

# A hat-trick for Coops at EC Ballance Farm Environment awards

MAHIA farming couple Richard and Hannah Coop picked up three awards at last night's East Coast Ballance Farm Environment Awards.

The Coops, who farm at Okepuha Station, won the Beef + Lamb New Zealand Livestock Award, Hill Laboratories Agri-Science Award and the East Coast Farming for the Future Award.

Parkhill Dairy Farm at Ashley Clinton, entered by owner Andrea Barry and manager Craig Pennell, won the regional supreme East Coast Ballance Farm Environment Award and the Ballance Agri-Nutrients Soil Management Award, CB Norwood Distributors Ltd Agri-Business Management Award and the Massey University Innovation Award.

BEL Group, made up of farms owned by the Barrys, had a good showing at the awards evening with another finalist, Andrea's son Robert and daughter-in-law Allison, winning the Predator Free New Zealand Award. Robert is 21C at Barry Farms, which operates two dairy farms called Hedley and Ellingham, also at Ashley Clinton. The two BEL Group entries also shared the Dairy NZ Sustainability and Stewardship Award.

The WaterForce Integrated Management Award was won by Steve Treseder, who manages a Waipukurau sheep and beef farm for Nisbett Taumata Estate Ltd.

The winners were announced at an awards dinner at the Napier Conference Centre last night. The Coops, along with Graeme Watts of Rawhiti Station for Ngati Pahauwera Commercial Development Ltd, Raupunga were two of five entrants selected as finalists in the awards with Rawhiti Station not picking up an award.

The awards recognise and celebrate good farm practices which promote sustainable land management through an annual awards programme.

Richard and Hannah Coop are fourth generation Coops to farm at Mahia in more than a century — the family's long association with the peninsula began back in 1905 when land was purchased by Richard's great grandfather.

The 940ha Okepuha Station was farmed by Richard's parents, Will and Cathy, from the 1970s until recently when Richard and Hannah took over the farm business. Moving back to the farm eight years ago, Richard immersed himself in the family



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business eventually taking over management. The couple bought the stock, plant and machinery and lease the land from the family trust.

The awards judges say the couple make a great team with Hannah's dairy consultant background complementing Richard's dry stock experience.

"They are a dynamic young farming couple who demonstrate passion and enthusiasm in everything they do."

Okepuha is a stunning and dramatic property with a balance of flat finishing country and undulating easy hill country that gives way to sleep, clean hill country.

The above-average production Richard and Hannah have achieved is supported by financial figures that show the farm to be grossing between \$1000-\$1200 per hectare from a mix of sheep and beef breeding and finishing supplemented with 400 dairy grazers.

The Coops have 300 Friesian/Hereford cows put to Simmental terminal sire bulls. Yearling heifers are put to low birthweight Angus bulls. All heifers are retained and killed before the second winter (above 480kg live weight). The steers are sold

store at weaning averaging 250kg.

On the sheep side, docking averages 153 percent for the 3000 Coopworth ewes and all lambs are taken through to finishing, including some 1500 bought-in lambs.

The Coops use Farmax for feed budgeting and FarmIQ software to help manage animal health and health and safety.

Supplementary feed crops include chicory, plantain, and winter rape. Fodder beet was grown but has been removed from the programme as the benefits are perceived to be less than the resulting damage to the soil.

Judges said the couple's ability to acknowledge and learn from failures was exemplified in the decision not to repeat the fodder beet paddocks.

Richard had earlier also decided not to farm bulls because of the damage they were causing.

"We take pride in the farm, especially the frontage, and the holes and the wrecked fences weren't worth the extra money we were making. The dairy grazers are awesome now."

"Trading stock are a bit of a lever in our system. We focus on the breeding stock and if there's surplus feed we top up with trading stock."

Okepuha Station has a great reticulation system fed by a stable spring-fed system that was established on the farm by Richard's parents. The reticulation has enabled many waterways and adjoining riparian areas to be fenced. Richard and Hannah are part of the Green Ribbon Award-winning Whangawehi Catchment Group, which, with help from the Hawke's Bay Regional Council, has seen 27,000 natives planted in a 10ha fenced block on Okepuha Station.

"We're looking at creating a different group for another catchment that flows through the farm to keep protecting and enhancing that biodiversity." Through their long association with the area the Coop family have shown a deep commitment to the land and the community of Mahia. Richard and Hannah employ two locals as a shepherd and a general hand — Kingi Wiriata Jnr and Charly Harrison — and others throughout the season when required.

Their eldest child Eva, 2, will attend the local Te Kohanga Reo once she turns three. She has a little brother Patch. Originally a "complete city slicker" from

Wellington, Hannah met Richard when her family rented the farm's shearers' quarters one summer. Hannah was five and Richard was 14 — "So obviously the connections developed in later years", they say, laughing.

The farm is a special place for the wider family with Richard's sisters Amanda and Sara and their families still visiting often.

Richard says it's important to them that farming is more than sheep and cattle.

"We have the big picture in mind. We're planting all these natives and there are so many other things that make up the word 'farming'. Mum's father was a bit of a legend back in the day — he said, 'if you look after the land it will look after you'. We like that. We're privileged to be doing what we're doing so we're putting in as much as we can and hopefully we'll get it back."

Keeping with the trend of farm stays, Richard and Hannah open the shearers' quarters during summer.

"It's a great way to showcase the area and the farm gate is always open to visitors. We want to be good ambassadors for farmers all the time."

"Plus... you never know who Eva and Patch might meet in the next 20 years," Hannah says with a smile.