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### **Strong farming partnership earns top environmental award**

Mayfield farmers Mark and Nicky Morrow have been declared Supreme winners in the 2008 Canterbury Ballance Farm Environment Awards.

At a special function in Christchurch on 10 April, the Morrrows, who farm sheep, beef and deer on 1030ha west of Ashburton, were also named winners of the PPCS Livestock Farm Award.

Ballance Farm Environment Award judges praised the Morrrows' strong farming partnership and noted a deep connection to the land that stretches back many generations.

The couple grew up neighbours in the Mayfield district and today their farming operation is spread over three distinct units on flat, stony country. These units include a 96ha block, which is set up as a 'techno system' for bulls.

Over the years the Morrrows have managed to achieve good business growth without compromising environmental sustainability. This balance brought them to the attention of award judges, who commended them for their 'excellent stock management policies in a fairly harsh environment'.

'We have a habit of tackling some hard-to-do ventures, so we have to permanently ask ourselves if we are doing the right thing,' says Mark.

'We have expanded our business three and a half times and ended up being in a strong position, but there's nothing easy about it. You've got to be careful when you start to make those calls; Nicky and I make them together.'

The former Monitor Farmers also recognise the importance of community involvement. Nicky is the current president of the Mayfield A & P show, and Mark is a past president. Such things are valuable, they believe, not just to 'give back' to the community but also from a business networking and social perspective.

'If you isolate yourself on your farm, you can miss out on a lot,' says Mark.

Now in their early 50s, the Morrrows have achieved a good degree of personal satisfaction. But the current lack of profitability in sheep farming concerns them.

Mark says the present return on a ewe farmed for 12 months is terrible. 'Costs have beaten us and we have to move on,' he says.

But, typically, his view is not just from behind the farm gate. 'The whole sheep industry has to get it right,' he says. 'At the moment no one can afford to run a sheep farm. These past few years, it's been frustrating trying to get the sheep side of the business to grow, and it's the same for everyone.'

'Taking the cash out of the system for any period of time has a lot of obvious worrying outcomes, with perhaps the biggest being that it seriously affects farm succession.'

The Morrows have two daughters (Sophie and Miranda) and a son, Ben, who has just returned home after years of agricultural work and travel and is now one of three employees on the farm.

Each staff member is in charge of stock movement and maintenance in their own areas.

'Staff are given responsibility and they hold regular meetings,' noted the award judges. 'Nicky has compiled an excellent booklet on farming policies and management strategies for staff to follow.'

Stock last year included 5000 ewes, 1220 hoggets (grazed off-farm in the winter), 180 breeding cows, 60 rising 1 year (R1) heifers, 122 carryover cows, 1000 R1 deer, 220 R2 deer, 290 R1 bulls and 660 R2 bulls.

The Morrows' stocking policy is a response to their environment and leans towards a high proportion of deer and rising two-year-old bulls. 'We are dryland farmers so that flexibility to be able to have animals ready to send off and kill is very important,' says Mark.

The Morrows plan for snow in winter and dry summers.

Several years ago, a big snowfall saw them use up one year's worth of supplementary feed in three weeks. So they plan to keep two years ahead of their feed requirement, making their own supplementary feed. This is mostly fine chop silage but this year, in response to low sheep returns and also with a nod to Ben's experience and interest in cropping, they are introducing 100ha of cereals.

The Morrows' quest for long-term sustainability extends to many aspects of their farming operation. Planting trees for shelter and aesthetic value is an ongoing tradition, established by Nicky's mother, Gwylfa Gerard, 'a great tree lady'.

It is also part of farm practise to 'stay on top' of weed control (using muscle and management, with minimal chemicals) and maintain a high standard of general tidiness.

Fertiliser is another personal priority for Mark. 'I always like to know we have kept the fertiliser up, then if things turned to custard for a while, we'd be able to duck for cover.'

The complete list of winners in the 2008 Ballance Farm Environment Awards is:

**Supreme Award:** Mark and Nicky Morrow

**BFEA Land and Life Award:** Bruce and Lyn Nell

**Environment Canterbury Water Efficiency Award:** Donald and Sandy Hart

**PGG Wrightson Habitat Improvement Award:** Murray and Sue Johns

**LIC Dairy Farm Award:** David and Voray Croft

**Hill Laboratories Harvest Farm Award:** Donald and Sandy Hart

**Ballance Nutrient Management Award:** Donald and Sandy Hart

**PPCS Livestock Farm Award:** Mark and Nicky Morrow

**Gallagher Innovation Award:** Richard and Anna Hill

**Ends**