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2011 Alaska State Fair Farm Family of the Year Announced

(Anchorage, AK) – The Baker family of Palmer has been selected as the 2011 Farm Family of the Year by the Alaska agricultural community. The Bakers, owners of the Gray Owl Farm, will be honored at the Alaska State Fair Board of Directors' reception on the opening day of the fair, Thursday, August 25.

Craige and Kathy Baker met in Nebraska while attending college. Both came from agricultural backgrounds but pursued degrees in speech, theater and English education. In 1984, after the economic recession made it difficult to find teaching jobs in the Midwest, the Bakers packed up and made the trek to Alaska. Craige worked on building a dairy farm at Point McKenzie, worked for Matanuska Maid and managed the Musk Ox Farm before settling down in Palmer. Craige and Kathy taught at Palmer and Wasilla High, respectively, for 18 years.

In the early 1990s, the Bakers purchased and began developing the property that would become Gray Owl Farm. When they opened for business in 1998, Craige produced and sold sod and Kathy focused on nursery crops in her greenhouse.

Since then, the Bakers have grown and diversified their business. They grow crops such as peppers and eggplant in their greenhouse after the nursery season ends and they sell produce out of what Kathy calls her "overgrown garden." The farm boasts beautiful plots in which the Bakers test out the perennials they sell so that potential customers can verify the hardiness of the plants.

The Bakers constantly attempt new and different things on their property. Last year, for example, they started planting peonies to produce them as exports. Though the flowers are three years away from being mature, Craige and Kathy are excited about the opportunity to reach a new market.

The Bakers, who have three children and six grandchildren, are passionate about small family farms and niche agricultural markets. They currently produce on 20 acres but say they don't want to get any bigger. Scotty, their youngest son, owns a business that installs the sod his father grows, and hopefully interest in the farm will continue with their grandchildren.

"We feel strongly that small family farms are a niche that has survived and stayed strong," Kathy said. "They seem to be in an area that is growing right now."

The Bakers are very involved in their community. They have been artistic directors for the Valley Performing Arts (VPA) while their children acted in its productions. They are committed to agricultural education and offer greenhouse and farm tours to elementary school students in the spring.

The Farm Family of the Year award, sponsored by the Matanuska Valley Federal Credit Union, was established by the Alaska State Fair in 2000 to honor an Alaska farming family and show appreciation to all the hard working Alaskans committed to agriculture.

"The Alaska State Fair is honored to again host the Alaska Farm Family of the Year ceremony" says Ray Ritari, general manager of the Alaska State Fair. "We appreciate the Matanuska Valley Federal Credit Union's sponsorship of the award and the Alaska Division of Agriculture's work in the nominating and evaluation process. Congratulations to the Baker family for winning this prestigious award."

After reviewing nominations, an awards committee chaired by the Alaska Division of Agriculture annually selects the winning family based on production of quality Alaska Grown products, community and agricultural organization involvement, and overall image. "The Bakers exemplify a niche agriculture sector in Alaska" says Director Franci Havemeister. "Their small family farm is multi-generational, well diversified and works diligently to produce quality products and hearty Alaskan perennials." Previous Farm Family winners include Insanity Acres (2007), the Brad Lewis Family (2008), the Oberg-Kenley Family (2009), and the Pyrah Family (2010).

For more information, please visit www.alaskastatefair.org or contact Kelly Larson, Fair Marketing Assistant at (907) 746-7164 or marketing@alaskastatefair.org.

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