

# Stephen & Tracie Fulford, *Jefferson County*

Submitted by Extension Agent(s): Jed Dillard

It has only been nine years since Stephen and Tracie Fulford came back to farm with Stephen's family raising peanuts (green and dry), cotton, corn, soybeans and grain sorghum on a 1600 acre operation. Stephen's grandfather sold boiled peanuts all over Tallahassee by the bag. That was back when he could walk into the unoccupied Governor's office to deliver his standing order.

Boiled peanuts don't come from Fulford Farms by the bag anymore. As a third generation farmer, Stephen constantly faces the challenges of growing a family business capable of supporting a growing family. He is now operating partner of the business and must make managing the business more than "what grandpa used to do."

The Fulfords combine precision farming with conservation tillage to decrease erosion, weed pressure, and trips across the field. He has expanded the family's operation to rented land literally all across Jefferson County (and into Madison County as well). He is keenly aware of the fact that increased acreage does not necessarily mean more profit, and he understands the difficulties of finding rental land that pencils out.

Conservation practices and techniques on the home place create obvious benefits, but they create value on rented land as well. Good rental cropland is hard to find and sometimes even harder to keep, and the Fulfords' conservation practices



allow them to utilize and continue to lease cropland that might not work for conventional operators.

"Planting peanuts in Bermuda or Bahia sod has allowed us to utilize highly erodible land without jeopardizing the top soil. Using land that conventional farmers can't prevent us from having to travel as far to find land. That saves costs and allows us to grow the farm more efficiently. We get better peanuts and lower costs."

"We first got the land at Lloyd on a one year contract," Stephen said. "The owner was going to put in pines the next year. Once he saw what our conservation practices do for his land, he decided to continue our lease. Now, we have the land, and he has an up-front income stream as opposed to an up-front cost and a delayed income stream from pines."

This year's second cotton variety trial was planted on that Lloyd property, in cooperation with the North Florida Research and Education Center. These trials allow seed companies to evaluate varieties in a sod seeding program. In past years, the farm has cooperated with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Department of Agricultural Water Policy to evaluate irrigation management practices. Stephen does not just follow Extension, he pushes us (politely, of course). For example, he asks, "Why doesn't the Florida Automated Weather Network have a cell phone app for rainfall?"



## Improving Agriculture through Extension Involvement

Stephen supports Extension through words and deeds. He is eager to improve, but this eagerness is filtered through the reality of having to make things work financially. If Stephen is doing it, his friends and neighbors know they ought to at least consider doing it.

He has hosted field days to demonstrate conservation tillage, and he collaborates with UF/IFAS in cotton variety trials. As a member of the Jefferson County Board of County Commissioners he supported the move of our local office from a condemned building to the former IFAS research center on an eighty acre campus.

Stephen serves on the North Florida Research and Education Center advisory board, and he and Tracie have been active participants in Extension events to highlight awareness of Extension and agriculture in the county.

Transferring relatively untried practices from research plots with a long-term management history to new rental land raises new questions and problems. The farm works closely with IFAS Weed Science to create and evaluate weed treatment programs. Sharing the “things we haven’t seen before and had no idea could happen” helps IFAS develop recommendations for tough problems in real world situations and makes the adoption of sod seeded crops easier for all.

The Fulfords’ adoption of new practices and their willingness to share their personal successes and problems give these practices credibility that no amount of plot work can.

## Impacting Agriculture in Northwest Florida

In Stephen’s words, “I see that I cannot sit on the sidelines and expect someone else to speak for me; I must step out and be a leader.”

Stephen and Tracie are articulate and tireless advocates for agriculture and use their personal experience to explain what agriculture is all about.

Both Fulfords became involved in the Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Ranchers program in 2006 and were statewide winners in 2010. Tracie, a self-described “city girl,” established a blog, “The Farmer Takes a Wife” and serves as the county Farm Bureau Ag in the Classroom Coordinator.

Fulford Farms is a model for soil and water conservation, and is enrolled in the Florida Best Management Practices program. As Stephen has said, “When water leaves our farm, we don’t want our soil to go with it.” The Fulfords’



environmental stewardship has been recognized by the Suwannee River Partnership CARES program and the Agriculture and Consumer Services Commissioner’s Agricultural Environmental Leadership Award.

In addition to leading his family farm, Stephen served as a Jefferson County Commissioner, including a year as chairman. He was especially effective in bringing an agricultural point of view to Commission discussions on water policy, both in Jefferson County and the Florida Association of Counties. He served on a regional board working to bring broadband internet to rural communities and was a director of the North Florida Economic Development Partnership.

Jefferson County Extension is pleased to nominate the Stephen and Tracie Fulford family for the 2013 Northwest District Agricultural Innovator Award. ■

## Stephen & Tracie Fulford Monticello, FL

