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Pioneering blueberry producer our Farmer of the Year!

A leader of the blueberry industry in Australia has taken out this year's Farmer of the Year Award, with the Young Farmer of the Year Award going to a young trailblazer of the fishing industry.

Ridley Bell of Mountain Blue Orchard at Wollongbar, on the NSW North Coast has been honoured with the top gong for his work in changing the face of the local blueberry industry.

Ridley Bell has 35 years of experience in blueberries, and a number of varieties released by him are being grown both in the Northern and Southern states of Australia and internationally. In 1978 Ridley was instrumental in setting up the Australian Blueberry Growers Association to service the blueberry industry, presently serving as association secretary and also on the R&D sub - committee.

NSW Minister for Primary Industries Steve Whan says Ridley Bell's innovation really stood out.

"Ridley essentially committed to a niche aspect of an emerging industry by embracing the breeding and varietal work that has made him such a success," Mr Whan said.

NSW Farmers' Association President Charles Armstrong said Ridley Bell's success is a great example to farmers that business opportunities can be developed around standard and traditional operations.

The Awards also celebrated finalists Pepe Bonaccordo of Pepe's Ducks in Windsor and Philip Lynn of Clancy Pastoral in Glen Innes.

"This year we have enjoyed an extraordinarily diverse field of applicants, showing how farmers in NSW are really stretching themselves and thinking outside the box to improve sustainability and profitability on farm," Mr Armstrong said.

Young Farmer of the Year, Andrew Carroll of Palmers Island Mullyoway, Palmers Island also on the NSW North Coast showed judges a real drive to improve the commercial production of this species, formerly known as jewfish.

"Andrew is working hard to establish a working model for the sustainable farming of Mullyoway, a species he has identified as being perfect for land based pond farming," Minister Whan said.

Innovation was also shown by sugarcane farmer and Young Farmer of the Year finalist Angus Stainlay from Murwillumbah.

"It's this interest in sustainability, industry development and community involvement that is driving the best aspects of farming in NSW. It's a real pleasure to see so many strong examples, especially in the Young Farmer category," Mr Armstrong said.

The annual Awards are coordinated by the Association and Industry & Investment NSW, with support from The Land and the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW.

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