

New Zealand leaders ‘scoop the pool’ in Trans-Tasman agribusiness awards

New Zealanders have ‘scooped the pool’ in the 2019 Rabobank Leadership Awards, taking out both titles in this year’s trans-Tasman awards ceremony, recognising outstanding leadership in agribusiness.

At the awards dinner held in Auckland last night, New Zealand leaders completed a clean sweep of the trophies with **Volker Kuntzsch**, the chief executive officer of New Zealand’s largest seafood company Sanford, announced as the winner of **2019 Rabobank Leadership Award** and **Mat Hocken**, the director of Manawatu dairy company Grassmere Dairy, receiving the **2019 Rabobank Emerging Leader Award**.

The Rabobank Leadership Awards are held annually recognising the contribution of leaders from across New Zealand and Australia’s food and agribusiness sector. The 2019 event marked the 20th anniversary of the awards and the first occasion the awards dinner had been held in New Zealand.

Presenting the flagship **Rabobank Leadership Award** – which recognises outstanding senior leadership in the food and agribusiness industries – Rabobank Australia and New Zealand managing director Peter Knoblanche said Volker Kuntzsch was a hugely-deserving recipient, who had made an enormous contribution to New Zealand’s seafood sector.

“Volker was appointed into the CEO role at Sanford in 2014, bringing with him an international track record of more than 25 years in the industry and a global reputation. Over the past five years, under his leadership, Sanford has transformed from a commodities player into a business which is focused on creating value for its customers and the company, while at the same time becoming a major advocate of sustainability and creating high-end consumer goods,” Mr Knoblanche said.

“Under Volker’s direction, Sanford has adopted a multi-pronged strategic approach which places equal emphasis on environmental, economic and social objectives. Recent business developments include the introduction of innovative fishing and farming

practices to help maintain fish stocks, increase product quality and reduce environmental impacts across the business. The business has also shifted the supply chain focus from fishing, fish farming and processing towards the needs of customers and consumers.”

Mr Knoblanche said Mr Kuntzsch’s influence had “extended well beyond Sanford alone”.

“Volker’s extensive industry experience and his natural ability to bring industry participants together have seen him play a major role in the evolution of New Zealand’s seafood industry. This contribution started in the late 1990s when he visited New Zealand while working for Unilever and convinced the industry to go for Marine Stewardship Council certification,” he said.

“In more recent years, he’s engaged extensively with a wide range of domestic and international seafood industry participants and has been the driving force behind improved industry awareness of sustainability issues. He also played a pivotal role in the redevelopment of the Auckland fish market which opened in 2018.”

Mr Knoblanche said Mr Kuntzsch also sat on a number of seafood industry boards, while his leadership in the area of sustainability has seen him appointed to the Sustainable Business Council - an executive-led organisation focused on creating a sustainable future for New Zealand.

Prior to joining Sanford, Mr Kuntzsch held a senior fishing industry leadership positions, including president of Nippon Suisan (US), president and CEO of King and Price Seafood Corp (US), global marketing director for Nippon Suisan Kaisha (Japan), managing director Hangana Seafood (Namibia) and senior roles with Unilever in Germany and the United Kingdom.

Accepting the award, Mr Kuntzsch said his leadership philosophy was driven by a desire to make a difference in people’s lives.

“It’s not necessarily about me leading all of the change, but about assembling a team of people who understand what needs to be done,” he said.

“For me, bringing people together with different capabilities and nurturing their progress towards a common goal is the most fantastic thing.”

With the awards held in New Zealand for the first time, Mr Knoblanche said it was fitting to see **Mat Hocken** become the first Kiwi to collect the **Rabobank Emerging Leader Award** since its introduction in 2013.

Director and owner of family business Grassmere Dairy, a 1000-cow dairy operation on the banks of the Oroua river in the Manawatu, Mr Hocken returned to the family farming business in 2013, successfully growing the enterprise and making his mark as an industry leader both locally and nationally.

A former New Zealand age-grade rugby representative, who also played for the Belgian national team, Mr Hocken had spent 11 years overseas completing an MA in Political Science and Government at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom and working in government and industry consultancy roles in Belgium and Australia.

Presenting the award, Mr Knoblanche said Mr Hocken was “one of those exceptional emerging leaders who has the combination of business, technical, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills, as well as academic and sporting success.”

“It is the complete package that makes him stand out,” he said. “After returning from overseas, Mat joined Grassmere Dairy during a period of tough economic conditions and, with the support of his wife Jana and family, has successfully navigated succession challenges and implemented lean business management into the operation.

Mr Hocken had also made a significant contribution to his rural community in the Manawatu and nationally in a number of leadership roles, Mr Knoblanche said.

Mr Hocken is the joint-founder and chairman of the Rural Innovation Lab, an advisory board member of Massey University Business School and a Director of MyFarm investment syndicates in the apple and kiwifruit sectors. In addition he has held positions as Dairy Chairman of Federated Farmers Manawatu-Rangitikei, and as associate director of the New Zealand Rural Leadership Trust.

A Nuffield scholar in 2017, studying innovation in agriculture, Mr Hocken is also a regular speaker at national and international industry conferences and events, including the Global Dairy Farmers Congress in Germany in 2018.

“Across his various industry roles, Mat has shown he has the ability to bring together a broad collaboration of people – from farmers, Maori agribusiness representatives, technology companies, researchers, corporates and start-ups – to focus on helping solve the challenges facing New Zealand’s food and agriculture sector,” Mr Knoblanche said.

“Mat is an exceptional young agribusiness leader who has a passion for the industry as well as a desire to keep learning and I have no doubt these attributes will ensure his influence across New Zealand’s food and agribusiness sector continues to grow.”

Accepting the award, Mr Hocken paid tribute to his family, his on-farm team and the key people who had influenced his career.

“I’m very fortunate to have a supportive family network and a great team on farm and this has enabled me to pursue a number of off-farm projects,” he said.

“I’m also lucky to have worked with a number of great people throughout my career both overseas and here in New Zealand. I have really valued the help from supportive local farmers through my involvement with Federated Farmers, while the Nuffield network has helped guide, inspire and encourage me to take on leadership positions.”

Both the Rabobank Leadership Award and Emerging Leader Award are peer-nominated and judged. Previous New Zealand-based recipients of the Leadership Award include Sir George Fistonich, Sir Graeme Harrison and Sir Henry van der Heyden. The 2019 Rabobank Leadership Dinner was held at the Eilerslie racecourse and the keynote speaker was John Brakenridge, the Chief Executive of the New Zealand Merino Company.

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