



Ballance
Farm Environment Awards®
Promoting Sustainable Profitable Farming

2010 HORIZONS REGION

KEN AND SUE BALLANTYNE

SUPREME AWARD

NZ FARM ENVIRONMENT AWARD TRUST LIVESTOCK AWARD

PGG WRIGHTSON LAND AND LIFE AWARD

HORIZONS REGIONAL COUNCIL AWARD (for integration of trees)

The Ballantynes looked over numerous farms before they walked onto the Aria property they now proudly call home, and instantly felt it was the place for them.

“We had seen a lot of rubbish, a lot of places that weren’t for us,” recalls Ken, “so when we got here we realised straightaway it was going to suit us.” Born and bred Southlanders, Ken and Sue are passionate about their 526ha southern King Country sheep and beef farm, set in terrain ranging from flat to moderately steep. It is summer safe country - “except for two summers ago”, quips Ken wryly - bordered on the northwest side by native bush, a vast tract that stretches all the way to Mokau on the west coast.

They purchased the first 446ha of their place in 1996 when they came from a 250ha Taupo ballot farm they had taken on in 1984. The couple’s able planning and the entire Ballantyne family’s work rate on the Aria farm means their pride in the “impressive” property is thoroughly justified, according to the award judges.

“Ken and Sue have developed a magnificent asset through careful management, timely implementation and a lot of hard work,” reads the judges’ feedback report. “This has culminated in an easy to work farm with quality stock combined with quality facilities, which has alleviated stress and pressure for both owners and stock.”

The judges also noted positively the way trees had been used. The regional council’s farm plan had been implemented “over and above” the recommendations. “The tree plantings are quite outstanding, adding great appeal to the property surrounds as well as protecting the more fragile areas of the farm,” the judges wrote.

Ken humbly describes their transformation of the property as “just fencing, fertiliser and water, just sorting out the basics”, but some of the numbers associated with the farm paint a more accurate picture: from three to 78 troughs; P readings in the soil from 4 to 17; 8350 trees planted in the past five years; and 28 paddocks to 88, including three kilometres of laneway. He does however admit to being proud of their numbers associated with lambs in recent years: “We are achieving 140% plus survival to sale and drafting to liveweights of 40kgs plus now,” he says. “We are really happy with that, that’s Southland weights!”

Ease of management has always been a priority in the development of the farm. The year after moving there, Ken and Sue purchased an 80ha block across the road. The Ballantynes understand the value of being able to have easy access, so buying the smaller block of gently rolling country was an easy decision. They like that roads, both open and closed, run through and around their property. A set of yards has been strategically placed at the end of the laneway, allowing all the back paddocks to feed into it easily and facilitating stock movement.



National Partners

Regional Partner





“It really makes looking after the stock so much easier and less stressful on them and us,” explains Ken.

Water availability also keeps the stock, and humans, happy. They have worked with a water specialist, Gary Robinson, to vastly improve the farm system. “Expensive, but worth it,” is Ken’s verdict. The judges agreed, noting in their report: “The

development of a reliable stock water system is a big asset to the farm, supplying clean, well-placed trough water year round, even through a drought.”

Last year they wintered 2550 ewes, 700 hoggets, 50 rams and killers, 156 breeding cows, 220 yearlings and five breeding bulls. They favour the Wairere Romney sheep and aim to breed all their sheep replacements. The beef stock they buy in, preferring Angus cows and Simmental bulls. On each visit the award judges noted the “excellent condition” of all stock.

Another driver for Ken and Sue is their awareness of the importance of water quality protection and soil conservation and management, for the long-term health of the property. “We decided from the start we were not going to push the system,” explains Ken. “We learnt that lesson pretty well on the pumice at Taupo.”

The judges commended the couple’s willingness to work with their varying soil types and fertility levels. “They are understanding their soils and managing their cattle to maintain soil quality,” wrote the judges. “Improvement to fertility has also been a major focus, with very low P levels when the property was first purchased. This is an ongoing project, as the ash soils require close monitoring and high inputs due to the P retention properties. Cobalt and selenium are also added to the soil every year, rather than using animal health supplements and remedies, and the stock respond very well.”

