

THE AHUWHENUA TROPHY TE KAWERONGO

JULY 2025

»» Northland's night



L-R: Dave Samuels, Hon Nicola Grigg, Cedric Nepia, Hūhana Lyndon, Hon Tama Potaka & Morris Pita

The 2025 Ahuwhenua Trophy awards evening proved to be a special night for Te Tai Tokerau with Whangaroa Ngaioitonga Trust from Whangaruru winning the Ahuwhenua Trophy competition for the top sheep and beef farm and Coby Warmington from Waimā in the Hokianga named the 2025 Ahuwhenua Young Māori Farmer.

Over 800 people packed into the Fly Palmy Arena in Papaioea, Palmerston North for the occasion which was attended by an array of dignitaries and there was outpouring of excitement when Whangaroa Ngaioitonga Trust were announced as the winners by Hon Tama Potaka, and whānau from the Trust joined together on stage to receive the prestigious trophy.

Morris Pita, Co-Chair of the Trust said after the announcement his first impression was one of pride for the whānau. He said they are just starting to appreciate the size of the shoes that come with this recognition and only hopes that they can do them justice. He said that Northland is a unique and special part of Aotearoa and to be able to represent the people of Te Tai Tokerau in this environment as part of this historic event is a privilege. He also congratulated and paid tribute the other finalist,

Trophy. Both ran excellent field days in the run-up to the awards dinner and the nearly 500 people who attended them would have seen Māori agriculture at its very best in some of the hardest farming land in Aotearoa.

"Whangaroa Ngaioitonga Trust are indeed worthy winners, and their governance and farm management is outstanding. Farming in Te Tai Tokerau has its own set of challenges and they have demonstrated that smart, innovative and passionate people can easily overcome any adversity and they have converted this into outstanding success in a short period of time," she says.



AHUWHENUA TROPHY
EXCELLENCE IN
MAORI FARMING
AWARD 2025
SHEEP AND BEEF



The Proprietors of Tawapata South, Onenui Station at Māhia in the Hawke's Bay.

Hūhana Lyndon, Co-Chair of Whangaroa Ngaioitonga Trust said she was shocked, excited and overwhelmed at winning the trophy. She said they were quietly doing their own thing out on the coast and saw entering the competition as a learning experience and never thought they were going to win it.

Nukuhia Hadfield, Chair of the Ahuwhenua Trophy Management Committee says 2025 saw two great finalists compete for the Ahuwhenua

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POSITIVE VIBES

Minister for Māori Development, Hon Tama Potaka described the awards as a fantastic night to celebrate and showcase excellence in Māori farming. He said for Māori, farming is a way of life and not just about making money. Minister Potaka said he grew up on a sheep and beef farm at Rata just south of Taihape and said he knows the importance of land.

"The whenua is an integral part of our Māori identity, and it is something that for most Māori is enduring and perpetual. Minister Potaka said Māori won't let go of the whenua because it defines our whakapapa. "It's who we are. Our job is to figure out how do we use that as a foundation for our livelihoods, for jobs and opportunities for our young people," he said.

Tama Potaka said the Ahuwhenua Trophy is an opportunity to reinforce the fact the government absolutely backs Māori farmers using the whenua as a platform to create jobs for Māori and other New Zealanders. He said people need to realise the great things that Māori enterprises and trusts do.

"Take Onenui Station where the Rocket Lab launches are taking place, and Whangaroa Ngaiotonga Trust and what they are



doing - going from zero five years ago to being winner of the Ahuwhenua Trophy this year. All this gives me great hope and enthusiasm," he said.

Associate agriculture Minister Nicola Grigg said she's never seen such a huge crowd come to a farming event. She says it was great to see the high calibre of the

farms that Māori operate. "It was very positive especially given where agriculture has been for the last six years or so. What has happened in this room defies all of that and I haven't felt any of that negativity that we have seen across the agriculture economy," she said.

Nicola Grigg who has special responsibility for horticulture, said with the next Ahuwhenua Trophy competition being for horticulture and the awards dinner being held in Whangārei it will be a great opportunity to showcase Northland. She said horticulture is the fastest growing sector within the Māori farming economy and that trusts are investing heavily in the sector right across the value chain.

