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## **Southern Produce forging ahead**

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The produce industry is still mourning the loss of David Stewart Precythe, president and chief executive officer of Southern Produce Distributors Inc., who passed away on April 20 at the age of 68.

“His legacy is one of honesty, integrity, hard work, loyalty, and he was a man of his word,” said his son, Kelley Precythe. “He did what he said he was going to do every time. He was a great leader. We always knew he was there. He was the mastermind; the man who stayed up at night building his vision for what he wanted to happen at Southern Produce and in the sweet potato industry, which he took to a global level.”

Precythe was a friend and trusted voice to many in the industry.



Kelley Precythe with his father, David Stewart

Precythe, who passed away April 20 at the age of 68. “He was in the business his entire life and had 45-50 years of blood, sweat and tears in this business and was a major part of the produce industry,” Precythe said. “He was a very hard worker. He was a big speculator and a big gambler and he was all-in all the time. When the company needed him, he was there. Same with the industry. He never turned his back on the industry and he never slowed down. He had an intuition about him and was right a lot more than he was wrong.”

These are traits that the younger Precythe will emulate as he takes over as president and owner of the Faison, NC-based company.

“I’ve been groomed for this my entire life,” he said. “I’m ready for the challenge and we have a great team with a lot of experience and we remain committed to keep our footprint as leaders in the industry, as we have the past 75 years.”

Sterling Cook is now chief executive officer of the company, and there’s a strong board in place with lots of experience to help plan for the future. Although everyone will miss “Stewart” Precythe’s presence and experience, the leadership now has been pretty much running the company for a long time, so no one needs to worry.

“Our strategy going forward is it’s going to be business as usual. We will be focused on strategic growth and ensuring success for the future,” Precythe said. “In the past, we would run big decisions by him and 99 percent of the time, he would agree with us and be aligned with our vision. Now, it’s up to us.”

Things are looking strong for the upcoming season as most of the produce has been planted and the weather has been cooperating.

“Our bell pepper processing operation has already kicked off and will be running strong all summer,” Precythe said. “We grow, pack and ship around 12,000 acres of sweet potatoes annually. We’re now certified organic and will remain committed to our long-term partners.”