

Hill Country Farmers Scoop Retail Award

Top Honour: Hawke's Bay sheep farmers Hannah and Sam Morrah have won the Future of Farming Award from British retail giant Marks & Spencer.

A Hawke's Bay lamb farming couple have been named by British supermarket chain Marks & Spencer as its top food supplier, beating growers of bananas in Costa Rica and St Lucia, coffee in Kenya, coconuts in Ghana, prawns in Thailand, flowers and asparagus in Kenya, and wine in South Africa.

Sam and Hannah Morrah, who produced 2,600 lambs under Marks & Spencer rigid quality control system over the seven months ending in May on their farm in Wallingford, Central Hawke's Bay, left for Wales yesterday to receive their award.

The supermarket chain says its Future of Farming Award recognises food suppliers' "social responsibility in tackling climate change, waste, biodiversity, water and animal welfare".

It also scores them on commercial acumen, innovation, professional development and leadership.

It was the first year the award had been open to farmers outside Britain.

Mr Morrah said the award was a confidence booster after three years of drought.

It was in recognition of the New Zealand meat industry, he said. "We certainly don't think we're the only ones at this level. There is plenty of others out there doing the same thing."

Encouraged to enter by the Silver Fern Farms supply manager, they knew they had made it onto a short list of eight.

"We were quite surprised to win. We thought the other growers would have a much better opportunity to comply with Marks & Spencer's standards than a hill country sheep and beef farmer."

The couple farm Primera sheep, a composite breed developed by Hawke's Bay sheep and beef genetics company Rissington Breedline, which with Silver Fern, is contracted to supply Marks & Spencer with lamb cuts year round to strict taste, size and delivery requirements.

Farmers have to meet environmental and animal welfare standards.