All gullies with wet areas or soil susceptible to slipping have now been fenced. Much thought goes into which commercial species to plant on these steeper sidings. Some of those used are Eucalyptus Nitens for firewood and Eucalyptus Fastigata for timber. Douglas Fir and Blackwood have also been planted for timber, although aesthetic value is always a consideration. “You may as well plant something you like looking at,” says Ken. “Planting trees is very rewarding, making the farm a better place to work and live.”

The Ballantynes are interested in and respectful of the history of their land. They acknowledge the role the place has played in the lives of many people in the past, and are happy for that to continue. It is used by community groups like endurance horse riders, or the local school as part of a fund-raiser trail bike ride. Pig hunters are frequent visitors and trampers often use it as an entry point to the DOC reserve native bush.

The land was first farmed in 1905; the Ballantynes are only the eighth owners since then. It was abandoned in the 1930s, but in 1939 Aubrey Brough arrived and took over the mortgage.

JUDGES COMMENTS

- *Lifelong interest in developing and breeding a sustainable flock.*
- *All stock in excellent condition.*
- *Good understanding of different stock types on differing parts of farm.*
- *Stock benefit from central laneway, subdivision and excellent water supply.*

He had 70 sheep and, for many years, no power or phone. One of Aubrey's sons, Tom, still farms nearby and enjoys the link with his childhood home. Tom is another frequent visitor, often bringing groups of family and friends to pig hunt, tramp or simply visit.

Ken particularly appreciates the community spirit in the area that people like Tom Brough and his wife Lorraine represent. Ken has bipolar disorder and needs to manage this and his associated depression. He is candid about his mental health, including his suicide attempt three years ago, because he wants as many people as possible to understand the importance of talking about such things. Rural folk, working hard and often living isolated lives, are at risk of getting



depression without realising it, he believes.

"I hope by being open and honest about my illness that it may encourage someone with a similar illness to seek professional help and realise that by getting professional help you can control the illness and live a full and productive life," says Ken. "I know some people are uncomfortable with what happened to me, but it doesn't worry me, I hold my head up high." This

is made possible, he points out, by support from Sue and their family, and people like the Broughs, and another local, Dan Weinberg.

Ken and Sue have trodden a long path to a lifestyle they love, their financial security giving them the ability to enjoy their stewardship role on the land. The award judges described the Ballantynes as "self-made" people. They bought their first land in 1979, a six-hectare block from Ken's mother. In addition to farm work, the couple has operated a shearing run and a slink skin run and Ken has done his time at the freezing works and on the shearing board.

The three Ballantyne children, aged between 22 and 27, no longer live on the farm but all retain a strong sense of belonging to the land and the family's significant community networks. Ken and Sue are particularly pleased their children were all highly regarded part-time members in the paid work force before they left school. A legacy, no doubt, of the work ethic modelled to them by their parents.

Julie is living in Australia and Hayden is about to travel from Alice Springs to Chile. Lisa comes home from her Hamilton home and job often, sharing her parents' pleasure in getting out on the farm and quietly working away at pruning some of the trees that have been planted in the past five years. "It's good for the soul," says Ken. "On our last farm we planted 20,000. We saw the farm recently and it was really gratifying to see the difference the trees we put in make to that place, in so many ways."



JUDGES COMMENTS

- *Striking passion for their farm.*
- *Careful farm development to enable operation with ease and efficiency.*
- *Immaculately presented property.*
- *Life-time commitment to supporting local business, community, sport groups and involvement with industry issues.*

MARIE, PAUL AND SHAUN OLSEN, TERRENCE OLSEN

LIC DAIRY FARM AWARD HILL LABORATORIES HARVEST AWARD BALLANCE NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT AWARD

The Olsen partnership is significant for two types of very successful blending – that of dairying and potato production, and that of the people concerned.



