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NZ farmer wins prestigious 2011 Australasian business development award

New Zealand farmer Lance Gillespie has been awarded the **2011 Rabobank Business Development Prize** for a management project undertaken to enhance human resources management at his dairy operation, Table Flat Holdings, in the central North Island.

The prize – which is awarded annually as part of the **Rabobank Executive Development Program** – was presented to Mr Gillespie at the graduation of a group of leading primary producers from around New Zealand and Australia who recently completed the program, a business development course for Australasia's leading agricultural producers.

Mr Gillespie's winning project focused on improving human resource management tools in his farm business, through the creation of a comprehensive Farm Operations Manual.

"I see human resource management as the key to running a successful farm business in this challenging environment where we are competing for the right people to fill positions," he said.

Mr Gillespie said the Farm Operations Manual formed the first part of his plan to retain and attract staff. "It gives a detailed overview of what the business is, how it operates and where we are heading as well as provides clarity of roles and clearly outlines the skills required for different positions," he says. "This manual allows us, as an employer, and our employees and prospective employees to gain a better understanding of each other."

Mr Gillespie said the manual functioned as an invaluable "living document" for the business which will be reviewed, updated and modified over time, with plans also to add modules on grazing management, calf rearing, tractor and machinery operation and maintenance and effluent management.

Located on 309 hectares at Apiti, 50 kilometres north west of Palmerston North, Table Flat Holding runs 400 head of dairy cattle, producing 180,000 kg MS (milk solids) per year off 145 hectares. Eighty hectares is leased for dairying from a neighbour, in a lease/swap arrangement; in turn 160 hectares of hill slope is leased out to run sheep and beef cattle.

At some 680 metres above sea level, the area has traditionally been a sheep and beef farming area. The high altitude sees the business having to contend with dairying in a sub-alpine climate, managing snowfalls during winter and early spring.

With the farm initially purchased as a joint venture with his brother and sister-in-law in 2004, Lance Gillespie and his wife Katherine took full ownership of the business in 2007, moving to the property with their three children – Ethan (now 10), Charlotte (eight) and Lauren (four).



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Mr Gillespie currently has two full-time employees in the business, including farm manager Arno Renes, who along with his wife Anita is also a 10 per cent equity holder, and one part-time staff member.

Mr Gillespie – who had previously also completed the Rabobank Farm Managers Program for up-and-coming young farm leaders – said he had drawn on the skills and ideas garnered from the both programs to put in place his management project and to plan the further development of his business operation.

“These programs have undoubtedly been the best off-farm educational experiences I’ve had since leaving school,” he said. “Everything you learn, and are exposed to, on the courses is relevant to agriculture and your business and where you are at today.”

As a result of undertaking the Executive Development Program, Mr Gillespie says he has also begun planning for future growth – taking the business through to ‘horizon 2’ development stage and looking ahead to where he wants the operation to be in 10 to 20 years time. Part of this may involve leveraging under-utilised areas of his property to expand into farming other commodities.

The opportunity to interact and develop an ongoing network with the other progressive and innovative primary producers participating in the course was also an invaluable part of the program, Mr Gillespie said.

“It was also a great learning experience to be with these other producers, who you gain valuable knowledge from as well – in terms of the issues they manage in their businesses and also how they would approach the decisions you are facing in your business. We’ve all made life-long friends and an invaluable ongoing business network,” he said.

Now in its twelfth year, the Rabobank Executive Development program provides farmers from across New Zealand and Australia, and a range of agricultural sectors, the opportunity to develop and enhance their business management skills.

Run annually and spread across two week-long residential modules, the program introduces participants to the latest practices in business management, leadership, strategy, finance, human resources, value chain management and marketing, and how these can be applied to their farm businesses.

Rabobank business programs manager Nerida Sweetapple said all projects presented by this year’s graduates were great examples of how participants had applied their learnings from the Executive Development Program to their farming operations.

“Many participants had documented the changes they had made and had already produced significant results for their businesses,” she said.



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“Lance’s project – the development of a Farm Operations Manual – was outstanding. He combined a number of tools he gained from the program, but took it a step further to produce something that is very tangible and useful to his operations on many levels.”

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