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# Awards recognise catchment success story

By Rural News Group



The Birchall family.

## **Farming in an environmentally sensitive catchment can be tough, but the Birchall family is working hard to meet the challenge.**

And the Bay of Plenty Ballance Farm Environment Awards provided them with the perfect opportunity to highlight some of the good work they are doing on their 280ha dairy farm near Rotorua.

As well as benefiting their own business, their involvement in the Awards also helped them show the wider community that farmers in the Okaro catchment take their environmental responsibilities very seriously.

“There’s a lot of good work going on around here. Farmers are very supportive of each other, so we felt it was important to put our hands up and tell others about what is happening in the catchment,” Shane Birchall says.

He and wife June run their 530-cow operation, Waionehu Farm Ltd, with their son Daniel and daughter Megan. Shane and Megan are also involved in several local committees that focus on environmental issues.

Shane and June first entered the Bay of Plenty Ballance Farm Environment Awards about eight years ago and enjoyed the experience, so the whole family decided to enter again this year.

“I think the kids were a bit hesitant at first, but we all found it to be an excellent educational and networking experience and they are already talking about having another go in future.”

In the last 10 years the family has invested heavily in infrastructural improvements designed to enhance environmental and economic sustainability. As well as upgrading the farm’s water and effluent systems,

the Birchalls have also erected two HerdHomes - the first in the district – which have helped augment animal welfare, minimise pasture damage and reduce nutrient loss.

All waterways have been fenced and planted, and a 2ha wetland has been constructed to filter nutrients from farm run-off.

“This place has been in our family for 35 years. Mum and Dad laid a good foundation but we realise that if we want to keep the operation sustainable for future generations, we need to keep improving,” Shane says.

Ballance Farm Environment Award judges described the Birchalls as an innovative family with individual strengths. They praised the family’s environmental focus “within the farm and the community”.

In the 2016 BOP Ballance Farm Environment Awards the Birchalls won three category awards, including the WaterForce Integrated Management Award, which recognises farmers “who have developed and implemented integrated water management systems and processes for water used within their farming system”.

Shane says the WaterForce award was welcome recognition of efforts to improve water efficiency on the property.

He says the family was thrilled to win three category awards.

“It reinforced what we are trying to do here.”

He says the judging process was thoroughly rewarding “because it makes you sit down and take a good hard look at what you are trying to achieve”.

“We also met some very interesting people, including the judges, scientists and other entrants.”

Shane says the Awards programme provides excellent informational tools that will help farmers tackle environmental issues in future.

“There is a lot of good science out there, and this is a great way of getting the message across.”

He says all farmers should consider entering the Awards, even if they don’t feel their farm or orchard is ready.

“You don’t have to have all your ducks in a row. Just put your hand up and give it a go.”

Entries for the 2017 Bay of Plenty Ballance Farm Environment Awards close on October 21, 2016. It costs nothing to enter and entry forms are available online at [www.nzfeatrtrust.org.nz](http://www.nzfeatrtrust.org.nz)

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