



Judges' Report

CATEGORY:

Farming

Ben Morven Farm Ltd

INTERVIEWED

Geoff Hayes

DATE

21 November 2024

JUDGES

Pete Anderson, Cath Baker and Wendy Sullivan

INTRODUCTION

Ben Morven Farm is a 150ha deer farm located in Fairhall, owned by Geoff and Nic Hayes, who are fourth-generation farmers. The farm primarily focuses on velvet production, with some venison, and has developed flatlands for vineyards. The property features a 2.7km stretch of waterway, which is a tributary of Doctors Creek.

The hillslopes on the farm are fragile, with unstable subsoil prone to tunnel gully erosion or "under-runners." These erosions pose hazards to livestock, lead to the loss of productive land, and cause siltation downstream.

To mitigate these issues, the Hayes have implemented strategies such as block planting eucalyptus and tagasaste, as well as improved stock management. They have also fenced all riparian margins and planted native species to protect streams from siltation and livestock access.



GENERAL INFORMATION

Ben Morven Farm is situated in the lower hill country of Fairhall. It encompasses the hillslopes on either side of a large valley. An ephemeral stream crosses the property, feeding into Doctors Creek. The farm has a reservoir dam and stream intake to irrigate the vineyards on the flatlands.

Geoff and Nicola Hayes are the fourth generation to farm this property. Initially a deer breeding unit, the farm now exclusively raises stags for velvet production, which suits the region's hot, dry climate and fragile soils. Farming in this environment requires careful practices to "keep the soils on the paddocks and out of the waterways."

Stag behaviour, such as wallowing in wet areas and pacing along fence lines, exacerbates soil erosion and creates critical source areas for sediment entering waterways. To address this, the Hayes have constructed wallows away from streams and implemented paddock spacing to separate deer and prevent such behaviours.



Ben Morven Farm demonstrates a strong commitment to sustainability through various actions, including:

- Installing solar panels to reduce energy consumption.
- Using a bale buggy instead of a bale wagon to minimize fuel use and soil compaction.
- Producing 75% of its baleage on-site and sourcing the rest locally.
- Carefully selecting land units for re-pasturing and using direct drilling methods.
- Monitoring for pests in forage crops rather than using a blanket spray regime.
- Using forage crop species that utilise water efficiently and recover adequately during drought.
- Recycling all bale wrap, fertilizer bags, wire, and plastic containers through appropriate schemes.
- Producing or locally sourcing winter feed to reduce emissions.

The Hayes also contribute to the community by:

- Providing a cycle-cross track across the farm.
- Hosting Marlborough Boys' College agriculture classes students.
- Donating rabbits to the Falcon Trust and wild meat to RSE workers.
- Serving as chair of the Marlborough Deer Farmers Association.

THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY

- Adopting low-stock, high-value production systems suitable for fragile environments.
- All waterways on the farm were deer fenced and planting, including wet areas with generous buffers.
- Using local knowledge and small-scale trials to identify successful tree species; subsequently using tagasaste and ground-durable eucalypts for erosion control and sequestration while providing a sustainable source of untreated timber and fodder.
- Converting old stock water ponds into sediment traps.
- Measuring aquifer recharge to inform water use decisions.
- Mitigating stag behaviour by relocating wallows and using paddock spacing to avoid pacing.
- Developing vineyards in harmony with the landscape and engaging proactively with lessees about herbicide use in drains.



PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

- Deer grazing behaviour makes it challenging to protect newly planted trees. While some trees have been successfully established using old vineyard posts for protection, mass planting has proven the most effective strategy.
- The dry environment limits the survival of many plant species. Through trial and error, tagasaste and eucalyptus have emerged as the most drought-tolerant options.
- Regular release spraying and identifying suitable native species, such as *Carex secta*, have further enhanced the success of riparian planting efforts, particularly in reducing stream bank erosion.



SUMMARY

Ben Morven Farm demonstrates a deep understanding of balancing environmental stewardship with productivity by adopting farming systems tailored to its fragile, dry climate. Retiring tunnel-eroded land and transitioning it to eucalyptus or tagasaste blocks is an effective approach to sustainable land use, while the extensive riparian enhancements are particularly impressive, reflecting a strong commitment to protecting the waterways. Innovative practices, such as converting old stock ponds into sediment traps, showcase thoughtful and forward-thinking farming methods that place environmental care at the forefront of their operations.

SUGGESTIONS

- Seek guidance or support from a specialist weed control contractor with experience in the drill and fill method for managing willows effectively.
- Explore opportunities to collaborate with upstream and downstream landowners on a catchment-level stream restoration project. This could be approached individually or through a community meeting facilitated by an external expert to encourage collective action.
- Establish native vegetation beneath the canopy of tagasaste and eucalyptus trees to create multi-functional landscapes that support both erosion control and wildlife habitats.
- Laying seeded kanuka branches offers a cost-effective and low-impact method for establishing native plant communities.
- Consider using water crystals mixed with compost when planting to aid establishment during the dry season.