Northland MP, Grant McCallum who was at the awards says it was a great night for Northland. "A night like this is unbelievable and shows the potential of our people and as the local MP I couldn't be prouder," he said.



AHUWHENUA YOUNG MĀORI FARMER AWARD



Grace Watson, Coby Warmington, Puhirere Tau

Twenty-nine year-old Coby Warmington, Farm Manager at Waima Topu Beef near Hokianga was named the winner of the 2025 Ahuwhenua Young Māori Farmer Award for sheep and beef.

The announcement was made by the Māori Trustee, Dr Charlotte Severne at the Ahuwhenua Trophy awards dinner held in Palmerston North. This competition was inaugurated in 2012 and is designed to recognise up and coming young Māori in the pastoral and horticulture sectors. The other finalists in the 2025 competition were Grace Watson and Puhirere Tau.

Dr Charlotte Severne said Te Tumu Paeroa is proud to sponsor the competition which is a celebration of the achievements of inspirational young Māori farmers thriving in the agri-sector,

all while championing the sustainability of the whenua. She said the awards continue to showcase the development of young Māori leaders and announced that each of the finalists would receive a \$5,000 scholarship with the winner receiving an additional \$5,000.

Dr Severne said an important part of the competition is the alumni of the award. She said Te Tumu Paeroa checks in with them all as part of a programme to help them

grow in their careers. She said they like to hang out together and have a social media network but adds that they are encouraged to get involved in a wider ecosystem of farming.

The winner of the competition, Coby Warmington said he was extremely surprised and happy at receiving the award. He said he entered the competition with the objective of looking to broaden his comfort zone and challenge himself socially and mentally and said that is exactly what happened.

Coby said he enjoyed spending time with the other finalists. He said back at Waima where he works, he will take the learnings of the week and implement some of the ideas on his own farm and will also try and teach other rangatahi how to be better farmers.

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TOP MĀORI FARMS ON SHOW

A feature of the Ahuwhenua Trophy competition are the public field days held at the farms of the finalists. This year the two finalists, Whangaroa Ngaiotonga Trust and The Proprietors of Tawapata South, Onenui Station, drew large crowds to see at first hand the achievements of the two properties.



Whangaroa Ngaiotonga Trust

In Northland the rain poured down on the day itself, but it was a blessing in disguise as it helped end the drought which was causing much grief in parts of Te Tai Tokerau. The farm of Whangaroa Ngaiotonga Trust is nestled near the east coast settlement of Whangaruru about 70km from Whangārei. On a fine day the sight of the Ngaiotonga Marae and the coast is stunning but even with the rain it was possible to realise the natural beauty of the property.

Around 200 people attended the field day and while the planned farm tour proved short-lived as the farm tracks turned to mud, this was more than compensated for by the excellent presentations that were held in the Marae. So big was the crowd that an extra marquee and large screens were set up outside the whare so that guests could hear the Whangaroa Ngaiotonga Trust story.

Whangaroa Ngaiotonga Trust farm consists of 360ha of coastal hill country land on which it runs a state of the art bull fattening operation. It runs about 1,000 bulls in summer and this peaks to 1,500 in October. About 70% of the bulls are sold for store at 12 to 15 months with the remainder going to the works at 24 months. A further 700ha are in a mix of commercial and native forest and wetlands.

The story of Whangaroa Ngaiotonga Trust is one of loss, restoration and resiliency over many years and it took them a very long time to get their land back and when they did they found it has debts of four times its value. Since 2020 the trustees, staff and whānau have managed to transform a rundown farm into a profitable well run bull finishing operation. To get the farm up to its present state they removed 60ha of gorse created a 40km network of water pipe supplying 450 micro troughs, put in 57km of fencing and cell systems, and a new farm roading system.

Co-Chair of Whangaroa Ngaiotonga Trust Morris Pita gave an emotional presentation. He said the people of Whangaroa Ngaiotonga are overjoyed a proud of having their land back. He says their success has been based on having the

right vision, leadership and staff to make prudent decision in a nimble way and being very agile as an organisation. He says the leadership at the top has enabled the farm manager, Matt Payne to do what he does best – making astute decisions on buy and selling stock.

