



Ballance
Farm Environment Awards®
 Promoting Sustainable Profitable Farming

2010 WAIKATO REGION

WYNN & TRACY, TONY & COBY AND TOM & BARB BROWN
 TIROROA FARMS

SUPREME AWARD PGG WRIGHTSON LAND AND LIFE AWARD HILLS LABORATORIES HARVEST AWARD

Shared values that span generations and an established set of priorities are clear drivers in the Brown partnership.

Dairying together on their 320ha Matamata family farm, brothers Wynn and Tony Brown have a clear picture of the crucial role the health of their soil plays to their business. "Our soil is our most valuable asset," says Wynn. "We prioritise soil, pasture then stock, we aim to get things right in that order."

The Browns also agree on fundamentals, like the latitude of meaning to the term 'sustainability'. "Sustainability is a pretty broad sort of a word," says Tony, "it's not just about the environment and the stock, it's the people too – you've got to have a life as well." The award judges noted of the partnership: "This farm is a real family affair and it is a credit to you the way you have put the business of farming in order."

In 2001 Tiroroa Farms won the BFEA Habitat Enhancement Award for the Waikato region. Since then the Browns have added 143ha to their holding and say their development of the new blocks has incorporated much of what they learnt from entering these awards last time.

Wynn and his wife Tracy and Tony and his wife Coby operate within an equity partnership sharemilking company, milking 700 cows on family trust land controlled by their parents, Tom and Barb. Tiroroa Farms is, according to the award judges, "a beautifully maintained property and a well-functioning family farming system". The judges noted: "The farm appears

to be achieving well across the full range of important aspects and there seems to be good balance, flexibility and risk management."

Tom and Barb Brown came to the original 177ha block of the farm in the Peria Hills area west of Matamata in 1970, when it was purchased with Tom's father. A district rolling in contour, the farm was rough with plentiful gorse, blackberry and nodding thistles. They farmed sheep and beef and once the weed control chemicals became available, Tom used them with the abandon common to the era. The effect on his health now is a reminder his sons say they heed well; this consciousness is part of their sustainability package.

Their soil is predominantly light, and prone to summer dryness. The judges commended the Browns' awareness of the importance of maintaining soil structure and the way in which their maize production and regrassing programmes are managed. The Browns undertake all ground preparation and the use of power implements is avoided. Planning for cropping is undertaken in the winter, with all the farm's requirements grown on the property. Maize silage is not fed out in spring, instead it is used to smooth out production through shoulder periods of feed availability, especially each summer.

They are enthusiastic about their involvement in FAR trials, one of three farms in the Waikato doing so. "The results have been amazing," says Tony, "they are changing perceptions of what you can do with effluent. Now we know we can grow a 26 tonne crop off an early maturing variety like 38M28.



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A lot of people struggle to do that off a long-growing crop. The only extra work for us has been in communicating, it has been an easy process and a credit to the FAR people.”

Successful farming, family, and community involvement go hand-in-hand for the Brown clan. Wynn and Tony have a younger brother Chris, who with his wife

Helen is also dairying in the Matamata area. “Our parents are good role models, leading by example, they have always said you only get out what you put in,” says Wynn. He and Tony are grateful for the trust their parents place in them. “We like to be progressive and although Dad is more familiar with dry stock farming, he hasn’t resisted any of our progressiveness,” says Tony.

For his part, Tom made it clear to the judges he was comfortable with the farm’s operation and that he was always confident his sons could work together as adults because they did so while growing up on the farm and in the community for contractors, as well as contributing to the family commitment to help out an elderly neighbour for many years.

It was never an option for the Brown boys to leave school and come home to the farm, however. Tom and Barb encouraged

their sons to “get out in the world” and Wynn and Tony believe the experience they gained doing this is a key factor in their confidence as employers and business partners today. There is clear recognition of the importance to the dairy industry of quality staff. Wynn contributes time off-farm on the Ag ITO training board. A herd manager couple is employed on the farm and given responsibility opportunities that encourage progression in the industry within two years or so. Says Tony: “We are proud to say all the managers that have left here have furthered themselves in the dairy industry.”

