

As a boy growing up in Sampson County, North Carolina, James L. “Cookie” Lamb was curious about everything pertaining to farm life. He yearned to drive a tractor or a truck, take care of animals, and understand how farm tools and equipment worked. It was the beginning of a lifelong devotion to the land—land to which his grandfather and father dedicated their lives. The Lamb family’s cash crop on their seventy-five acres had traditionally been tobacco, but they also grew cucumbers, okra, corn, and soybeans and raised hogs and a small herd of cattle.

Lamb remembered, “My dad was originally intent on a US Army career when my grandfather’s health declined. My dad abandoned his own dream and came home to help out. Looking back, I guess that decision was pivotal because it enabled me to grow up on the family farm and discover my true calling.”

That calling would be put to the test when his father died in an automobile accident when Lamb was only sixteen. Suddenly the heavy responsibility for the farm fell on his young shoulders. After graduating high school and continuing to work on the farm on weekends, he enrolled in North Carolina State University’s School of Ag Engineering. He obtained his BS in Agriculture and Environmental Technology in 1996.

In 1994, while still in college, Lamb had interned with a North Carolina company called Prestage Farms and learned about the various stages of pork production. He realized quickly how drawn he was to the nursery operation. He said, “Prestage Farms was the ideal fit because it is a family-owned and operated local business with 260 contract pig farms and as many turkey farms. They are big enough to be a major industry player and yet small enough to call you by your name.”

So Lamb built a pig nursery farm on the same 75-acre tract in Clinton where he grew up. He and his family manage the nursery operation and grow corn, soybeans, millet, and Bermuda grass and raise a few cattle. Over the years Lamb has constructed two swine barns to house his animals and purchased three new tractors and attachments.

He receives weaned pigs at 21 days of age from Prestage’s trucking staff and keeps them for seven weeks or until they’re about 50 pounds, and then forwards them to finishing farms until they reach their market weight.

Lamb explained, “Here we have an eight-week cycle or turn that includes a week to clean the facility before the next turn begins. There are approximately 3,040 pigs

here at any given time. Given our six-and-a-half cycles or turns per year, this amounts to around 20,000 pigs annually.”

The yields on Lamb’s contract farm are as follows: 4.29 acres of irrigated Bermuda hay yields 6900 lbs.; 5 acres of millet are grazed by the farm’s cattle; 2 acres are planted with sunflowers as a wildlife habitat; and 22 acres of corn and soybeans yield 160 bushels/acre and 40 bushels/acre respectively. There’s also an acre and a half of cultivated garden space. The farm has 7 brood cows and 1 bull. Seven calves per year are raised to approximately 400 lbs. and then sold to market in Smithfield, NC where they are sent on to a feed lot in the Midwest and grown to a finishing weight of 700 to 800 lbs.

In the early 1990s, Bill Prestage, owner of Prestage Farms, perceived how the regulation trends in the industry were moving, so he decided to employ someone in the capacity of environmental specialist. With his practical experience and educational background, Lamb was the perfect fit, and he assumed this full-time responsibility in 2003.

He said, “I handle environmental compliance for all of the company’s hog operations across NC and one in SC, conducting annual inspections of those sixty-one farms. I also deal with more than 200 contract growers, assisting them with their compliance, irrigation calibration, and sludge surveys—roughly 385 lagoons. I’ve worked to develop a ‘sludge boat’ that helps farmers navigate these lagoons faster, and I assist producers in creating waste plans and help them fill out their annual reports.”

Lamb Family Farms is a team effort. James met his future wife, Felicia, while the two were attending Union High School. With aspirations to go to law school, Felicia enrolled in Campbell University but ended up becoming a teacher, first for eighth graders, then fourth graders. James and Felicia were married on Valentine’s Day in 1998. She went on to earn a Master of Arts degree in reading and now works as a Reading Specialist with second graders at Union Elementary in Clinton. She was honored as Teacher of the Year in 1998 and as the Walmart Teacher of the Year, Clinton, NC, in 2003.

