



Ballance Farm Environment Awards

Promoting Sustainable Profitable Farming

27 March 2008

Passion for land earns Harvey family Supreme Award in Wellington Ballance Farm Environment Awards

A multi-generational passion for farming and the environment has earned a Martinborough family a top environmental award.

John and Yvonne Harvey and their eldest daughter Rebecca Madden were named Supreme winners of the 2008 Wellington Ballance Farm Environment Awards at a special ceremony on 27 March.

Described by judges as a family that is passionate in their dedication to farming and the environment, the Harveys run Daisybank - a 1017ha sheep, beef and forestry unit just southeast of Martinborough.

John's grandfather purchased the original 166ha block in 1923 and the judges said the award recognises the family's 'multi-generational commitment to and understanding of their unique area'.

Situated in the Dyerville district where the average rainfall is about 700mm, Daisybank is considered a challenging farm. The prevailing north-westerly wind causes as much trouble as the lack of rainfall most years, says John, so shelter and the lie of the land must always be considered with stock placement and welfare.

The bulk of the contour is easy hill, with some flats and steeper gullies. Much of the soil is clay, with some limestone and some stony soils. The Dry River runs through part of the property, aptly named because part of it disappears underground each year.

Last year the farm wintered 6921 sheep and 507 cattle. Before John left school he identified a need to establish a Romney flock that could withstand the conditions and he convinced his father to begin keeping some ram lambs. In 1972 they began recording the flock that is now the Daisybank Recorded Romney flock.

Cattle on the property are bred and managed to a successful formula, using a mix of Murray Grey, Charolais and Friesian genetics.

The judges commended production on Daisybank, describing the family as good, experienced farmers who know where they're going. They farm difficult country, but the farm reflects all the hard work they've put into it.

The Harveys have also been quick to spot opportunities. Rising demand for grape growing land in the 1990s saw them sell off 32ha of light, stony-soiled land in four blocks - a move that allowed them to clear their mortgages and develop their property into the profitable business it is today.

Central to the development of the farm, said the judges, has been the awareness by all involved of the unique set of environmental factors.

Any gorse-infested land too steep to work has gone straight into pines (about 100ha in total). Alternative stock water, reticulated through troughs, is being established and shade and shelter for stock has been provided. Waterways and dams have been fenced off and planted in natives, and pole planting has been undertaken to stabilise erosion-prone country. This work to future-proof farming on this land is on a vast scale, and ongoing.

But the truly mammoth task has been the battle to turn dense, steep areas of gorse into productive farmland. 'We thought it could be beaten,' says John, 'it was just a matter of time, and keeping at it.'

John admits in some parts of the farm, the cost of converting to pasture was more than the land purchase.

The key, he says, has been the 'very impressive, very skilled' bulldozer and tractor operators who've worked over difficult ground to prepare it for cropping and pasture establishment.

In keeping with the history of the place, ownership and responsibility is flexible and innovative. Acting on what John says 'turned out to be very good advice' from his accountant and lawyer, John set up a family trust when he and Yvonne, who have four children, married.

'The main thing is we wanted to keep it flexible but workable, enabling us to try to treat all the family fairly,' says John.

Another family company owns the pine trees and a forestry right protects the land they are on. John says it's possible the proceeds of the forestry venture can be used to help the children who don't come home to the farm.

He's grateful for the life Daisybank has afforded him and those he loves. 'If you want to be the richest corpse in the cemetery, don't go farming,' he says. 'But if you want a really good life there's nothing better.'

Wellington BFEA judges made the following points about the Harvey's operation:

- Structured approach to succession planning and farm ownership options for family members
- Clearly defined land use and development plan
- Pragmatic financial management
- Principled approach to animal breeding
- Refinement of stocking policy to fit property attributes
- Good management around the climatic variations and variable soil types
- Retirement of land prone to erosion, supplemented with pine or allowed to revert to strong native vegetation
- Native bush protected and more trees planted around dams
- Good levels of silviculture and tree management
- Multiple community interests and participation
- Respected farming leaders

The Harveys were also named winners of the PPCS Livestock Farm Award and the Markhams Business Planning Award.

Other award winners in the Wellington 2008 Ballance Farm Environment Awards were:

LIC Dairy Farm Award - Keith and Jo Dennis.

Ballance Nutrient Management Award - Andrew and Joy Gash.

PGG Wrightson Habitat Improvement Award - Aaron and Megan Slight; John and Ronnie Percy.

Hill Laboratories Harvest Award and **Gallagher Innovation Award** - Angus and Davina Thomson.

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