

Deer Farmers' Environmental Awards 2014

On behalf of the NZDFA I would like to thank the contestants who entered their properties in the 2014 Deer Farmers' Environmental Awards. Your preparation, time and effort was really appreciated.

The standard of properties this year was exceptional, a credit to all entrants. It was a real privilege for the judges to have the opportunity to observe their farming systems, what they have achieved and their plans for the future.

As deer farmers we need to demonstrate to the wider community that it is possible to attain a sustainable balanced farming system that is economically successful while maintaining and enhancing the environment. This was demonstrated successfully by each contestant in different ways.

The biennial Deer Farmers' Environmental Awards recognise excellence in environmental leadership and sustainable land management and comprise five categories plus a premier award, the Elworthy Environmental Award. The categories are:

- Outstanding performance across the environmental, financial and social aspects of the business
- Excellence in sustainable deer farming through action on the ground
- Utilisation of farming technologies to improve on-farm productivity, progress the business and manage resources
- Total commitment to farming sustainably with a strong customer focus
- Vision and innovation while mastering a demanding environment.

On behalf of the judges I would like to congratulate George Williams and Laura Billings, the winners of the Premier Elworthy Environment Award for 2014 and also the recipients of two category awards: the Duncan New Zealand Ltd Award for vision and innovation while mastering a demanding environment and the NZDFA Next Generation Award for outstanding performance across the environmental, financial and social aspects of the business.

The judges were very impressed with your outstanding farming operation, your understanding of the property, utilising stock classes that work best economically and environmentally for your farm.

A field day will be held at the winners' property in May in association with the Deer Industry Conference, with all category winners thereafter with presentations on farm. I encourage all deer farmers to attend this field day as this is an opportunity to learn how others have modified their farming systems and solved issues relating to their farm in a practical, cost-effective manner.

Once again thank you to all of the entrants, congratulations to the award winners, thank you to the judges and the sponsors for your generous support and commitment making these Awards possible.

David Stevens

Convenor, 2014 Deer Farmers' Environmental Awards



George Williams and Laura Billings, Te Maire, Hawke's Bay

Premier Award: The Elworthy Environmental Award



Sponsored by Deer Industry New Zealand, the premier Elworthy Environmental Award epitomises the vision of a sustainable farming system, ensuring long-term protection of the environment and sustainable production. Best farming practice is clearly evident.

George and Laura's business showcased an excellent balance of environmental and production priorities. Their growth over the past 10 years has been well planned with exceptional results. By emphasising the strengths of each block and putting a great deal of work into developing a sustainable business, they have created a property and business that is at the forefront of industry performance and land management. George and Laura are on top of their game, they have a strong vision, know what is possible, know how to achieve it and are consistently driving to be at the front of the field.

The 640ha home farm, Te Maire, was partially leased by George off his father in 1998. George initially took on 500ha and left his father Hugh with 140ha for his breeding hinds.

In 2000, George and his family were hit by the sudden death of Hugh in a farm motorbike accident, leaving George to take on the management of the entire property (including Paretai, a 300ha flat land property).

That year George leased the whole family farm, Te Maire and Paretai, and then progressively purchased Te Maire up until 2006, with Paretai being sold by the family. Further farm purchases since then have taken today's total land holding to 1,188ha (970ha effective).



George Williams and Laura Billings.



Cultivation and baling is done in-house.



Te Maire has a good mix of land classes, including 600ha of medium rolling hill country.

George Williams and Laura Billings, Te Maire, Hawke's Bay

Duncan New Zealand Ltd Award

For vision and innovation while mastering a demanding environment.



The recipient of this award demonstrates forward thinking and innovative farming practices while having to operate their business within a demanding environment.

George and Laura run the business together, with Laura managing the books and George overseeing farm and stock work. The rest of the team consists of a part-time staff member who focuses on stock movements and a full time tractor driver and maintenance man.

The farm has a great mix of land classes, including 370ha flat land of which 340ha can be used for cash cropping. The 600ha of medium rolling hill country is dotted with totara and is a wonderful sight, truly enhancing the landscape.

The remaining 218ha is in trees with pine plantations, QEII covenanted native bush blocks, stock exclusion bush blocks and 33ha of the scattered totara. All major waterways were fenced off 20 years ago.

