



Ballance
Farm Environment Awards®
Promoting Sustainable Profitable Farming

2011 HORIZONS WINNERS

RICKIE MORRISON & SHARLEEN HUTCHING

SUPREME AWARD WINNERS

ALSO WINNERS OF:

LIC DAIRY FARM AWARD, BALLANCE AGRI-NUTRIENTS NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT AWARD AND HILLS LABORATORIES HARVEST AWARD

The award judges were impressed with the accomplishments of Rick Morrison and Shar Hutching in just their third season of ownership of their first farm, an 83ha (70ha effective) milking platform and nearby 26ha runoff, just south of Eketahuna.

Commented the judges: "Their achievement in the development of this dairy farm in just three years is quite outstanding." They wrote: "Overall, the judges felt that this farm created a significant impact in terms of presentation, efficient use of resources, and in particular as a great example of environmentally sustainable New Zealand farming practices."

Rick typically keeps things more low key, simply saying of their 201-cow operation, "when you've got goals you try to achieve them". But he is quick to point out that they believe pushing cows and land hard for output is counter-productive in the long term "so we have just a comfortable stocking rate and make sure the pasture is protected".

When prompted though, this quietly achieving couple do disclose muted satisfaction with their progress so far. "People that come on the farm all seem to say the same thing," says Rick, "that they'd love to drink a glass of milk from this place. That makes us feel pretty good."

Farm waterway and nutrient management is a major consideration on this flat to rolling farm, which has an average annual rainfall of 2.5m. "Though it's definitely been higher than that the last few years," says Rick. "We can get 200mm in one day." Their covered feed pad with rubber matting and room for 250 cows is a vital management tool. Rick is constantly aware of rainfall and potential pasture damage, and moves the cows onto the feed pad regularly, especially during spring. "I get up in the middle of the night to shift the herd onto the feed pad if I think I need to, the locals think I'm a nutter!"

However, on at least two counts, there's a strong chance "the locals" think Rick is anything but a "nutter". Production on the farm the season before they purchased it was 42,700kgMS. Last season, their second on the property, they achieved 70,400kgMS. And on the second count, Rick and Shar, who have been together for 20 years, are undeniably "locals".



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RICKIE MORRISON & SHARLEEN HUTCHING

SUPREME AWARD WINNERS



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Both from dairy farms in the Eketahuna district, Shar trained and worked as a hairdresser after leaving school. Apart from a short stint as a builder's labourer in Wellington, Rick has been dairy farming all his working life. He began his sharemilking career as a lower order sharemilker on his parents' farm. When his parents sold the farm in 1999 he stayed on in a 50:50 agreement with the new owners.

Shar joined Rick as a full-time dairy farmer when they began that first 50:50 job, and the couple have been an effective and successful unit ever since. They milked 240 cows for six years in their first job, then 420 cows for three years on another Eketahuna farm before buying their current property. They

have two daughters, Ashley (7) and Maia (4). "We are a pretty good team," admits Rick, "we don't argue much and we know each others strengths and work to them."

The award judges agreed, writing in their feedback report: "Rickie and Sharleen are a committed team and have managed an impressive production increase through dedication and hard work. The production increases have come without negative effects on the environment as they have taken steps to mitigate any adverse effects."

The couple managed their first step into farm ownership with a combination of hard work, saving well, good management and striking the market right. Rick explains during their first 50:50 job they were able to save \$100,000, which they invested into the farm of Shar's parents. Their equity in the place grew as farm values tracked upwards. More recently, they capitalised on a market high and sold 250 cows from their herd. This return, added to the equity they were able to retrieve from the Hutching property, allowed them to buy their current farm.

The previous owners had only had it two years. They had bought the place in an extremely rundown state, put in a new cowshed and the covered feedpad and gave it "a general tidy up". But there was still plenty of scope for Rick and Shar, which was why they purchased.

Further subdivision, better fencing and a revamped stock water system and race has been required, and there was "ragwort for miles"; recalls Rick. In their first year there, in an extreme measure to convert the pasture to productive mode, they turned over 37ha, almost half the milking platform. "We still managed to lift production that first year, but the next spring it meant the half of the farm that had been done was like a big sponge," explains Rick.



JUDGES COMMENTS

- Fencing of drains and planting of water ways with wide margins to enable planting and improve water quality.
- Excellent management of the effluent and pond system and runoff from the wintering shed.
- Makes use of the wintering shed in high rainfall and adverse climatic conditions.
- Considered effluent application; e.g. on ridges to reduce the effect on waterways.