“The potato cropping runs like a well-oiled wheel,” enthused the award judges after their farm visit, “while the dairy side of the farm provides an excellent and stable platform to their overall business operation.”

Based at Opiki, south of Palmerston North, the 307ha Olsen operation is owned by Terrence Olsen and his sister-in-law Marie and operated

by Paul and Shaun Olsen, sons of Marie and the late Gregory. The original partners in the business were the elder brothers, Gregory and Terrence; they purchased the flat, predominantly peat, 88ha home block together in 1977.

The judges commented that collectively, the Olsens’ farming knowledge was “huge”. Terrence still plays an active role on the farm, particularly with the potatoes, and Marie relief milks, rears calves and keeps the financial records. This is a family business that impressed the judges with its smooth operation and effective relationships. Of particular note, they wrote, was the two-way intergenerational respect: “It is very much a team effort and has a good strong family atmosphere where everyone is involved,” said the judges. “The next generation is keen to learn from their superiors as well as them listening to the younger generation.”

Paul and Shaun came home to the farm they grew up on within the same year during 2003/04, following respective stints at Lincoln and Telford, travel, and employment on other farms. Prior to that Marie and Terrence employed a lower-order sharemilker. They oversaw the dairying together, and Terrence ran the potato production. Now, Shaun runs the dairying side, Marie and Paul take their turn relief milking. Paul manages the potato production with help from Terrence. In addition five seasonal workers are employed for the potatoes and the dairy farm employs a herd manager and assistant herd manager full-time. An effort is made to create a team environment says Paul, with dairy staff included in decision-making as much as possible. It is a great strength, the Olsens believe, “that we can all do each other’s jobs”.

Paul and Shaun flat with a couple of mates on the farm, another indicator of the good health of the family’s relationships. “Communication is the key,” says Paul. “Shaun and I don’t work together all that much; living together is not a problem, it makes sense. On the farm, we just divide responsibilities and pretty much leave each other to it, unless someone asks for help.”

In 2006 they began leasing a 40ha block adjoining the dairy farm and this has been amalgamated into the whole operation. The 670 cows are milked through a 60-bale rotary shed. Milk production has been increasing for the last five years and the plan is for this to continue. Last season 214,000 kgMS was achieved from 580 cows, with this season’s target of 250,000kgMS in sight. The judges noted: “They have a clear



JUDGES COMMENTS

- Significant factor the way the whole family ‘gel together’ running this good scale mixed dairy and cropping operation.
- Dairy farming on a challenging soil structure, and doing it well.
- Grass-based system using minimal inputs; integration of potatoes maximises pasture renewal programme for dairy farm.
- Livestock in excellent condition.



vision and goal of where they want to be. They are always looking to better themselves and their systems.”

Soon after Paul and Shaun entered the partnership a 71ha run-off was purchased nearby. It is sandy, rolling country and enhances both the practical, seasonal demands of their farming and the business side of the operation. The company

structure of ownership of this block and the purchase of a separate 300-cow dairy farm in an equity-share partnership in 2008 – in which Paul and Shaun hold a 25 per cent share - allows for succession planning and progressive buy-in by the brothers.

The run-off is home to young herd replacements and also to around 450 cows for six to eight weeks in the winter. “Being able to do that really takes the pressure off the milking platform,” says Paul. This is especially important with the peaty soil, which compacts easily and tends to get wet from underneath. The judges noted the great awareness of the Olsens of the constraints of farming with this type of soil. Cows are stood off during heavy rain at all times of the year. Wind is also an issue that the Olsens consider, especially at their seasonal worst in spring, at the end of calving and beginning of cultivation.

All streams and drains are now fenced; there is no stock access. This is an entirely logical thing to do, says Paul. Eliminating the risk of cows falling in, or drain sides collapsing is “simply good management” he points out. “When you farm in a wet area like this, you need your drains to work as efficiently as possible,” he says.