Wynn came home in 1993 with his B Ag from Massey to help his father convert the original farm to dairying. Wynn had been working for JD Wallace Corporation in a variety of roles, including dairy farm conversions, so brought valuable knowledge and experience home. Initially, 325 cows were milked in a 36aside Herringbone shed. Wynn is proud of the way the family business has evolved. “In the past 15 years we have grown our equity an average of six percent a year,” he says.

Tony, a diesel mechanic by trade, returned to the farm in 1995 after several years overseas including work driving tractors in Australia’s vast wheat belt and travel experiences through Africa and Europe. “That time away really gave me a focus of where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do,” recalls Tony. But just to be sure, he worked for wages under Wynn and Tracy for two years.

Once Tony and Coby were onboard, the stage was set for a gradual expansion. A 12ha block on the southern boundary



JUDGES COMMENTS

- Long term sustainability possible through good systems i.e. succession, environment, financial & Community Commitment.
- Pride in seeing staff move on in the industry, maintain contact with them.
- Decisions well thought out involving all the family; for example, new dairy allows more time off for family and staff.
- Office in dairy, everything can be found by all who need it; separates home from workplace.



was purchased in 2002, a 131ha block on the northern boundary in 2004 and in 2008 they began leasing a 30ha block on the southwest boundary.

Both couples acknowledge the importance of the family partnership, and of being part of their community. Says Wynn: “If that wasn’t important and it was only about the money Tracy and I would have gone south and been milking a few more cows on our own by now.” Tony credits the partnership structure as “a key fact in us going forward”. In the partnership, there has to be justification in all that is done he says. “Nothing random can be done, there’s no new toys

just because there’s been a good payout,” he says with a grin. “A partnership is that extra step before you spend money, and that’s a good thing.”

The judges noted the effectiveness of the way the Browns plan, writing in their report: “There was careful planning and design thought put into systems that appear to work well, including years of research before building the new cow shed, and a system of roles, responsibilities and rostering that provides stability and flexibility and opportunity for adequate time off for all involved in the business.”

The Westfalia Surge 54 bale rotary farm dairy is new this season. Its existence on the farm is the result of at least six years of contemplation, costing and design. “We got it built because we really wanted to utilise everyone’s time better, both in terms of work and for our families,” explains Tony. Wynn points out the long-term view they have: “We put the shed in to complement the farm, not vice-versa, that is quite an important difference.”

An innovative roster system is in place that gives the three working couples a three-day weekend every three weeks. In addition to improving family life, the roster allows for flexibility to deal with unforeseen events and seasonal variations. On a daily basis, the way the roles are structured means they are interchangeable, everyone gets a variety of work and, “importantly”, Wynn points out with a grin, “no one person is ever spending more than an hour putting cups on”.



JUDGES COMMENTS

- *Excellent soil structure maintained, pasture and crop health impressive.*
- *Simple systems that allow for ease of management; sound knowledge of soil management.*
- *Maize crop impressive given the low fertiliser inputs (part of trial).*
- *Always asking questions and looking at low cost ‘new’ ideas*

JOHN & ANNE BRIER – NGAPONGA

BALLANCE NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT AWARD NZ FARM ENVIRONMENT TRUST LIVESTOCK AWARD MASSEY UNIVERSITY DISCOVERY AWARD

The Briers demonstrate a long-term commitment to the advancement and application of agricultural knowledge, both for themselves and beyond their own gate.



Soon to depart for a two-year term of Volunteer Service Abroad in Vietnam, the couple are leaving their 643ha Ngaroma sheep and beef farm in the hands of one of their children, Dan (a vet), and his wife Bronwyn; a trading partnership between the two couples is in place.

John and Anne came to Ngaponga, a property southeast of Te Awamutu

with contour ranging from easy rolling to steep, in 1996. John was a MAF farm advisor before they farmed sheep and beef at Coromandel from 1974 to 1986. From 1986 until purchasing Ngaponga, John was a farm management tutor at Waikato Polytechnic. During that time, the couple also established a 26ha dairy goat farm on the outskirts of Hamilton.

The need to consider proximity to education for the couple's six children – Kelly, Gerard, Brendan, Daniel, Robert and Veronica – was diminishing by 1996, when John and Anne purchased the Ngaroma property. It has been a successful move in many regards. The award judges commended the Briers' goal of improving farm income in a sustainable manner and wrote: "This is a well-managed farm with a lot of emphasis put into careful decision-making to maximise profitability."