The business has completed a Land and Environment Plan and with their Ravensdown rep they do frequent soil tests and nutrient budgeting. They have also modelled their property in OVERSEER® to understand where the risk areas may be.

The business is made up of deer, cattle, cropping and a few sheep. Of the 13,247 stock units, 2,500 are in deer, 10,000 in grazing and steers and 500 in sheep. This equates to a 13.7 stock unit per hectare overall and 6.4 stock units in the deer unit.

Since 2011 the business has completed a from finishing bulls to running dairy grazers. Running both at the same time during the change was a difficult juggling act, but did spread the risk of selling out the cattle over two years. Heifers are contract grazed on a weight gain basis. The grazing works well for cash flow, but is not so great for pasture management mobs are rarely available to clean up a paddock. One hundred and forty R2 steers are bought in June and run through until December to manage the grazing pressure in spring.



The trees on Te Maire provide good shade and shelter.



George Williams and Laura Billings, Te Maire, Hawke's Bay

NZDFA Next Generation Award

For outstanding performance across environmental, financial and social aspects of the business.



The recipients' enthusiasm for farming deer and doing it so well showcases the opportunities that lie within the New Zealand deer industry.

The deer are a personal passion of George's and the focus is purely on velvet with venison a by-product. The deer work well with other stock classes on Te Maire, with hinds and stags useful for cleaning up pastures after the heifers. Velvet production impressed the judges. Production for the 2014/15 season and culling policies were as follows:

Total cut: 2,550kg (includes 278kg of regrowth)

2 year-olds: Average 3.2kg; culling cutoff 2.5kg
(20 percent culled)

3-year-olds: Average 4.0kg; culling cutoff 3.0kg
(5 percent culled)

4-year-olds: Average 4.7kg; culling cutoff 4.0kg
(4.5 percent culled)

Mixed age: Average 6.3kg; any dropping in velvet weight are culled.

George has been using EID tags to record velvet weights for the past three years and finds the process "working well and very quick".

Since 2010 Te Maire has also been the home for the Wilkins Farming North Island stag sale. George receives 25 stags in early August and it is his responsibility to feed them as well as possible and prepare for the sale in December.

Cropping is another large part of the operation with more than 90ha of malting and feed barley, 65ha of processed peas contracted to McCain's and about 100ha of winter feed crops (kale, swedes, Goliath rape and oats) every year. Each year, 30ha of autumn feed and 170ha of new grass is sown. The tractor driver is kept busy with all their cultivation and baling done in house while harvesting is contracted out. Soil fertility and

structure is important to George; he has utilised cut straw and tries to incorporate that back into the soil, as well as sowing lupins to help build up the top soil and fertility.

The sheep are used mainly for cleaning up weeds, laneways and steep gullies. Weed and pest management is a personal challenge that George likes to keep on top of. No staff member is allowed to drive past a ragwort bush without pulling it out and they carry grubbers on their side-by-side vehicles. The business contracts Bay Trapping to manage more than 400 GPS-mapped bait stations on the farm to ensure pests are kept to a minimum.

George does not like to sit still for long. He is a member of the local NZDFA Branch, participates in the Hawke's Bay Advance Party and belongs to a large farms East coast discussion group that includes a range of farming systems. He has been involved with the central Hawke's Bay vet club for nearly 16 years and is on the local Tikokino school board of trustees.

The judges were very impressed with the entire operation with "precision" and "highly motivated" featuring in their assessment of the farming business. George and Laura have a great attitude towards their farming business and are constantly looking for ways to drive it forward.



Flax plantings enhance the landscape at Te Maire.



Hamish and Anna Orbell, Clayton Station, Fairlie

Firstlight Foods Ltd Award

For total commitment to farming sustainably with a strong customer focus.



Hamish and Anna Orbell with their young family.

The recipient demonstrates a passion for the land and strong environmental stewardship. They actively work towards ensuring the land is left for the next generation in a better state than when they started. It is clear from their business decisions that they have the end customer in mind.

Clayton Station means a lot to the Orbell family as it has been in the family since the 1960s and has been developed extensively.

The property is in the upper catchment above the Opuha Dam near Fairlie. Most of it lies between 500–1,000 metres (1,600–3,500 feet) above sea level.