Around 70ha of potatoes have been grown annually for the past five years, but there is flexibility within their management to vary that amount as climatic, market or other factors dictate. The potatoes are grown on a rotational basis, a useful tool for regrassing poorly performing paddocks. Soil testing is undertaken and a nutrient budget is calculated prior to cropping each year, so fertiliser is only applied as needed. The judges noted with approval that the Olsens “use a lot of the residual fertiliser from the potato growing to keep the new grass growing, so they are not over-applying the nutrients”.

A contractor is employed to plant the grass, otherwise the Olsens and their staff undertake all machine-work. As part of their Quality Assurance programme GAP monitoring and recording systems are used. This ensures minimum inputs and assists in traceability from pasture to plate. The Olsens are particular about documenting “everything we do”, to ensure there is accountability within the partnership and also, says Paul, “it’s just part of that whole best on-farm practise thing that is so important”.

Paul and Shaun are active members of Young Farmers Club. They appreciate the leadership courses and club training available and say their participation has helped them with improving communication and management skills.



JUDGES COMMENTS

- *GAP monitoring and recording systems ensure minimal inputs and product traceability.*
- *Industry contribution through cropping trial work.*
- *Considered management of soil structure through combination of potato and dairy farming.*
- *Farm well set up, good infrastructure and facilities adding to ease of management.*

ROBERT AND SUZANNE CARTER 'THE POPLARS'

MASSEY UNIVERSITY DISCOVERY AWARD

Rob Carter's light-hearted asides about their entry into full-time farming have a ring of truth about them, but they don't do justice to what this couple has achieved on their Taumarunui hill country farm since purchasing in 1988.



The award judges noted of the Carters: "The ability to think outside the square, diversify and pick up on opportunities as they arise was very impressive."

Prior to buying their 339ha (270ha effective) property the couple were living on their lifestyle block on the outskirts of Taumarunui. Suzie was teaching and Rob was an electrical contractor.

Farm prices had slumped "so we decided it might be a good time to buy a bigger lifestyle block," says Rob, tongue in cheek.

Rob recounts how some years earlier he had gratefully received an old turbine "perfect for a small hydro-power scheme" from a farmer who no longer needed it for his woolshed. "So I had to find a farm with a creek with enough fall to use it on!" Now, provided the creek doesn't run dry in a drought, the turbine generates virtually all their electricity needs.

Along the way, Rob has also created a gravity fed water system for stock troughs, making redundant the many dams on the property whose presence was escalating soil instability by re-lubricating troublesome land slumps.

Rob considers that, in a sense, his retirement began when he and Suzie and their children Hayley and Travis moved to The

Poplars. "Not that I stopped working," he hastens to add, "I mean, retirement, in terms of enjoyment." The award judges noted Rob's attitude, writing: "He is enthusiastic and enjoys all challenges and opportunities of everyday farming life. His attitude to all that is presented is a keenness to learn and 'can I make it work better'."

Last year they wintered around 3500 stock units. This comprised 1800 ewes, 130 breeding cows, 80 younger breeding stock plus finishing stock and rams. Contour is medium to steep. The farm contains woodlots with a range of exotics including pine, redwood and lusitanica; 30ha of mature trees and 20ha contains younger plantings.

The Poplars is in Kirikau Valley, southwest of Taumarunui, and has a warm, humid microclimate, perfect for facial eczema. The Carters found this out the hard way in 1992, when they lost a third of their ewe hoggets. Typically though, they turned a problem into an opportunity: "We had been performance recording our elite Coopworths, but we hadn't been selecting for facial eczema tolerance," explains Rob. "With our hoggets getting hit so hard, we knew what we had left was a pretty good place to start with!"

They also select for fertility, lamb size and growth and, more recently, worm resistance. In addition to rams for their own use, they sell around 50 a year. This helps pay for the recording costs. "It is a sideline, but an important one, because it has allowed us to improve genetics greatly here," explains Rob.

