



**AERIAL PHOTO** by Jim Bicknell of John Van Vliet's Greytown orchard that won the Ballance environment award for netting his orchard.

# Orchardist nets innovation award

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A Greytown orchardist once vilified for firebombing thousands of starlings has now been commended for building nets to keep them out.

John Van Vliet and his wife, Jaimee Burns, have won the Gallagher Innovation category of the Ballance Farm Environment Awards for installing \$2.4 million mesh nets that protect against hail and birds.

The netting covers 61ha with plans to extend it to 80ha.

In August 2007, Mr Van Vliet attracted condemnation from around New Zealand and beyond after setting bombs under the nests of roosting starlings – explosions that left hundreds dead and hundreds more flightless and dying.

An investigation by then agriculture minister Jim Anderton found Mr Van Vliet had done nothing illegal, but Mr Anderton sought legal advice to prevent the carnage happening again.

In 2006, Mr Van Vliet also attracted flak for setting bombs,



**GREYTOWN ORCHARDIST John Van Vliet.**

this time filled with ballbearings, under the starling nests – leading to hundreds of birds being killed and more injured, many of which were finished off with firearms the next day.

Mr Van Vliet said yesterday he had been losing \$250,000 a year to bird damage of his apples and pears and “it was only because it was desperation” he had bombed the birds.

He said he had not expected some

of the birds to survive the blasts with injuries or burnt feathers.

“We didn’t expect they were going to get away like that.”

Now a change of heart, and a bit of financial backing, have led Mr Van Vliet to the more peaceable, mesh solution.

“You can’t carry on blowing them up, can you?” Mr Van Vliet said.

He said even in 2007, he had sought funding from “all the major trading banks” for the canopy, but it was only PGG Wrightson that eventually provided the finance.

Mr Van Vliet said funding from PGG Wrightson for the \$2 million project was crucial. “None of the trading banks would do it.”

“If we didn’t get the netting we would have pulled the trees out; the birds would have killed it.”

The nylon mesh has squares 16mm across, further divided by thin threads into nine smaller squares.

“It’s a bit like the old stockings, it’s down to a very fine mesh.”

The mesh is fine enough to also protect from hail damage, Mr Van Vliet says, tongue firmly in cheek, that “this way we kill two birds

with one stone”.

From a distance, and from the air, the mesh looks white, or like a giant greenhouse, and walking and driving through it is like a futuristic, climate-controlled world.

In fact, the mesh does also shelter from the wind, and from insects – “we’re using less pesticide” – and Mr Van Vliet said the temperature can be 5C hotter inside the canopy than outside, which he admits can be an issue for the fruit pickers.

“They get pretty hot.”

Less light gets through, however, and Mr Van Vliet has also found it necessary to lay out white cloth underneath some of the trees to reflect light back upwards for ripening.

The mesh also slows evaporation, and Mr Van Vliet said “the only downside” is the runaway grass growth.

With the land under the trees now meant for lamb fattening, however, there is a plus even there.

Mr Van Vliet said for him, the most important part of the award is “just the recognition that we’re doing the right thing”.