RICKIE MORRISON & SHARLEEN HUTCHING

SUPREME AWARD WINNERS

Because of the farm's topography and rainfall, the couple realised early on retiring pasture that became stream beds when it was wet would be a wise choice. They have also retired undeveloped wet ground and what Rick describes as "little pockets" of native bush. "There's still more to do though."

The judges praised these fencing and planting initiatives which they termed "significant" and "stunning in just three years", noting how the work would improve water quality and biodiversity. The couple say they have no hesitation in making the choice to retire and plant out some of the farm, despite their drive for production. "What we fence off now we will gain more eventually with the shade and shelter that is being created," says Rick. And keeping the stock out of the streams and mud is a good management practise, he points out: "Otherwise you have cows turning up for milking covered in mud, then you have to hose them down to get it off, then they are more likely to get mastitis, and so it goes on."

Rick and Shar have revamped the effluent system on their farm. "We were having to get the effluent pumped out monthly sometimes, which was expensive, and there was too much effluent going back out onto the pasture in one hit," explains Rick. They now have a system which allows the direction the cowshed effluent goes to be stored and eventually distributed – to a tank at the shed or the effluent pond – to be altered according to how wet the paddocks are.

They like to keep the effluent irrigator at least 10 days in front of the cows to prevent pasture and soil damage, and run off, by ensuring the ground is not sodden and the effluent well soaked in before the cows get there. Most of the paddocks are undulating, so passes per paddock with the irrigator are usually limited to two, to minimise run-off into waterways, and they

are careful about where in the paddock the effluent is applied for the same reason.

Shar, who is in charge of calf rearing, had great success last season with a change in calf-shed surface. They built a large shed that can hold 108 calves but in their first year, despite their best efforts, battled with sickness in the calves. Noticing that large calf rearing operations didn't use mulch, they made the change to a surface of 40mm rounded pebbles "and we'd never go back to mulch, it made a huge difference to animal health". The bought-in pebbles were scooped out at the end of last season and spread on the tanker track to make way for a new floor of them for next season.

Next season they will be milking between 70-100 more cows. They have a five-year lease, with first right of purchase, on a 40ha block across the road. The judges praised Rick and Shar for their vision and management commenting, "this couple represents driven owners who set very clear farm and financial goals". They also wrote: "In terms of tidiness and presentation, this farm is a "stand-out", a prime example of a model dairy farm which could be actively displayed to an international audience."

Clearly instinctively good dairy farmers, and uneasy in any sort of spotlight, Rick says, "we just want the farm to be a better place than when we came here, we don't want to be greedy and farm every inch of it. And we definitely want to do our part to keep our country 'clean and green'."



JUDGES COMMENTS

- *Dairying in a challenging high rain fall area; wide fenced margins of streams and drains protects water resource.*
- *Grass based system with minimal inputs.*
- *Clear focus on maintaining quality grasses; conversion of pasture to milk an efficient process from paddock to milk harvesting.*
- *Active renewal of pastures and recording of species in each paddock.*

RICHARD & RACHEL STEELE
'RETARUKE STATION'

PGG WRIGHTSON LAND AND LIFE AWARD
MASSEY UNIVERSITY DISCOVERY AWARD

The Steeles take a long-term view of land stewardship by both acknowledging the past and planning for the future on their 1441ha hill country property.



The award judges were impressed by Richard and Rachel's "love for their land" and the way they are "actively seeking opportunities to farm in a long-term and sustainable manner". The judges also wrote: "Richard and Rachel are a committed team who manage a difficult property well through dedication and hard work."

The Steeles came to the area, an hour south of Taumarunui, in 1993 when they purchased the original 830ha Retaruke Station. In 2005 they enlarged the station by buying the 611ha property next door. They farm 8000 stock units with the ratio 70 percent Perendale/Romney

sheep and 30 percent predominantly Angus cattle. There are 120 cultivatable hectares on Retaruke and 300ha of easy hills, with the balance being steep hill country. 150ha is in a forestry partnership, planted in redwood. They have retired 80ha of regenerating native bush and placed 119ha of mature native bush under QE II covenant.

