

# Maori farmers to the fore

*Strong performances by Maori agribusinesses are reflected in a prestigious contest that's 80 years old this year.*

**A**griculture has come a long way since Sir Apirana Ngata and the then Governor General, Lord Bledisloe, launched the Ahuwhenua Trophy competition for Maori farmers back in 1932 – and Bledisloe is much more widely remembered these days for the trans-Tasman rugby trophy he donated the year before.

But with Maori agribusinesses today thriving and often leading the way in their business philosophy and methodology, the attention the BNZ-sponsored contest throws on an often-undervalued sector is more relevant than ever.

While Maori farming businesses have tended to “fly under the radar”, it is increasingly acknowledged that the best maintain standards that set them up for ongoing success.

Because many Maori businesses are collectively owned by hundreds or thousands of shareholders, they have over decades developed standards of governance and accountability that prove beneficial in a wider business context. And a lack of desire or ability to realise a capital gain on land that will never be sold means Maori farmers have a stronger focus than many others on the generation of trading profit.

Chairman of the competition management committee Kingi Smiler says that the leadership and governance of larger Maori agribusinesses is showing the way ahead to the sector generally: “This is not a case of catching up. To me they are out there in front.”

He says the contest celebrates their resilience and performance and highlights their successful collaboration with the wider business, banking and farming communities. “Increasingly Maori farmers are exploring opportunities beyond the farm gate to develop direct linkages between the products they produce and customers in international markets.” Smiler has hand-on experience of exactly those kinds of linkages: he is chairman of the Maori controlled company Miraka which has Vinamilk, a Vietnamese-

owned dairy company as a cornerstone customer and minority shareholder.

BNZ national manager of agribusiness John Janssen says the scale of many Maori businesses, their robust governance practices and willingness to use independent advisers often makes them attractive to prospective international partners.

“With the current focus and growth in exports to Asia, Maori agribusiness is well placed to take advantage of significant export opportunities.”

Janssen says the Ahuwhenua Trophy contest has grown in stature over the last decade and mirrors the increasing recognition of Maori agribusiness and the Maori economy generally.

Field days are held at each of the finalist properties. “The best thing about it is that those who are looking to lift their performance can come along and have a very transparent look at a successfully run Maori business. They then understand what the standard needs to be, and then they'll enter in a few years time.”

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*The Governor-General Sir Jerry Mateparae (left) with Roku Mihinui, winner of the 2012 Ahuwhenua Trophy competition. Image courtesy of John Cowpland, Alphapix.*

## Award Finalists

The competition alternates between sheep and beef farmers and dairy farmers. This year was for the sheep and beef businesses, with three finalists competing for the top award. They are: the century-old Te Uranga B2 Incorporation's sheep and beef operation, **Upoko B2**, north-east of Taumarunui, which has 1123 effective hectares on which it carries 12,500 stock units; **Tarawera Station**, northwest of Napier, which is owned by the Te Awahohonu Forest Trust and is made up of both ancestral and leased land totalling 3546 hectares, of which 2,865ha is effective and on which it runs 30,000 stock units; and the Rereahu Lands Trust-owned **Te Hape Station**, a northern King Country property of 3100 effective hectares carrying an average of 31,000 stock units. The winner is announced on June 7.