Rainfall ranges from 800–1,200mm. Heavy snowfall is the main risk and management challenge. In June 2013, 1.2 metres of snow fell and affected feeding out for three weeks. The property is usually December wet, but hot dry summers can create further pressure.

Of the station's 4,810ha, 1,552ha is cultivatable and the remaining 3,258ha is oversown and top dressed. A further 1,636ha has been retired through tenure review.

Hamish's understanding of Clayton and its challenges is exceptional, and his passion for deer is reflected in the skilled management and integration on the property.

The scale of development since the 1960s is spectacular. The original maps show only 12 paddocks in five blocks, no fertiliser usage, only 1.5km of shelter and no roading.

Now there are 163 paddocks in 25 blocks, 200 tonnes of fertiliser is applied per year, there are 41km of shelter belts and plantings and more than 100km of roading and tracks.

The farm runs sheep, beef and deer with a decent amount of cropping including barley, oats and ryecorn (a 1,400 stock unit (su) equivalent). Approximate stock numbers are:

sheep: 12,000 su

cattle: 8,000 su

deer: 5,500 su

The deer block makes up 963ha in 40 paddocks running 2,584 predominantly red deer based on a foundation of English sires. The herd consists of 1,252 breeding hinds, 203 R2 hinds, 282 R1 hinds, 475 R1 and R2 stags, 182 velvet stags and 34 sires, as well as more than 150 share-farmed fallow deer. Hill blocks used by the deer have excellent native cover, which helps to protect soil and retain water quality and quantity while providing an ideal area for fawning (currently about 93%).

In recent years, development planning has been led by a commitment to enhancing water quality through the station's catchments and establishing new winter management systems (self-fed whole crop silage pads) to keep deer and cattle off heavy clay soils on the flat country.

Hamish and Anna have put a lot of work into their weaner supply contract and developed a strong relationship with their finisher (Downlands Deer, Geraldine). Most hinds are bred to elk bulls. This allows them to produce a weaner that their finisher wants and can finish faster. The finisher also has a say in the sire genetics used on Clayton. This showcases how Hamish and Anna have their end customer in mind, working to produce something that is good for both parties. This property and Downlands Deer have recently completed three years as a joint Focus Farm as part of the deer industry's "Making a Difference" programme.



The native cover in the hill blocks helps protect soil and water.

Murray and Beverly Hagen, and Jim Cameron (Manager), Connemara

Gallagher Technology and Innovation Award

For excellent utilisation of farming technologies to improve on-farm productivity, progress the business and manage resources.



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The good relationship between owner and manager is reflected in the excellent animal performance and innovative practices being trialled on Connemara, the Hagens' property near Manapouri. Use of advanced farm systems and tools in the business is evidence of the open mindedness and forward thinking approach that the Hagens and manager Jim Cameron take to improving their performance.

Connemara was bought by Murray and Beverly Hagen in 1999 as a run-down sheep and beef property with only 14 paddocks across 320ha.

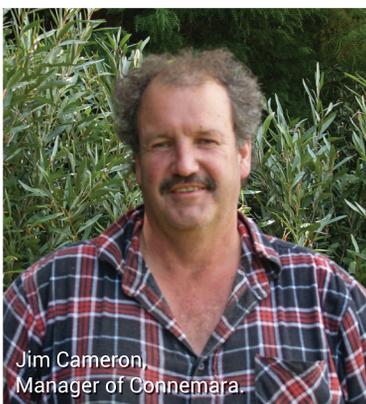
Murray has since developed the farm into a 70 paddocks, featuring well-designed laneways and sensibly planted shelter and amenity areas.

The farm is primarily flat with land use capability classes 2–3 (on a 1–8 scale). About 20ha is planted in shelterbelts using Leyland cypress, radiata pine, eucalyptus species and poplars. The property neighbours DOC land alongside the Waiau River.

The system is predominantly deer, with a small number of cattle to help manage pastures. Stock include 850 elk breeding cows, 360 elk bulls for velvet, a growing elk stud and about 1,000 weaners, with a number brought in each year to finish.

Jim Cameron has been managing the property for three years, which frees Murray to do a lot more contracting work as a side business. Jim loves working with the deer and is passionate about driving the business forward.