A key objective of the trust is to focus on sustainable farming practices that not only ensure the longevity of the property but also appeal to the increasing eco-conscious market.

Fellow Co-Chair Hūhana Lyndon, says she was glad it rained because it was a relief for farmers hit by the drought. She said entering the Ahuwhenua Trophy is a great learning opportunity and that as an industry we don't open ourselves up for critique.



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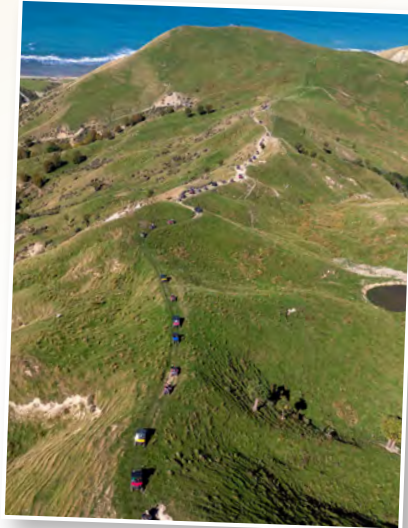
TOP MĀORI FARMS ON SHOW

The day at Māhia

Onenui Station owned by the Proprietors of Tawapata South is located at the tip of the Māhia Peninsula in Hawke's Bay, about 30 minutes' drive from the small holiday township of Māhia on a beautiful coastal road. Onenui Station consists of 3,476ha of whenua, 1,700ha of which is effective farmland. It winters 15,000 stock units, including 6,000 breeding ewes, 600 breeding cows, replacements, and trade cattle. The farm finishes 75% of its sheep and 36% of its cattle, with the remainder sold. The station comprises 350ha of productive flats, with the balance classified as North Island steep hard hill country.

The Trust is in the process of reclaiming more than 1,000ha of scrubland and bringing it back into productive use. Other features of the development on the property include the planting of lucerne to combat the summer dry, the introduction of new genetics to improve calving percentages and growth rates and setting up a trial flock of Wiltshire ewes to assess their performance. They are also doing a lot of environmental work including fencing off coastal faces and making Waikawa Island off the tip of Māhia Peninsular predator free to protect the rare shore plover sea bird.

After a formal welcome to the farm, guests heard a series of presentations from Trustees and staff. But the big feature of the day was an opportunity for people to be taken on an extensive farm tour of this amazing farm on side-by-side vehicles and farm bikes. The weather was perfect and the farm tracks in excellent condition which enabled visitors to take in breathtaking and contrasting views of the steep hill country, the stock run on the farm, the coast and of course getting a unique close up view of the Rocket Lab launch pad. It was a spectacular day just seeing the farm but also the long snake of farm vehicles making their way around the property.



Lester White, Chair

The Chair of the Proprietors of Tawapata South, Lester White said he was blown away by the way the day unfolded. He says knew it was going to be a big day but on reflection he says that was an 'understatement'. "I am so grateful for the

way in which things have turned out. We have had our whānau here, people from other farms and places, the support of the Ahuwhenua team and even our finalist competitors who came down from Northland to be here with us," he said.

Lester White says as an incorporation the field day confirmed that what they are doing is ok. He says who would have thought that farming and launching rockets into space would be a match – but it has worked well. He says huge credit must go to the previous committee who had the foresight to take on the idea of having a space launching pad on the farm.

He says Tawapata is nine years into a 21 year deal with Rocket Lab and says looking into the future they would like to strengthen their relationship with Rocket Lab but maybe also look at other opportunities. "We could potentially look at options such as other international partnerships and relationships. What we do know is we can do this," he said.

Nukuhia Hadfield says the Proprietors of Tawapata South put on a fantastic field day and those attending the day were given a great view of their beautiful farm which is in a very remote place. "I think it was lovely that we could take our sponsors and people from Wellington who normally can't get out on farm to ride around Onenui and see the fantastic work that our Māori farmers are doing way out in the country," she said.

"It shows the benefit of having a sheep and beef competition because it gets us off the beaten track and seeing the wonderful work that people are doing. Remember it's in these isolated places that much of the beef and lamb that is exported is produced and the field days are a fabulous way of highlighting this," she said.