John and Anne were keen to return to living within a rural

community. "When we lived at Coromandel we enjoyed a very rich community," says John. "While moving to Hamilton was the right thing to do at the time, we soon learnt there was a cost, which was the loss of that kind of community." Since moving back into full-time farming, they have been locally involved and have helped establish a mentor group of six farming couples from the wider area; a support and "mark and measure" group that they value. "We are in the business of looking after one another's goals," John explains.

Ngaponga appealed because of the scope to improve production and the farm itself offered a life accompanied by "the really pleasant outlook". Its boundaries two areas of native bush administered by the Department of Conservation and a steep, bush-covered gully runs through the farm.

Last year they wintered 2500 ewes, 600 hoggets, 120 breeding cows, 97 bull calves, 110 yearling bulls and 130 R2 bulls. There are 510ha effective, approximately 200ha of easy rolling country and 310ha of medium to steeper hills. There are two main soil types on the farm, Mairoa ash over light pumice subsoil. Bulls are restricted to the easier contoured ash soils and the judges noted: "It is pleasing to see that the bulls are causing minimal damage to the soil despite the relatively intensive grazing system."

The breeding cows and ewes usually run together from March until June. The cows take care of the surplus rougher feed on the hills well, says John, but they are watched closely, especially if there is heavy rainfall, to avoid pasture and soil damage. "We are very conscious of the responsibility we have



JUDGES COMMENTS

- *Managing pasture to optimise production very well in a difficult environment.*
- *Soil test history shows steady improvement in soil fertility in past 13 years.*
- *Cropping programme allowing pasture improvement, no supplements necessary.*
- *Excellent working nutrient budget and nutrient management plan.*
- *Willing to seek out and try new ideas.*
- *Involvement with Innovation Waikato for research and trials.*



to maintain the asset we have,” he says, pointing out this also makes sense economically by maximising production and maintaining the capital value of the property.

John and Anne use Farmax computer software extensively as a decision tool. “It is good for tactics and keeping track of how we are going when we set targets,” explains John, who enjoys the “visible

measure” they have. For example, they know that in 2004 the farm produced 250kgs of meat and wool per hectare, and last year it produced 380kgs.

John is comfortable with new technology and acknowledges the skills in this area of a son, Brendan, who is a farm business consultant. The Briers’ were part of a recently completed three year Innovation Waikato Rezare project exploring ways of applying existing technology to make farming more efficient. This included trials with electronic ear tags, integration of broadband technology, creep grazing, hill country regrassing and the use of satellite pictures to gauge pasture quality.

Typically they are relaxed about the benefits specifically to their own farm; it is extra work, but they enjoy being part of the research process. “It’s all about making the world go round,” says John, though, he adds, “if something falls out the bottom for us that is nice!” Already, the tag technology has created traceability that has allowed them to move into Marks and Spencer supply contracts.

He also likes that they now have “marvellous broadband in the district” and says there is a confirmed three kilogram a head lift in lamb weights attributed to the implementation of a trial rotational ‘creep’ grazing for lambing and lactating ewes and their lambs.

This creep grazing bypasses the traditional practise of set stocking the ewes after scanning until docking or weaning. Instead, the four large mobs of sheep are allowed to move on, the lambs tending to creep ahead of the ewes, benefiting from the extra grass. Initially the lambs mismothered too much with shifting, so were missing out on milk and mothering and weren’t thriving. However the installation and use of gate bat latches, which are set to open at a given time, allows the rotation to happen without the intrusion of humans to lambing and mothering ewes, and the gates keep the lambs closer to their mothers. At the end of the day on which a bat latch has opened a gate, a person can come and quietly move the remainder of the sheep through the opened gate and shut it behind the mob. There is a human benefit too, says John with a grin: “It’s a great lifestyle thing, being able to set a few bat latches on weekends!”