"When we started to develop the bush, we found it too mature and beautiful," says Rachel. The QE II block is on the land purchased in 2005. It contained magnificent illegally logged rimu, matai and kahikatea, some of which were still lying there. This bush does still have some large trees standing however. Experts estimate some of the living kahikatea to be 888 years

old. "By putting it into QE II, we've made sure felling is never going to happen again, even if we're not here," says Rachel. "We often take people in there that are interested, it is just a marvellous place with native orchids and ancient passionfruit vine, kohia."

Richard and Rachel came to Retaruke from a smaller property with the aim of developing into an operation that had scope to take others – family or a good manager – on board when the time was right. "We wanted to be able to retire on the place," says Rachel. "We love planting trees and watching them grow, we'd like to stay here forever."

They are on the way to achieving their aim, with their adult children maintaining a strong connection to the place. The farm is in a family trust. Son Rich works on Retaruke as stock manager. Daughter Anna, who has a business degree, has just returned from three years OE and is studying from home to complete her accountancy degree. Son Dan has an interest in Retaruke Station's stock. Dan is a previous multiple winner in these awards; he has established an eco-tourism venture, Blue Duck Lodge, on a nearby 1300ha farm he owns in a partnership.

The Steeles have made a point of remaining open-minded about opportunities to enhance the diversity of their farming business. One extra income stream comes from more than 400 beehives set amongst plentiful manuka stands on Retaruke. The station is also venturing into the tourism market. With encouragement from Dan the farm's shearing quarters are being refurbished to take the overflow from Blue Duck Lodge, and visiting groups like jet-boaters and trampers. Richard and Dan



JUDGES COMMENTS

- Demonstrated "pride and passion" in farming a steep hill country property.
- Seek opportunities to farm in a sustainable and long-term manner; striving to establish succession and retirement options.
- Lifetime involvement in community groups that improve outcomes for farming families, conservation and history preservation.
- Active in river rescues as required.



RICHARD & RACHEL STEELE 'RETARUKE STATION'

PGG WRIGHTSON LAND AND LIFE AWARD MASSEY UNIVERSITY DISCOVERY AWARD

own a jet boat which they have just had certified to carry commercial passengers. “We live in a wonderful part of the world. We enjoy helping other people appreciate it,” says Rachel.

The station runs a contracting business of two diggers and a full-time driver. In addition to work on farms in the district and on their property, they sub-contract to the local roading contractor, thus ensuring that despite many washouts and the 13 bridges on their road, access can be maintained better than if a digger was to travel from a town base every time it was needed.

Access to farms in the area has been a limiting and sometimes controversial issue for many years. Nearby is the famous “Bridge to Nowhere”, completed in 1936 for a Government farm settlement that was abandoned in 1942. Still standing today, the bridge is a graphic monument to the remoteness and inaccessibility of the area.

The bridge across to Retaruke station's home block is a 10 tonne capacity suspension bridge, which is too narrow for modern agricultural equipment. The bridge on the adjacent farm purchased by the Steeles in 2005 partially collapsed causing the death of a beekeeper some years earlier. This accident has been the subject of a lengthy legal battle over liability.

When the Steeles purchased the adjoining farm in 2005, the bridge had been repaired but was condemned by engineers as too unsafe. They decided a new bridge was needed, to service the two properties that now comprise Retaruke Station. Daunting as the idea was, Richard and Rich were unphased. In fact, says Rachel, they appeared to relish the challenge and spent many nights before and during the building process sitting at the kitchen table “working out the maths”. They sourced a



new steel bridge that, because of a mistake, was unusable for its original purpose. It was re-specified, transported in pieces to Retaruke and sited using ingenious methods like concrete pouring from a helicopter and a massive flying fox constructed by Richard and Rich.

The new, solid foundation 18 tonne \$200,000 bridge, was completed in November 2008, a testament to perseverance, a triumph over logistics which stumped professional engineers and a lasting symbol of the Steele family's commitment to their property and their area.

Richard and Rachel are both active community contributors willingly giving their time to a range of organisations including the Taranaki Wanganui Conservation Board, Federated Farmers and local chopping and sports events. Last year they held a '100 year birthday party' for the Retaruke Station house in which they live. 180 people attended, including 50 descendants of the settler who built the house, James Sarsfield Lacy, many of whom the Steeles know personally and still live in the region.

“We do our bit in the community, and we enjoy doing it,” says Rachel.



