



Ballance

Farm Environment Awards

*Promoting Sustainable Profitable Farming*

### **Forty Years Hard Work Helps Whakatane Farmers Win Top Environmental Award**

Whakatane sheep and beef farmers Chris and Antoinette Mountfort have been named Supreme winners of the 2008 Bay of Plenty Ballance Farm Environment Awards.

Their win was announced at a March 5 ceremony, where the Mountforts also picked up the PPCS Livestock Award and the Environment Bay of Plenty Environmental Award.

The Mountforts have spent much of the last 40 years converting a scrub-covered block of land at Pikowai, just north of Matata, into what is now described as 'one of the most attractive, sustainable and productive farms in the Whakatane district'.

They bought the first 126ha block in 1966 and with a baby on the way, struggled through some difficult years. Chris had always wanted to go farming but as 'townies' the Mountforts didn't qualify for a ballot block. He went shearing to help cover the costs of scrub cutting and fencing contractors.

Two years after buying the first block the couple bought an adjoining 145ha, which stretched them even further. At one stage they came close to having to sell up. 'One season, after sending 200 ewes to the works, we received a bill for the stock as they supposedly were not worth enough to cover cartage and slaughter costs,' says Chris.

During this downturn the Mountforts were approached by forestry companies that were buying up land in the district. One of these companies told them it wouldn't pay for the areas of native bush they had protected and planted.

'Instead we went into partnership with Tasman on a block of 33ha of pines which they managed at the northern end of the farm,' says Chris.

The couple have planted vulnerable gullies, re-routed farm tracks and protected 40ha of native bush through the Queen Elizabeth II Trust. As well as native trees, flaxes

and pines, they have also planted 1000 blackwood trees and retired areas around springs and streams that feed the Mimiha Stream.

While these plantings have reduced grazing land, the Mountforts say the benefits include erosion control, additional shelter for stock, improved appearance of the farm and increased bird life.

The farm currently carries 800 ewes, which lamb at 145-150%, and 100 breeding cows. Heifers are sold at auction and steers are carried on for sale on the local market.

‘We never over-stock the farm but can carry up to 400 head of cattle,’ says Chris.

Ballance Farm Environment Award judges made note of the Mountforts' commitment to a policy of animal health and performance ‘rather than simply focusing on stock units per hectare’.

They were also impressed by the couple’s ongoing commitment to a programme of planting, environment enhancement and protection. This programme is run in conjunction with Environment Bay of Plenty.

Judges say the farm’s potentially fragile soil type has been well cared for with the appropriate pasture cultivars and good stock management.

And they praised the value and pride the Mountforts have for their rural lifestyle and local community.

The Bay Of Plenty is the first of eight regions participating in the 2008 Ballance Farm Environment Awards to announce its winners.

Ian Pirani, who retires from the region’s judging coordinator role this year, says the standard of entry was again very high.

He says farmers and orchardists are clearly very aware of how their activities affect the environment. ‘But what really shines through is how they are also thinking about the needs of their customers (both locally and overseas) as they come up with innovations to offset these environmental impacts.’

The full list of 2008 Ballance Farm Environment Award category winners for the Bay of Plenty is:

**Supreme Award:** Chris and Antoinette Mountfort, Puriri Farm, Whakatane

**LIC Dairy Farm Award:** Margaret and David Wright, Whakatane

**PPCS Livestock Award:** Chris and Antoinette Mountfort, Puriri Farm, Whakatane

**Hill Laboratories Harvest Award:** Glen Roberts, Riverside Orchards & Trebilco Orchards, Kati Kati

**Ballance Nutrient Management Award:** Paul Furniss, Willow Creek, Whakatane

**PGG Wrightson Habitat Improvement Award:** Barry & Pam Pethybridge, Te Puke

**Gallagher Innovation Award:** Shane & June Birchall, Rotorua

**ZESPRI Kiwifruit Orchard Award:** Glen Roberts, Riverside Orchards & Trebilco Orchards, Katikati

**Environment Bay of Plenty Lifestyle Award:** John and Thelma Williams, Pottsbury Farm, Katikati

**Environment Bay of Plenty Environmental Award:** Chris and Antoinette Mountfort, Puriri Farm, Whakatane

**Environment Bay of Plenty Environmental Award:** Merlin and Heather McKenzie, Poyntzfield, Rotorua