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Cream of the crop turn out to discuss farming's future

Exchange | Business
ELLIOTT MINOR | Wednesday, October 18, 2006 at 12:30 am

Gopal Gupta shows how a PDA could be used used to run a farm through a wireless network at the Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition on Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2006, near Moultrie, Ga. Gupta said a farmer could theoretically control irrigation, self-steering tractors and other farming operations from anywhere in the world. The same technology that keeps people connected in big-city coffee shops is coming to rural Georgia, where it can enhance education, economic development and improve farm efficiency. (AP Photo/Elliott Minor)

MOULTRIE - The chief farming officials from three Southern states called the event for all they were worth Tuesday, but when the cream had settled in the pail, it was Tennessee that took home the prize.

The agricultural commissioners of Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama competed in good-natured, old-fashioned milking competition on the opening day of the 29th Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition - a three-day event whose main focus is cutting-edge technology.

The exhibit hall was filled with high-tech exhibits such as satellite guidance systems for self-steering tractors, computer-controlled pesticide sprayers, and an automated $8,000 machine that turns cooking grease into 80-cent-per gallon biodiesel fuel.

But a crowd of about 200 gathered to cheer and laugh as Georgia's Tommy Irvin, Alabama's Ron Sparks and Tennessee's Ken Givens hunkered down to put the squeeze on a trio of cows.

The cows kicked the buckets of Irvin and Sparks, causing them to lose milk, but they spared Givens.

Givens, a self-described miller since the age of 5, said he was prepared to "kick Georgia and Alabama," and he went on to do it by squeezing out 1,500 milliliters of the white liquid. He was way ahead of Irvin and Sparks.

"I haven't milked in 50 years," Irvin said. "I told them not to give me a kicker."

"We had a little accident," said Sparks, who finished third. "The cow put its foot in my bucket. I'm coming back next year for revenge."

Givens' victory was fitting. Tennessee is the spotlight state for the event.

Earlier, Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue toured the expo and predicted the gadgets he saw would bridge the technology gap between urban and rural areas.

Representatives of Calhoun Networks of Roswell, which has turned the 700-acre Sunbelt site into a giant wireless hot spot, leveled the governor on a plan to bring wireless broadband connectivity to five rural southwest Georgia counties.

Farmers will use the network to manage their farms, monitoring the moisture in fields, turning on irrigation systems and performing many other farm chores from any place in the world that provides an Internet connection.

"We are using the information superhighway, which is broadband internet to bring your farm information in your home, office or in your hand," said Gopal Gupta, president of PreSoft Ag Solutions of Lilburn, one of the partners in the wireless project.

Holding up a PDA - a hand-held computer - that was getting electronic updates from a south Georgia farm, he added, "Theoretically, we can control everything on the farm from anywhere in the world."

Thousands poured through the gates Tuesday morning to mark the opening of the three-day show featuring the latest farm equipment and products - from never-less, energy efficient water heaters to powerful emergency generators - aimed at enhancing the lives of rural residents.

Georgia Power Co. had a display focusing on electrical safety on the farm. Miniature people and miniature tractors got zapped throughout the day by miniature power lines.

The show, held at a former World War II pilot training center known Spence Field, near Moultrie, is expected to attract about 200,000 visitors. At a luncheon on Tuesday, there were large delegations from Russia and South Korea.

Besides the 100 acres of displays, Sunbelt has 700 acres of peanuts, cotton and other crops where farmers can check on the performance of equipment during actual harvest and tillage demonstrations. There were also lots of farm animals - pigs, hogs, cows and working dogs.

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