

Small Farmer of the Year honored

The Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T State University recently celebrated its 32nd annual Small Farms Week, highlighting the contributions of small-scale producers in North Carolina who generate \$250,000 or less annually in agricultural gross sales. This year's theme was "Small Farms, Big Impact."

The efforts of these small businesses do not go unnoticed. As part of the yearly event, a small farmer is recognized and honored for his or her contributions to North Carolina agriculture. This year's winner was Ronald W. Simmons, Jr. of Master Blend Family Farms.

Located near Kenansville in Duplin County, Master Blend practices niche-pork production, allowing small farmers to get premium prices by raising pigs outdoors with all-natural feed. The farm also includes an on-site general store that sells pork and a variety of other locally grown products.

Simmons said he started raising hogs in 2012 he noticed a need in his community. "America is becoming more aware and concerned about what it's consuming and what it's feeding its kids. We decided to raise the animals without growth hormones and steroids in the pasture because we saw an opportunity."

In fact, the community is at the heart of what Master Blend Family Farms does each day. Simmons even made it part of his business model to ensure that children in his community get exposure to agriculture through farm visits, FFA and 4-H activities.

According to James Hartsfield, an area farm management agent with N.C. Cooperative Extension in Duplin and Sampson counties, "Ronald Simmons has worked thoughtfully and creatively. He's always searching for new ideas and innovations. He sets a good example for other small farmers, and he's willing to share the secrets of his success with other farmers so they can be more successful. Ronald, his family and his whole team at the farm are a great inspiration."



Small farms are major contributors to North Carolina's \$85 billion agriculture and agribusiness industry. They make up nearly 90 percent of the state's total farms.