



Ballance Farm Environment Awards

Promoting Sustainable Profitable Farming

Media Release

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'Best practice' brings top environmental award for Gore farmers

The quest for 'best practice' has earned arable farmers Earl and Vicki Dillon a string of awards in the 2008 Southland Ballance Farm Environment Awards.

At a ceremony on 16 April the Dillons were named Supreme winners of the annual contest, which recognises farmers demonstrating exceptional farm and environmental management skills. The couple also picked up the Hill Laboratories Harvest Award, Ballance Nutrient Management Award and the Gallagher Innovation Award.

'Their vision to adopt modern cropping techniques to ensure the long-term sustainability of their operation really impressed the final judging panel,' says judging co-ordinator Simon Saunders.

He said the panel was impressed by the Dillons' excellent understanding of their soil types and their eagerness to implement best practice in all their farming systems.

Autumn wheat is the cornerstone of the Dillons' cropping programme and occupies about half of the 748ha under arable production on their farm. Other crops grown on their property near Balfour in Northern Southland include barley, peas and vegetable seed crops.

Oil seed rape was grown for some 20 years and will be grown again in the future following the purchase of an oil press from which oil will be used to fuel the grain dryer.

The Dillons have always been early adopters when it comes to new technology.

Earl was one of the first Southland cropping farmers to use the tramline system to minimise soil compaction problems. Restricting vehicles to the tramlines also enables the accurate application of sprays and fertilisers.

Minimum tillage methods have been adopted to reduce the damage that can result from continuous cropping. The use of techniques such as direct drilling has resulted in a significant improvement in soil structure and worm populations.

In 2001 the Dillons employed Terence Green as their farm and cropping manager. From an arable background in the British Midlands, Terence brought experience of European cropping methods - some of which the Dillons have adopted.

A member of what judges described as an 'excellent team' that includes Earl and Vicki and their son Scott, Terence has also been given the opportunity and support to grow his own business on a nearby property.

Faced with rising fertiliser costs, Earl and Terence are constantly revising and improving their nutrient management. The detailed monitoring and analysis of crop yields and soil tests is used to determine the fertiliser type and rate required to replace nutrients lost in crop production.

Fertilisers are applied in strategic side dressings as and when the crop needs it. This avoids the risk of leaching into groundwater and open waterways.

Although using low inputs, the Dillons still manage to achieve crop yields that are comparable to other arable units in the region.

Crop stubble is either burnt or incorporated into the soil. Burning is used as a tool to help control pests, diseases and weeds.

This year the Dillons also baled and sold straw to meet demand from dairy farmers.

The judging panel noted the Dillons' passion for cropping, not only as a lifestyle but also for the future opportunities and returns possible from growing quality cereal and seed crops.

As a member of the Southland Foundation for Arable Research, Earl has used Foundation for Arable Research trials and his own on-farm trials to select the best cultivars to suit the environment and soil types of the district.

Judges notes on why the Dillons won the Ballance Nutrient Management Award:

- The Dillons' excellent understanding of their of soil types, limitations and management
- The use of dairy wintering pad waste to improve the soil structure, humus and biological activity in the soil
- Earl and Terence's detailed monitoring of crops and understanding of the crops' nutrient requirements, thus being able to match nutrient outputs with inputs to ensure the cost-efficient and sustainable use of nutrients

Judges notes on why they won the Gallagher Innovation Award:

- The Dillons' uptake and adaptation of modern cropping techniques and systems
- The way they have built or modified machinery to suit their particular needs, including a purpose-built air seeder/roller, dryer, drill press, Air Tech spray nozzle system and the recent importation of an oil seed press

Judges notes on why they won the Hill Laboratories Harvest Award

- Their early recognition of the damage continuous cropping can do to soil structure, resulting in change to minimum tillage methods
- The use of 'tramlines' to minimise soil compaction and provide crop pathways for the accurate application of sprays and fertilisers
- Although using low inputs, still achieving sustainable crop yields
- The team approach that includes Earl and Vicki, son Scott and farm/cropping manager Terence Green
- The large block layouts that assist in the efficient use of machinery
- The policy to keep machinery up-to-date and well maintained
- The manner in which they continually look to grow their business to provide opportunities for future generations and willingness to involve their cropping manager in the ongoing development of the operation

Other award winners in the 2008 Southland Ballance Farm Environment Awards were Otautau mixed cropping farmers Norman and Helen McLeish, who won the PGG Wrightson Habitat Improvement Award, and Peter and Jan Wishart, Winton, who won the PPCS Livestock Farm Award.