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TOP MĀORI FARMS ON SHOW

Māhia highflyer

Onenui Station on Māhia Peninsular in Hawke's Bay is a world first in more ways than one. As well as being an exemplar of Māori farming excellence, it is also the only working farm where the space company Rocket Lab have permanent rocket launch pad from where satellites are regularly set into orbit around the earth. The person who is in charge of the Rocket Lab operation is 37-year-old, Luke Smith.



Luke Smith

His parents were both born on Māhia and their ancestors date way back to the early whalers who were based in the area but before Luke was born in the 1980's decided to seek their fortune across the ditch in Australia.

Luke's father was an engineer and that helped spark his interest in all things space. "I grew up fascinated by rockets – things such as the space shuttle, the Russian Soyuz programme and the international space station back in the early 90s. With dad being an engineer, he got me into playing with cars and stuff and I decided that once I left home, I would be an engineer," he said.

To follow his dream, he went to Newcastle University in Australia where he obtained an honours degree in mechanical engineer. One of his lecturers described him as an exceptional dedicated and driven student and would go on to do great things in the future and this he has done with further study at Purdue University in the United States.

"I first came to Rocket Lab in 2022. It's a hard company to get a job and I applied about five times before I got a job as an engineer and then notched this amazing role," he said. At the same time coincidentally, his parents also moved back to New Zealand.

Today Luke Smith's official title is LC1 or launch complex one and he runs the whole operation at the Māhia site. But he doesn't get to press the button that sends the rocket on its way into space – that's the job of the launch director. "When the rocket arrives on the site it takes between 10 and 14 days to get it prepared for launch. My team basically tests the rocket and put all of the systems in place on the launch pad and that's when the launch director takes over," he says.

Since he's been at Māhia he's been involved in 28 launches with another one scheduled shortly. Luke Smith admits it can be a stressful and demanding job, but says he's used to that and it's not unlike the oil and gas industry he had worked in previously. He says in both cases you only have one chance to get things right. Luke Smith lives at Māhia – the land of his ancestors – and says living there and doing the job at Rocket Lab is very special and means a lot to him emotionally as well as it does in career terms. He says he is there because of the many special people who came before him and never forgets this.

HORTICULTURE IS COMING

Planning has started for next year's Ahuwhenua Trophy competition for horticulture. This will be the third year the beautifully made horticulture trophy has been competed for and it's time for all Māori horticultural enterprises to enter the competition. It is also time for those associated with Māori horticulture to shoulder tap orchards and trusts and put their names forward as entrants. Entries close 3 December 2025.

More information

If you have any questions about the Ahuwhenua Trophy competition or would like more information visit our website www.ahuwhenuatrophy.maori.nz.



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PGG Wrightson

Our warmest congratulations to this year's winner of the Ahuwhenua Trophy, Whangaroa Ngaioitonga Trust, and the finalist, the Proprietors of Tawapata South, Onenui Station, for their outstanding commitment to excellence in Māori sheep and beef farming. As a long-time sponsor of the Ahuwhenua Trophy, PGG Wrightson shares values with the Ahuwhenua Awards and recognises the vital role Māori agriculture plays in rural communities across Aotearoa.

PGG Wrightson's Iwi Relationship team is passionate about empowering Māori farming entities by delivering practical, hands-on training tailored to each farm's unique needs. Working closely with your team, they help identify essential skills and knowledge areas, then craft customised workshops that reflect



PGW's Iwi Relationship Team with Dr Charlotte Severne

your operational goals. These sessions, facilitated by Iwi Relationship Managers in partnership with local PGG Wrightson reps, bring together your staff with technical specialists in a collaborative learning environment. The training approach integrates tikanga Māori, ensuring cultural values are woven into the experience and outcomes.

The team actively collaborates with government agencies and farmer-led industry groups to foster strong connections across the sector and advocate effectively for Māori agribusiness interests.

Ka ora te whenua, ka ora te tangata
When the land is well, the people are well

To learn more about PGG Wrightson's Māori Agribusiness services and get in touch at:
www.pgwrightson.co.nz/our-services/maori-agribusiness

AHUWHENUA TROPHY 2025 – SHEEP & BEEF – AWARDS DINNER

FRIDAY 6TH JUNE. FLY PALMY ARENA, PAPAIOEA, PALMERSTON NORTH.



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