The system focuses on venison and velvet production as well as selling about 40 sire animals annually, a recent shift in policy for the enterprise. Velvet production averages 3.2kg for 2-year-olds,



4.5kg for older animals, 7kg for mixed-age bulls and 13kg for sires.

Animals are parentage and genometer DNA tested via the "SNP chip" method and information is entered into DEERSelect. EID has been used for years to track animal performance and speed up recording.

Challenges on the property include a summer dry period with predominantly light freestone soils that, when cultivated, are prone to wind erosion from dry northwest winds during summer. The free draining soils dry out, affecting pasture growth, and also have a high nutrient leaching capability.

Quality soil and pasture management is a priority and managed well. Surplus feed is harvested into baleage and silage. Eight hundred tonnes of silage and 800ha of baleage was made off farm and utilised for winter and summer feed. Twenty-six hectares of swede/kale crops for weaners is grown and break-fed. A summer rape crop is grown and used over late lactation, which suits the summer dry conditions.

To improve soil structure, Jim has researched alternative options and opted to use biological fertilisers, such as the Microlife range, with good results. He believes nitrogen-based products are "hit and miss" and do not assist with worm development and ecology of the soil.

Connemara is an extremely tidy operation committed to quality farming, high-performing stock and managed by a passionate team who are willing to adopt new technologies and give things a go. Sustainable systems and excellent land care are features of the now well-established operation.



The judges commented that Connemara is an extremely tidy operation.

Landcorp Eweburn Station, Ray Tibbles, Te Anau

NZ LANDCARE Trust Award

For excellence in sustainable deer farming through action on the ground.

NZ
LANDCARE
TRUST



Ray Tibbles has overseen 25 years of development at Eweburn.

The recipient of this award has demonstrated a strong level of leadership through identification of risk areas on their property, implementation of mitigation tools and adoption of farming systems to ensure long-term sustainability.

The extensive covenants and protected areas on Landcorp's Eweburn Station near Te Anau, along with excellent infrastructure and management, are a reflection of good planning, commitment and the passion shown by Ray and his team. Ray has been on Eweburn for 25 years and has overseen a huge amount of development and progress in that time.

The property is 3,825ha (2,600ha effective) and is managed by four staff, running sheep, beef and deer.

Deer make up the majority of the stock units on Eweburn, with 4,700 breeding hinds, 1,520 yearling hinds, 150 yearling stags and 110 sire stags.

Yearling hinds mated with home-bred spikers achieve 88% at weaning. Some top yearlings are sent to Dawson Downs in Balclutha for finishing for the chilled market, while the remaining are finished on the property, with 900 carried through winter.

Ray has made a big change with his deer this year, moving from post-rut to pre-rut weaning. Reasons for the change include feed shortages at key times, hinds needing to recover condition earlier and labour restrictions on the station at weaning. All stock are pregnancy ultrasound scanned. Last year the mixed-age hinds scanned 96% and, on average, weaned 88–91%.

Sheep total 1,700 Perendale breeding ewes, 450 two-tooths and 50 rams. Sheep are crossed with Landcorp Supreme terminal rams and achieve an average of 140–150% un-shepherded; all progeny are finished.