JUDGES COMMENTS

- *Actively building long-term industry relationships.*
- *New innovations/trials for rotational grazing of ewes and lambs lifted lamb production by three kilograms a head.*
- *Strong business plan with firm goals for production, succession and debt reduction.*
- *Asure Quality audit (for Marks and Spencer lamb meat supply contract) shows animal welfare & husbandry is excellent.*
- *Multiple yards reduce stock movement burden.*
- *Very good production results; lambing percentage usually 150-160%, 342kg/ha of meat and wool produced last season.*

WARWICK, JOYCE, HAYDEN AND OWEN BROWN COSY RIDGE FARM

LIC DAIRY FARM AWARD ENVIRONMENT WAIKATO WATER PROTECTION AWARD

Profitability, not production, is the mantra on this 77ha Pirongia dairy farm that Joyce Brown unequivocally calls “our little bit of heaven”.



In noting the Cosy Ridge Farm production cost per kilogram of milk solids at \$2.70 – compared with the Waikato average for the same time period of \$4.60 – the award judges commented: “It is very apparent that you are constantly seeking a better way of doing things and very passionate about farming.”

Warwick sums up their approach like this: “Our aim is to make the money, and hang onto as much of it as we can.” Former Aucklander Joyce adds: “We love the combination of being farmers and parents in this environment and community.”

Hayden was three months old in 1987 when Warwick and Joyce bought the original 56ha block on the eastern slopes of the mountain, just above the township of Pirongia. Although small, the farm was what they could afford and the character of it appealed. “We had been sharemilking on the flat, so the hills, the view and the creek along the back boundary appealed to us,” explains Warwick.

The contour is rolling and grass growth is consistent, thanks to the climate being “almost” frost-free and the localised rainfall, which is unique and extremely high when compared to Waikato average. An eye on the rainfall is part of a wider

awareness the Browns have in taking responsibility for their environment. The grazing rotation is sped up in the wet. Care is taken to ensure areas around the many springheads on the property are protected and the surrounding areas only lightly stocked.

The Browns have added to their original purchase twice, buying an adjoining 10ha in 1988 and 11ha last November. They have a policy of contour fencing, viewing this as an opportunity to plant trees, prevent stock damage and provide shelter. A dam has been developed, with the flax plantings on the edges to assist with nutrient filtering.

They have been milking 140 cows on 54 ha (effective) with a consistent production of around 40,000 kgMS. The addition of the new block brings the effective area to 65ha and they are planning to milk around 160 cows. Soil tests are taken every two years, with separate tests for different parts of the farm. A nutrient budget, using Overseer in more recent years, supports the long-established selective fertiliser application policy.

Hayden, a mechanical engineer, came home to the farm this season and has been happy to help out with the integration of the new block “and to find out if dairy farming is for him”. The experience has been a positive one, and, tempting though it is to encourage Hayden to stay, Warwick and Joyce expect he will leave to broaden his dairying experience at the end of this season. Younger son Owen is following up on his many farming and environmental-based school science projects with study at the University of Auckland.



JUDGES COMMENTS

- Impressive team approach resulting in a very efficient, simple, low input profitable dairy unit.
- A sustainable business as the physical farm and the finances are not under pressure.
- Big family involvement in day to day running and long term strategy.
- Fencing and management of waterways a high priority, a number of waterways run through the farm.
- Dams developed, well fenced and planted for nutrient filtering and runoff protection.
- Biodiversity is well understood and practised by all family members.

GEOFFREY AND JOHANNA FITZGERALD MAUNGAHAU

WAIKATO FARM ENVIRONMENT TRUST HABITAT IMPROVEMENT AWARD

The Fitzgeralds have transformed their Northern King Country property, purchased 11 years ago for dairy support, into a diverse business.

Adjacent to the western outlier of the Pureora Forest, the 430ha farm in the Wharepungua district northeast of Otorohanga is an operation encompassing sheep, beef, calf rearing, Boer (meat) goats, deer and a hunting safari park. But the function most obviously valued by the couple is that of providing a place to which humans can come to appreciate all that nature has to offer.

Noted the award judges: "There is a strong emphasis on sharing the specialness of your property with others, and a lot of effort has gone into adding to the enjoyment of those who use the farm." The Fitzgeralds sum up their approach: "We wish to leave the property as a pleasurable and valued asset for future generations."

