

Bison Producers take Ontario Outstanding Young Farmer title for 2009

(Guelph, ON) Farming, family and community are three words which sum up the 2009 Ontario Outstanding Young Farmers, Jason and Christina Pyke. The Pykes of Pykeview Meadows (www.pykeviewmeadows.com), a bison and field crop operation on Wolfe Island, received the top honour at the provincial awards ceremony held in London on Tuesday March 10th.

The Pykes were chosen from a group of six finalists which included Kevin and Jo-Ann MacLean of Napanee (dairy), Shawn and Tara McRae of Bainsville (innovative cropping practices), Edwin Sterrenburg of Stayner (dairy goats), Jeff and Eleanor Robinson of Osgoode (dairy) and Len and Tracey Vis from Jerseyville (dairy). The difficult decision was made by the judging panel of Mike O'Shea (OOYF Alumni), Anne Marie Kemmerling (TD Canada Trust) and Rod Stork (Ontario 4-H Foundation). For information on all of the finalists, visit the OOYF website at www.oyfontario.ca

Jason and Christina became interested in bison, in part because of their hardiness and need for minimal care, and in part due to their lean meat quality. From the purchase of 30 animals in 1996, their herd has now grown to more than 130 with another 40 calves expected this spring. Along with the help of Jason's father and brother, the farm also grows soybeans, wheat and corn on approximately 1000 acres. The Pikes have recently invested in wind energy with four 2.3 mega-watt turbines currently being erected on their land.

The judges selected Jason and Christina in part because of their hard work they have invested in developing a market for their animals. In just five years, they have increased from selling 10 animals, to selling 50 and Jason now has to buy additional yearlings just to keep up with demand. Products are sold at the Kingston and Ottawa Farmers' Market, to health-food stores, meat shops and restaurants. This spring, they plan to build an on-farm store. Products sold include traditional cuts of meat including steaks, roasts, and burgers, but also novelty items such as pepperettes, jerky, sausages and smokies, as well as a wide range of fine leather products made from the hides.

Both Christina and Jason are heavily involved with many local and provincial organizations including the Ontario Bison Association, the Wolfe Island Early Year's Centre, the Ottawa Rideau Regional Soil & Crop Improvement Association, and the Frontenac Environmental Farm Plan Peer Review Committee. Jason was also heavily involved with the Hay West project in 2002, when he coordinated the donation, transportation and loading of 1104 round bales of hay from Wolfe Island Farmers, to drought-stricken farms in Western Canada.

With all of this going on in their lives, family remains their priority and they appreciate the opportunity farming gives them to spend quality time with their two children, Jack (age 7) and Chloe (age 5).

Over 180 people were on hand at the awards banquet to celebrate with all of the finalists.

Luanne Lynn, Ontario OYF chairperson, noted that "the pride that these finalists have in their farms, and the love they have for their communities is very infectious. In tough times, these people remind us why we're all on the farm. Not only is it a rewarding occupation, it's also a great place to raise a family."

Celebrating its 30th year, Canada's Outstanding Young Farmers' program is an annual competition to recognize farmers that exemplify excellence in their profession and promote the tremendous contribution of agriculture. Open to participants 18 to 39 years of age, making the majority of income from on-farm sources, participants are selected from seven regions across Canada, with two national winners chosen each year. The program is sponsored nationally by CIBC, John Deere, Bayer CropScience and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and supported nationally by AdFarm and Canadian Farm Business Management Council.

The 2009 Ontario event was sponsored by Pioneer Hi-Bred Limited, TD Canada Trust, Syngenta, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Huron Tractor, GROWMARK, McFarlan Rowlands, The Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, and the Western Fair Farm Show. Nominations for the 2010 Ontario award will open in September 2009.

Jason and Christina will now represent Ontario at the National competition being held from December 1-6th in Ottawa, where they will compete with other farmers from across Canada for the title of Canada's Outstanding Young Farmers.