

Getting the balance right



Waikato farmers Grant Wills and Karen Preston with sharemilker Steve Ironmonger, right.

Steve Searle

A Walton farm's high milk production, despite the recent drought, and success in the Waikato Ballance Farm Environment Awards shows profit and environmental care can go hand in hand.

Grant Wills and Karen Preston won six

of the 11 awards in the Ballance Farm Environment Awards for the Waikato region including the supreme award, while their Friesian herd was again averaging 400kg milksolids (MS)/cow for the season.

Their robust farming system is based on the use of Herdhomes to provide feeding and shelter options that protect pasture

from over-grazing or pugging during dry or wet weather (*Dairy Exporter*, January 2011, page 8).

Efficiently run

The award judges said the 244ha (215ha effective) Tremeer farm was efficiently run with the focus on profitability "while

caring for people, the cows and the environment".

They said the farm was in excellent condition, as was its split herd, and was a positive reflection of the couple's commitment "to balance a profitable and sustainable dairy business with being an enjoyable place to work".

Impressed

They were impressed by the level of monitoring and record-keeping for consistent analysis of the business, and the farm environment enhanced by waterways progressively fenced since 2002 and buffer planted with thousands of native plants that draw birdlife.

Grant said their system of farming gives them more options as each season unfolds with the pay-off again being evident during this year's drought.

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Big changes were initiated at the start of 2008 with the installation of two Herdhomes.

The impact was so positive that a third shelter was added two years ago so the 650-cow herd can all be housed and fed a controlled supplementary diet at the start of each day.

"Our total production this season will be 265,000kg MS, which is down from a target of 280,000 but slightly better than last year's record production from the

same number of cows.

"With the drought I guess there would be few having production on a par or ahead of last season," said Grant.

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He said the Ballance Agri-Nutrients nutrient management award related to the storage and application of effluent from the three Herdhomes and dairy yards in accordance with soil test results for each individual paddock and a 20ha maize block.

"Previously we had soil testing across the farm to show a trend each year but the paddock by paddock testing has shown a lot more variation in soil fertility and fertiliser need than we anticipated."

The competition's LIC dairy farm award was for their overall efficiency and an ability to make choices for long term gains.

"We are running this farm as effectively as we can," said Grant, who dried off the young cows in mid-April but was able to keep milking most of the herd until mid-May with two-thirds of their total diet supplemented in the Herdhomes while pasture was low.

Adding confidence to such decisions is the advice of a herd nutrition consultancy in its third season of optimising herd diet and performance at Tremeer.

Grant said the Hill Laboratories harvest award was linked to overall feed monitoring that included caged pasture cuts to enable lower-order sharemilker Steve Ironmonger to plan a grazing round matching actual grass growth rates.

Graduates

Grant and Karen, both graduates of Massey University, were pleased to have won its discovery award in the competition, which recognises farmers' use of new systems and technologies.

Grant said it would be too difficult to set and reach goals without knowing what

you have as a start point.

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The Meridian energy excellence award was for efforts to reduce resource use; examples at Tremeer being the close proximity of feed bunkers to the Herdhomes, the use of tip drums and gate-mounted yard washers to cut water use and an efficient milking routine in the two herringbone dairies for the merged farm.

Tremeer was originally a sheep farm that Grant and his father Derek converted to dairying in 1988.

Grant and Karen sharemilked for Derek and his wife Audrey, before buying the farm in 1997. They added a neighbouring farm in 2003 that was previously owned by the family.

Grant is the Fonterra Shareholders' Council (FSC) member for the Matamata ward and chairs its co-operative development committee.

A field day will be held on Tremeer on May 15.

• **Graham and Rosemary Davison, Pinewoods, Otorohanga who won the Waikato River Authority Catchment Improvement Award will be profiled in the June issue.**