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2014 Alaska State Fair Farm Family of the Year Announced

(Palmer, AK) – The Williams family of EagleSong Family Peony Farm has been selected by the Alaska agriculture community as the 2014 Alaska State Fair Farm Family of the Year. The Williams family will be honored at the Alaska State Fair on Thursday, August 21.

Michael and Paula Williams moved to a remote location in the Mt. Susitna area in 1994 (40 miles from the nearest road system) and started EagleSong Lodge. They operated the lodge until customer traffic decreased due to the decline in fishing in the area. Traffic slowed to the point where they had to close the lodge in 2009. With the lodge closed, Michael and Paula were looking for alternative ways to create income because they wanted to stay at EagleSong. One night, while flipping through TV channels, Michael came across a PBS special on a new trend taking hold of Alaska peony farming.

After researching peonies in Alaska, Michael and Paula decided to give it a try and created EagleSong Family Peony Farm. They put together a business plan and received a loan from the USDA Farm Service Agency. They started flying and hauling in equipment, building a barn, clearing the land and started planting in 2010. EagleSong started off with a bang by planting 5,000 peonies in the first year and an additional 5,000 peonies in 2011. Peony farming requires a large up-front investment because peonies don't start producing flowers until they are about three years of age and don't fully mature until the fifth year.

A major reason Michael and Paula decided to invest in farming was their children. They wanted to have something of value that they could pass on. From the beginning, the children have been involved in making EagleSong Family Peony Farm successful. All of their children have a role related to the farm. Cody Williams is the full time field manager. Micah Williams helps with the retail sales at the Anchorage downtown market. Lee Williams is part owner and is the mechanical and technical advisor. Meghan Williams is the general manager for Alaska Peony Distributors. Paula's brother, David Kapla, helps on the farm during the summers. EagleSong is truly a family business!

In 2013, Michael and Paula started looking at how they were going to market and sell their peonies. They teamed up with Steve Giani, Bryan and Marilyn Hoffman, and Jon and Rachel Christy and started Alaska Peony Distributors, LLC (or APD). It was set up as a business where APD buys the peonies from the farms and is

responsible for marketing and selling the peonies so that the peony farmers can focus on farming. In order to help create a demand for Alaska Peonies, Mike and Paula received a grant from the Division of Agriculture to establish an information booth at the Anchorage Downtown Market. The purpose of the booth was to inform tourists all over the world of the availability of peonies from July to September.

Currently Eaglesong maintains 11,000 peony roots and they sell their cut flowers through APD. Their goal is to have 50,000 peony plants in production. They are currently in the process of securing a 22 acre agriculture lease that is adjacent to their land for the planned expansion.

The Williams family has always been community minded. In the past, Paula was a member of the Parent Council for the State run Alyeska Central School and was appointed to the Governor's advisory team. Mike served two terms on the Mt. Yenlo Fish and Game Advisory Committee. EagleSong received the Governor's TRAAKS Award of Excellence in 2001 for their work on the Iditarod National Historic Trail. Mike designs and hand carves a birch bowl to be auctioned off at the March of Dimes Signature Chef's Auction every year. EagleSong opens its doors to flight tours allowing guests from all over the world to learn about peonies in Alaska. EagleSong participates in the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms-USA program (WWOOF). WWOOF is an international organization where people volunteer on host farms in exchange for room and board during their stay. They have had WWOOF interns from all over the United States.

Mike and Paula continue to be community minded by conducting training seminars and growers schools on behalf of APD, Alaska Peony Growers Association and others. They want to share their knowledge with current and potential peony farmers. In the same sentiment, Paula's brother, David Kapla, uses his experience with EagleSong Farm by participating in the Alaska Sudan Medical Project. David travels to Sudan to help teach the people of Sudan how to farm and feed their families.

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 for all the hard-working Alaskans committed to agriculture. "The Alaska State Fair enthusiastically supports the innovation and creativity that is exemplified by the Williams family in particular and Alaskan agriculture in general. This award has recognized farming families from the interior to the Kenai Peninsula. It is fitting that a farm located 'off the grid' is honored this year. Congratulations to the Williams family," said Ray Ritari, the fair's general manager. After reviewing nominations, an awards committee chaired by the Alaska Division of Agriculture selects the winning family based on production of quality Alaska Grown products, community and agricultural organization involvement, and overall image.

"I would like to congratulate the Williams family for being chosen as the 2014 Farm Family of the year. They have been nominated by their peers for both their ability to develop a successful peony farm in rural Alaska and their outstanding community service which stretches the globe," said Agriculture Division Director Franci Havemeister.

Recent Farm Family winners include Vern Stockwell and Becky Gardner of Stockwell Farm (2013), the Martin Family of Dimond M Ranch (2012), and The Baker Family of Gray Owl Farm (2011).

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