JUDGES COMMENTS

- *Passionate about maintaining manuka for the honey industry, and diversifying their business.*
- *Support searching out new species of native orchids on property.*
- *Utilize knowledge to enhance the diversity of their business; obvious passion for sustainable long-term outcomes for their land.*
- *Designed and built unique flying fox enabling the construction of an 18 tonne capacity bridge opening safer farm access.*

THE COUSINS FAMILY 'HIAMOE'

BEEF + LAMB LIVESTOCK FARM AWARD HORIZONS REGIONAL COUNCIL AWARD (for the integration of trees)

The importance of family – historically, currently and in the future – is palpable on this 595ha sheep, beef, deer and farm forestry operation 16km east of Feilding.



John Cousins, whose grandparents purchased the original 150ha home block in 1910, took over from his father Ted in 1980. He states simply: "This is very much a family farm."

Ensuring the land is in good heart for generations to come is an obvious driver on Hiamoe. This is clearly reflected in priorities like the fencing and planting of

riparian strips, the protection of native bush by QEII covenant, extensive tree planting for erosion control, stock shelter and commercial woodlots, and the trialling of biological farming applications on a portion of the farm.

The award judges praised the way John, his wife Toos, elder son Edmund (18) and twins Julius and Guido (17) co-operate in the daily running of the property, and contribute to the planning for its future stewardship. Edmund has just begun study at Lincoln University and John and Toos are obviously welcoming this move which they term, "the start of a new era".

The judges noted: "The family have been here for 100 years and want to be there for the next 100 years. The development as a team is ongoing, they aim to specialise on the property so each one has their own area of expertise – the boys are aiming to go to university then farming. You can see they all work so well

together and it was a privilege to have the opportunity to be shown around the property."

Toos, who is from the Netherlands, had no farming experience when she and John were married. John proudly says, "she took to it like a duck to water". As for their boys, John says, "they've been farming since the day they were born!"

John took over the 363ha farm from his father in 1980 and John and Toos have since made four land purchases totalling 232 ha. Most significantly, they have been able to connect up the home farm with what was known in the family as the 'top farm', a property bought by John's father that previously could only be accessed from Hiamoe base by 11kms of road.

Hiamoe is now a long (8km) narrow property. As it progresses east the contour changes from rolling to easy hill country. The eastern end of the farm is on the western slopes of the Pohangina River Valley. Last year the Cousins wintered 700 deer for finishing, 2100 ewes, 600 hoggets, and grazed 480 dairy heifers on May-to-May weight gain contracts. 'Hiamoe Farmstay' is a small sideline; the family say they enjoy welcoming "interesting guests and bus tour groups from faraway places".

Since 2008 they have been members of the Hastings-based Firstlight Venison Co-operative. They finish weaners bred by co-op members. The deer are slaughtered in Feilding and the venison is marketed by Firstlight Venison direct to retail customers in the States and Europe.



JUDGES COMMENTS

- Demonstrated a good understanding of different stock types on different parts of the farm.
- Proactive in animal health management for the different stock classes; planting for stock shade and shelter is evident.
- Close focus on growth target goals for dairy grazing stock.
- Fenced dams and waterways, exclude deer and cattle; wide range of trees planted on unproductive, riparian and fragile areas.

BRENDAN & PHILIPPA KAVANAGH

BALLANCE AGRI-NUTRIENTS HABITAT IMPROVEMENT AWARD

The Kavanaghs have transformed their 600ha Raetihi property from a run-down farm with no effective internal fencing into an asset described by the award judges as, “a sound, well maintained hill country unit”.



Candidly admitting their task was initially “a bit daunting”, Brendan and Philippa have in the past 20 years developed a property on which their family of four boys, their livestock and an increasing number of native species thrive.

On their 480ha of available grazing land last year they wintered 2800 ewes, 1000

hoggets and 240 R3 steers. There are two blocks of native bush - 15ha retired in 2006 and 20ha in 2009 – which the judges described as being “in extremely good condition”. A spring fed 4.8ha dam, with an associated two hectare wetland, built in 2004, is home to koura, eels and birds including breeding pairs of weweia (NZ dabchicks), as well as providing a recreational facility for family and friends. “The boys like kayaking, and we’ve even had a boat on the lake and water skied,” says Brendan.

Brendan worked on dry stock farms in New Zealand and Australia when he left school. He gained a Dip Ag from Massey in 1983. When the couple married they were managing a Whanganui dairy farm, but they came onto their current property from a five-year stint living in Wellington, where they operated a rubbish collection business.

