancing his opportunity to produce a marketable crop each year. Larry is now converting his irrigation units from diesel pumps to electric pumps. He has made the investment in electric pumps because they cut his energy costs in half, have less down time, and lower maintenance costs. Over the next four years, he hopes convert all of his pumps to electric, where he can gain access to three-phase electricity.

Larry was one of the first farmers in Florida to experiment with Conservation Strip-Tillage. In 1979, he provided Dr. David Wright, UF/IFAS Agronomy Extension Specialist, his first opportunity to evaluate conservation tillage on a full production scale. A center-pivot irrigated field was divided and prepared for corn planting; half utilizing a conservation-strip tillage system, and half prepared with conventional methods. In that fist evaluation, the strip-till system produced 25 bushels more corn per acre than the traditional system. Today, all of his cotton and corn acres are farmed with the strip-till method. Over the years, Larry has experimented with cover cropping systems, and is now converting to a chevron-type roller to create an organic mat of crop residue. This cover crop mat helps conserve moisture and fertility, prevents erosion, and reduces Palmer pigweed germination. Larry even has hopes this new system will make his farm less dependent on irrigation.

Because of his interest in new ideas and willingness to work with people, Larry has developed a unique relationship with researchers at the UF/IFAS North Florida Research and Education Center (NFREC), near Marianna. These relationships lead to what may become his greatest legacy to the farming community. In 2002, Larry agreed to serve as the collaborator farmer on the Tri-state, Sod-based Crop Rotation Project. The project is a long-term, production scale research and demonstration project in three states. Not only did he agree to grow the peanuts and cotton for the research team, but has helped the team develop the production techniques for this unique system. A 160 acre, center-pivot irrigated crop field on the NFREC Beef Research Unit was dedicated for the project, now in its tenth year. The concept of the project is fairly simple: rotate the two major crops grown in the region, peanuts and cotton, with two years of Bahia grass for hay and cattle grazing. Small grains are also included in the system for winter grazing and cover crops. The grasses reduce nematodes, fungal diseases and other pests that reduce crop yields of broadleaf crops. The grasses allow integration of beef cattle to further diversify farm income. The goal of the sod-based rotation project is to demonstrate a long-term sustainable system for farming in the region. David Wright contributes much of the success of the project to Larry Ford, who serves as a true partner on the team. Now Larry is incorporating this sod-based system on his own farm. He said the sod-based system increases yields, reduces fertilization, reduces soil erosion, and even conserves moisture allowing for less frequent irrigation.

Larry started working with GPS-guided precision agriculture eight years ago. In the beginning, there were some satellite communication problems on his farm that hindered the success of the system. For the past three years, however, all

of the equipment used on the farm is more precise because of GPS-guidance saving time, fuel, and other inputs. He also uses a five-acre-grid soil sampling technique and incorporates the data with variable rate fertilizer and dolomite applications. The biggest advantage of the guidance systems, according to Larry, is the precise planting, which is especially important for peanut harvest. The bottom line is that GPS-guidance and variable rate application systems provide consistent results with reduced input costs.

Improving Agriculture through Extension Involvement

Larry Ford has a long history of collaboration with both the research and extension service of the University of Florida. He serves on the Crop Advisory Committees for both the Jackson County Extension Service and the NFREC. He has grown seed of newly released peanut varieties for Florida Foundation Seed. Larry also works annually with Pioneer Seed and Monsanto doing corn and cotton variety testing, providing true on-farm evaluations of their newest varieties.

Not only is Larry focused on commercial agriculture, but also on working with youth in agriculture. Two years ago, when the local Fair Board announced they were no longer going to host an annual County Fair, Larry was one of the key volunteers who made the commitment to continue this learning experience for young people in the area. He serves as the chairman of the volunteer board that organized the Panhandle Youth Expo. Since there would no longer be a carnival, Larry took on the challenge and led the fund raising effort to get the financial support that was needed from businesses and organizations in the county.

Impacting Agriculture in the Northwest District

Larry Ford has been, and is still very active in, his leadership roles for agriculture. He served six years on the National Peanut Board, and was chairman in 2006. He served on the Export Committee of the American Peanut Council; while serving, he represented US Peanut Farmers on trips to Japan and Mexico. He was appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture to serve on the USDA Peanut Standards Board. Larry currently serves as President of the Florida Peanut Producers Association. Larry was appointed by the Florida Commissioner of Agriculture to serve on the FDACS Peanut Advisory Board. He has also served the agricultural community locally on the Jackson County Cattlemen's Association and Farm Bureau Boards of Directors. ■

Larry Ford

Greenwood, Florida