They have fashioned the farm into what they term a "recreational retreat". They have transformed a two-hectare farm dam by fencing it off and planting the surrounds, creating a pleasant place "ideal for community functions". There is an ongoing programme to fence areas identified for conservation enhancement and native habitat breeding. And, most significantly, they have ring-fenced an area of bush (100ha) and pasture (60ha) with deer fencing to create a hunting block that's use is much broader than the lucrative market hosting overseas fishers and trophy hunters.

"It's quite something else," says Geoffrey, "to see how mind-blowing it is for some people to come up here, to get so close to all of this." The property, which rises up to 580m, has contour ranging from rolling to steep. The hunting block is managed so sheep, cows and goats can share the grazing with

the resident deer. The headwater for the Puniu River is just one property away; the waters that run through the farm are "clear and pristine". An observation platform has been built high above a natural clearing, a rustic log cabin nestles in a bush clearing and the farm has welcomed visitors ranging from overseas film crews to schools to small family groups.

Geoffrey and Johanna began their path to farm ownership in 1975, sharemilking near Otorohanga. By 2003 they had progressed to owning three farms and along the way had three sons, and made time for wide-ranging community involvement. Geoff was president of the 1000 member Tokoroa Pig Hunting Club from 1993 to 2008 and is involved at Government level in establishing legislative backing for the management of recreational hunting species.

The three Fitzgerald sons and their wives and young families live within a kilometre of each other. During the past three years Geoffrey and Johanna have acted upon their decision that it was time for their sons "to be in charge of their own destiny". Robert and Jacqui and Stewart and Emma are farming separately in the two dairy farms, and Craig, a maintenance and diagnostics engineer, and Angela own a small block cut off one of the farms. Geoffrey and Johanna live 14kms away at Maungahau. "Close enough to look after the grandchildren, far enough to sneak away when we feel like it," explains Geoffrey with a chuckle.



JUDGES COMMENTS

- Outstanding water feature in the two hectare lake and restoration of lake surroundings.
- Diversity the key; allows several income sources and gives owners pleasure to see others enjoy the environment.
- Deer population self-sustaining from adjacent bush reserve; jumps give access into safari park but not out.
- Farm's high landscape values and natural assets protected and enhanced.

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, Manawatu/Whanganui, Wellington, Canterbury, Southland and Otago.

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.

**Wynn & Tracy, Tony & Coby
and Tom & Barb Brown**

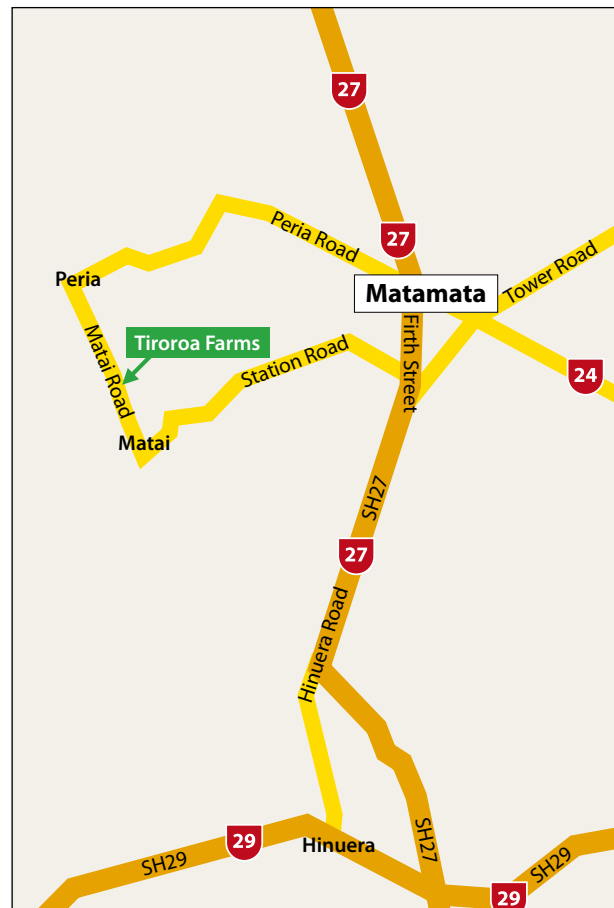
When: To be announced.

Where: Tiroroa Farms
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RD 2, Matamata

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