As well as better production, Rob and Suzie are aiming to breed animals that don't need intervention. This links with

JUDGES COMMENTS

- *Innovation developing on-farm mill and power-generation, adding sustainable economic value to the business.*
- *Stock breeding a highlight, particularly the FE resistant Coopworths, utilising current knowledge and technology.*
- *Active involvement in industry support, utilised knowledge gained by applying innovative and leading-edge practises.*
- *Weed and scrub cleared with care to protect waterways; native bush on boundary fenced with help from DoC.*



their “minimalist” approach to the use of chemicals on the farm. They have a “black tag regime” where any sheep with a problem is tagged for culling. “We culled a lot of sheep for a start, but not so many now,” says Rob, who is cautiously optimistic they are also “making inroads” on sheep susceptible to fly strike.

Rob’s more recent idea to establish a “boutique timber production system” on the farm is another example of turning around a disheartening situation. When the couple received a bombshell professional assessment of the worth of their almost-mature trees, and

found their profit wasn’t going to be the retirement nest egg it once would have been, they realised instead an advantage in a more sustainable approach than mass logging at one time, and also the potential for carbon credit income generation. Rob did a financial analysis based on them milling their own wood, and replanting as they go, which encouraged them to push ahead with their new approach. Using salvaged and new parts and spending hours in his workshop, Rob has built a mill for just \$6000. Once they build up sufficient stock of a range of timber sizes they will “set up shop”.

They liken this to “growing the business from within the business”. They are aware that for many in their position, equity in farms is used as a springboard to grow. However, they are mindful of making themselves “vulnerable” and say they remain respectful and aware of the pain so apparent in 1987, during the downturn in which they began farming.

FINALISTS



Dan Steele



Marie, Terrence, Paul and Shaun Olsen



Ross and Ruth Richards



Robert and Suzanne Carter



Rob and Sarah Craig



Ken and Sue Ballantyne

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, Horizons, Wellington, Canterbury, Southland and Otago. This is their sixth 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 Supreme Winners property.

Ken and Sue Ballantyne

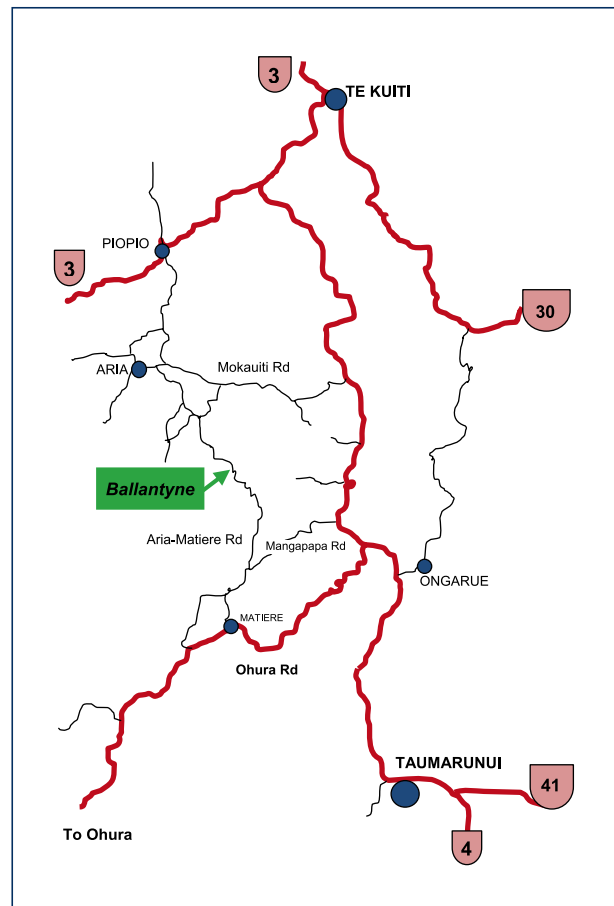
When: To be announced.

Where: 2057 Matiere Road
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