The agricultural downturn of the late 1980s provided an entry opportunity into farm ownership for the Kavanaghs. With

banks requiring 50 per cent deposit, Brendan and Philippa were initially looking at smaller farms, but decided to “give it a go” when they came across what is now their place, 14kms north west of Raetihi. They bought the 3500 ewes on the place for \$12 each! It had a good house, covered yards and a reasonable boundary fence, but everything else on the farm was marginal.

With the help of casual worker, Brendan erected five kilometres of fencing in the first two years. Productive pasture was established within a few years once fencing better controlled grazing, fertiliser was applied, the ring fern dealt to with a weak solution of Round-Up and clover oversown.

The farm is one valley over from the edge of the Whanganui National Park and has the Manganui o te Ao River, a major habitat for the endangered whio (Blue Duck), on its back boundary, so pest control is a major consideration. The presence of TB led to their decision to restrict their beef herd to steers.

After noticing only a few whio chicks were reaching adulthood, Brendan launched an offensive using traps supplied by DOC. He caught 26 stoats in the first year. “That knocked the numbers down, but I still maintain the traps and catch the odd stoat or wild cat.” When they retired their bush blocks they undertook thorough pest control programmes. “We are seeing a lot more native birds now, they are really nice areas of bush.” Brendan says they particularly enjoy seeing falcons, “they are pretty amazing hunters”.

The Kavanagh sons are Tom (25), Nick (23), Chris (20) and Hamish (17).



JUDGES COMMENTS

- Significant native bush areas retired and looking stunning.
- Development of substantial dam and stunning wetland area enhancing biodiversity of native bird life.
- Management of stoat lines protecting native bird life, in particular Blue Duck habitat on the Manganui o te Ao River.
- Extensive soil conservation programme; poplar planting and developing farm nursery

THE AWARDS

The Ballance Farm Environment Awards are designed to encourage farmers to support and adopt sustainable farming practices. The awards are now held in Northland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, East Coast, Manawatu/Whanganui, Wellington, Canterbury, Southland and Otago.

This is their seventh year in the Horizons region.

THE AIM

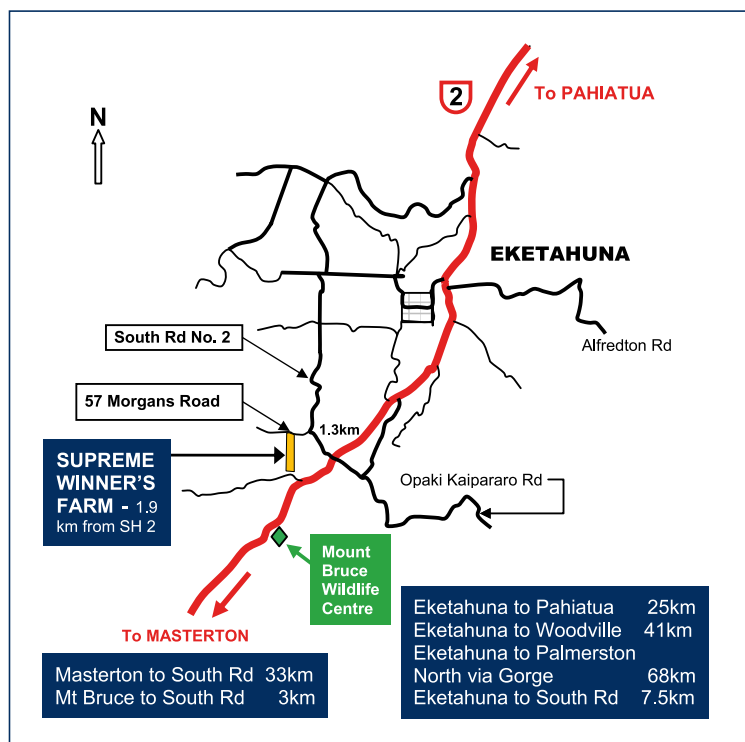
The aim of the Ballance Farm Environment Awards is to encourage and support farmers to pursue good environmental practices. When farmers enter the awards, a team of judges visit the farm and discuss the entire farming operation. The awards are designed to be a positive experience for everyone, an exchange of information and ideas, and a chance for farmers to get information and advice from the various judging representatives.

FIELD DAY

The field day will be held at the 2011 Supreme Winners property.

Rickie Morrison and Sharleen Hutching

When:	To be announced.
Where:	57 Morgans Road Eketahuna
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