

Linda Geist

Zac Erwin

Livestock Symposium names John Wood as Person of the Year

KIRKSVILLE, Mo. – The co-founder of U.S. Wellness Meats is the Missouri Livestock Symposium Person of the Year.

Lifelong Lewis County farmer and businessperson John Wood earns the honor for lifelong work to raise cattle on grass and market specialty meats, says University of Missouri Extension field specialist in livestock Zac Erwin. Wood's work makes a significant economic impact to the state, says Erwin.

Erwin serves on the committee for the symposium set for Dec. 6 and 7 at the William Matthew Middle School in Kirksville. It is the largest agricultural-based trade show in the Midwest.

In 2000, Wood's family and three other families formed Grassland Beef LLC to finish cattle on grass and market specialty meats. Doing business as U.S. Wellness Meats, the company sells grass-fed beef, bison, lamb, 1950s style pork, pastured poultry, butter, cheese, organic snacks, wild caught seafood, raw honey and gourmet rabbit.

All operations, except animal slaughtering, are under one roof in Canton, a town of 2,300, in northeast Missouri. In 2014, the company built a 4,400-pallet commercial cold storage facility with additional floor space dedicated to pick and pack shipping, USDA meat fabrication (beef, pork & lamb), and a retail store. The pick and pack room is one of the most worker friendly facilities in North America for shipping frozen meats, says Erwin.

Erwin says Wood places emphasis on worker safety, comfort and efficiency at the facility. "In similar facilities, workers assemble the frozen packages for customer orders while working in the freezer itself," Erwin says. "At Grassland Beef, workers build packages in a packing room separated by glass walls from the freezer. The 50-degree temperature difference in the packing room lets employees work longer in a safer and more comfortable environment."

Workers at the Canton facility pack 1,300 to 1,800 orders for customers in 50 states each week. Third-party custom pick and pack services add 500 or more

orders weekly. Fed Ex trailers take orders to Lambert Airport at St. Louis for overnight air service or to Quincy, Illinois, for ground service. The Canton facility includes a bright and airy retail store, Erwin says.

“The LLC growth and impact have benefited the local community due to the leadership of John Wood, his partners, and an outstanding US Wellness team,” says Erwin. “Three of the original families still raise beef for Grassland Beef LLC and customer demand has grown annually for 20 years, requiring the company to expand its supplier list.”

Wood’s leadership at Grassland Beef LLC helped it to become an economic leader in Missouri agriculture, Erwin says.

“The 40 employees have a 7-times multiplier impact of over \$9 million per year in the local economy. Add in the payments to local livestock farmers for grass-fed cattle, lamb, and pork, and impacts from the company’s promotion of value-added products from Western’s Smokehouse in Greentop, Brown’s Smokehouse in Elsberry, and Frickenschmidt Foods in Lockwood. The result is over \$10 million per year.”

Wood is a 1975 graduate of Iowa State University. He holds a degree in farm operations and a minor in agricultural business. After graduation, he co-managed McRoberts Farms, a diversified crop, cattle feeding and finishing operation for 25 years.

Wood received the Governor’s Award for Agricultural Achievement in Missouri in 2014. He also received the Terry Gompert Pioneer Award from the Grassfed Exchange in 2017 and the Weston A. Price Pioneer Award in 2012. He is past president of Lewis County Farm Bureau, University of Missouri Extension Council in Lewis County, represented Lewis County in the 1990s on the Missouri Soil & Water Commission, and a 40-year advisory board member of the MU Lee Greenley Jr. Memorial Research Center.

Wood gives back to agriculture and his community, says Erwin. Grassland Beef provides tours for numerous school classes, 4-H and FFA chapters, and adult groups such as the Green Hills Farm Project. “He encourages area ag youth to bring their talents back to the rural community to raise their families, and carry the torch to the next generation,” says Erwin.

For more information about the Missouri Livestock Symposium, go to
<http://www.missourilivestock.com/>