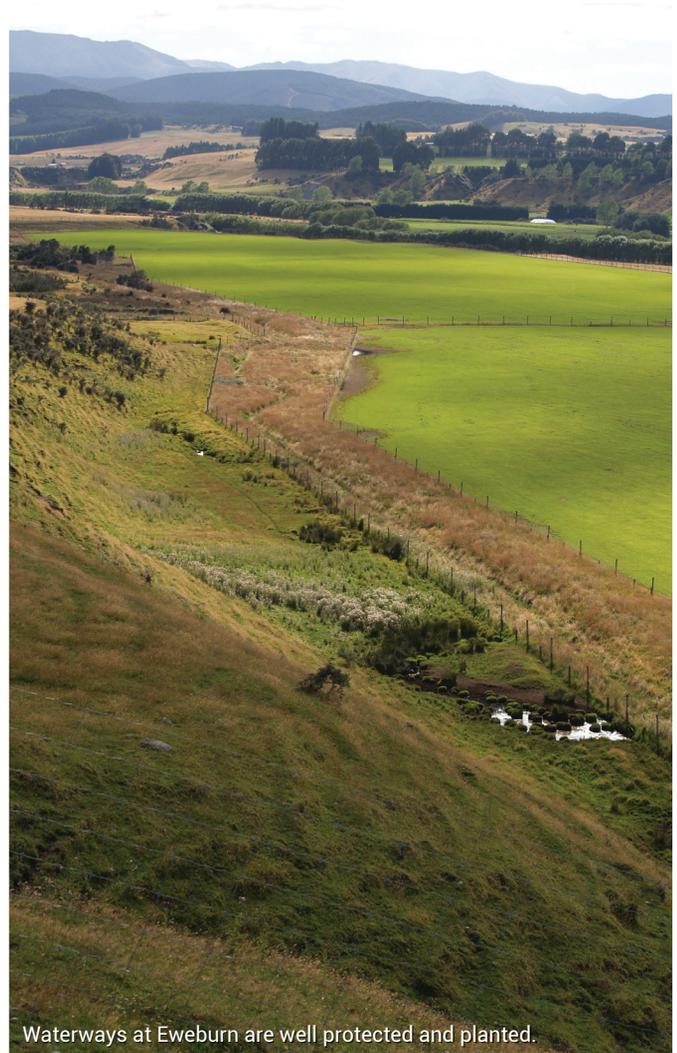
Cattle include 315 breeding cows, 110 R1 and R2 heifers and 21 bulls. Angus cows are mated to Duncraig Angus bulls; the cows are used to control pasture quality and are wintered on rough blocks with no supplements. Mixed-aged cows calve in

October while yearling heifers go behind a wire and are calved in September.

Four thousand tonnes of silage is made on farm, 350 bales of lucerne baleage and 120 hectares of HT™ (herbicide tolerant) swedes which is used mainly by the deer, with the fawns wintered on grass.

The station has 1,225ha of reserve, QEII covenanted areas, scrub and other stock-excluded land that has been progressively been fenced off as budget has allowed. Fencing off much of the scrub has vastly improved stock mustering and environmental sustainability, with a lot of scrub, wetlands and generally unproductive land being retired.

Waterways are well protected and planted, with a major waterway, the Upukerora River, running adjacent to the south-western corner of the property, ensuring that water leaving the farm is not contaminated.



Waterways at Eweburn are well protected and planted.

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Summing up

The Awards again showcased the high calibre of farmers within the deer industry. All entrants conveyed sustainable farming principles and all identified that being "sustainable" was a long-term commitment.

The 2014 Premier Elworthy Environmental Award winners, George Williams and Laura Billings, showed they have what it takes to be profitable and sustainable guardians of their natural resources.

Attendees at the 2015 Deer Industry Conference in Napier will have the opportunity to visit George and Laura's property at a field day on Thursday 28 May to see first hand what the couple have achieved. But there are lessons to be learned from all the category winners and in the following months farmers will be able to benefit from their experience at field days on their properties.

Judging panel

Janet Gregory

NZ Landcare Trust; Southland Regional Coordinator



David Stevens (Convenor)

Owner Netherdale Red Deer Stud; former Chairman of the NZDFA Selection and Appointments Panel, Southland



Brian Wellington

Owner Te Awamutu Station and winner of the 2012 Deer Farmers' Premier Elworthy Environmental Award



Amy Wills

Deer Industry New Zealand Producer Coordinator



Two further judges (below) assisted with judging in the Hawke's Bay and Southland regions:

Ian Millner

Hawke's Bay Regional Council



Gary Morgan

Southland Regional Council



Further information

The New Zealand Deer Farmers' Environmental Awards were instigated in 2000 by the late Sir Peter Elworthy and Fiona Lady Elworthy during the "Silver to Gold" 25th anniversary Deer Industry Conference. With the support of the family, the Elworthy name remains linked to the Premier Award.

The awards proper began in 2001, first as an annual, now a biennial event. They were held for the ninth time in 2014 and are now well established as part of the deer industry's environmental awareness programme, creating a high-profile way to disseminate practical knowledge that can be applied on all deer farms. Entrants demonstrate best practice principles as outlined in the comprehensive *Deer Farmers' Landcare Manual*, which was updated in May 2012.

For further information on the awards or the manual, contact Amy Wills, DINZ Producer Coordinator on 04 471 6110 or amy.wills@deernz.org