Daughters Maegan and Kinsley came along in 2001 and 2006 respectively. Maegan has finished her freshman year at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, majoring in pharmacy studies. Kinsley graduated eighth grade this spring and will begin high school next fall. She has inherited her mother’s interest

in pursuing a law career. James's mother, Thelma, at the age of 89, still helps her son daily with farm chores.

In his role as the environment specialist for Prestage Farms, Lamb enforces a strict biosecurity program at the nursery including air filtration to prevent airborne diseases, mandatory shower procedures for farm personnel, and disposable boots and coveralls for farm visitors. Pest control programs ensure the reduction of insects, rodents, and wild animals. If animals require treatment, they are subject to FDA withdrawal periods and treated by a veterinarian. The farm maintains certifications with Pork Quality Assurance.

On the local level, Lamb is the Sampson County Soil and Water Supervisor, the Sampson County Cooperative Extension Advisor, and the Sampson County Schools Curriculum Advisor. On the state level, Lamb is currently serving in the Agriculture Commissioners Circle, is a member of the Cape Fear Farm Credit Nominating Committee, a member of the Eastern NC Technical Assistance Group, and a member of the NC Pork Council Promotions Committee. On the national level, Lamb is a past member of the National Pork Board's Nominating, Environment, and Domestic Marketing committees and is a current member of the National Pork Producers Council Environmental Committee.

He has also appeared in the industry video series entitled "Well Raised, Well Traveled," a national and international educational program, and he has made industry-related visits to Mexico and Brazil. Lamb was named "Outstanding Pork Producer" in 2016 by the North Carolina Pork Council.

Giving back is an important component of Lamb's day-to-day activities. He sponsors youth and intern programs, attends career fairs, and gives educational talks to students about opportunities in agriculture. He also assists the North Carolina Pork Council and the National Pork Producer's Council with marketing efforts within the swine industry.

When the chance for leisure arises, the Lamb family likes to get away to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. James noted, "Felicia's parents also have a place in Topsail Beach on North Carolina's southern shore—a nice place to relax. At home, I like to do some small game hunting and take my mama fishing at a nearby saltwater lake at least twice a year."

When asked about the most challenging aspect of farming, he doesn't skip a beat when replying, "Profitability. You can offset a bad weather year if your row crops

or livestock prices are high. You can come back from a drought or a flood. But you are always at the mercy of the market.”

As to the rewards of a farming life, Lamb commented, “In this type of rural community we know our neighbors’ names. A kind of bond forms naturally that people in cities often lack. I enjoy the tightknit group of producers and farmers in this area because we help and learn from each another.”

He said another important takeaway from living and working on a farm is the value and amount of hard work it takes to be a successful farmer. “When I was a youngster on the farm, ‘break time’ didn’t come mid-morning and mid-afternoon. It was when you got to the end of the tobacco row, no matter how far away that was. And we didn’t stop at five o’clock. If there was a storm brewing off the coast during harvest, we could run all night. Mother Nature always dictated the schedule. And she still does.”

James L. Lamb was nominated North Carolina Farmer of the Year by Jessica H. Tripp, District Field Representative for North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation. She commented, “Lamb is the type of farmer who does everything in his power to help preserve the agricultural industry as a whole. He’s managed to maintain his farm operation while working full time for Prestage as an environmental specialist, a job that requires a huge commitment of time and energy.”

Tripp added, “James Lamb is a nationwide advocate for agriculture, a leader and gifted spokesperson for North Carolina’s hog industry, and an educator who enjoys informing the public about where food comes from and introducing them to new trends and innovations in today’s agriculture. Farming for him is not just a job; it’s a way of life, a heritage, and a calling.”

A distinguished panel of judges will visit James Lamb, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, the week of August 10–14. The judges include John McKissick, long-time University of Georgia agricultural economist at Athens, Georgia; David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; and Cary Lightsey, Lake Wales, Florida, the overall winner of the award in 2009.