

Darren's spraying pay day

DARREN Schreurs, a vegetable grower from Devon Meadows near Melbourne, has been named Australia's best farm spray operator.

A delighted Mr Schreurs was announced national winner of the inaugural Syngenta SPRAY awards at a dinner in Tamworth on Tuesday.

He was chosen from a pool of 120 round one entries, 15 State finalists and the eventual five State winners.

Mr Schreurs narrowly beat NSW State winner, Evan Lord – assistant manager of "Mukoora", an 8500-hectare mixed farm near Ardlethan in the Riverina owned by Warakirri Agricultural Trusts – to take the top prize of a \$15,000 study tour to Britain.

Third was Andrew Kennedy, who runs a spray contracting business, Kennedy Spraying Services, at Mount Gambier in South Australia.

The annual SPRAY (which stands for Sustainable, Productive, Responsible Applicator of the Year) Awards were launched this year by leading crop protection company, Syngenta, and Rural Press Ltd to recognise agriculture's top spray operators and to inspire others to adopt more efficient and safer methods of applying sprays.

Garth Wickson, a member of the judging panel and technical services lead for Syngenta in southern NSW and Victoria, said the judges had been impressed that Mr Schreurs had achieved "off his own bat" such a high level of professionalism and had invested so heavily in improving chemical storage, use and safety while working within a relatively small family business.

He said the judges also had been impressed with the number of high-calibre entrants in the competition

and admitted the task of picking a national winner had been tough.

Fellow judge, John Kent, Associate Professor of the School of Agricultural and Wine Sciences at Charles Sturt University, said competition between the top entrants had been "very close".

"This was such a strong field, it felt like we were splitting hairs at times," he said. "All the finalists were seeking ways to do things better and I was very impressed."

Professor Kent said Mr Schreurs had displayed a good knowledge of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) principles, risk management, occupational health and safety, and application technology, and showed excellent record keeping and safety procedures.

Another judge, Peter Hughes, operations manager of the Centre for Pesticide Application Safety at the University of Queensland, was impressed Mr Schreurs had made such a significant investment in spray equipment, safety and storage facilities, given the size of his operation.

"Even though his property wasn't as big as some of the other entrants, Darren had a lot of complexity to deal with," Mr Hughes said.

"Without a doubt, this was best practice at its best and I hope that many others will learn a lot from Darren's experiences."

Patrick Francis, editor of *Australian Farm Journal* and Rural Press Ltd's representative on the judging panel, said the SPRAY Awards had focused attention on one of the most unrecognised yet vital cropping procedures – pesticide application.

"The State finalists and the national winner, in particular, highlight the level of technical

and machinery sophistication, quality control and workplace safety that is emerging among farmers across Australia," Mr Francis said.

"While all the State finalists had strengths in particular areas of pesticide application, Darren Schreurs excelled across all the judging criteria.

"He also impressed the judges with a commitment to IPM, farm design to help prevent spray drift, follow-up paddock inspections to gauge effectiveness of pesticide applications, and crop pesticide record traceability for his customers."

Mr Schreurs works on his family-run vegetable farm, Peter Schreurs and Sons, at Devon Meadows about 50km south east of Melbourne.

The farm grows a number of vegetables including leeks (the main crop), baby cos lettuce, baby endive, baby wombok, radicchio, parsnips and kohlrabi.

About 140 of their 160 hectares are sprayed each year.

The business has plans to continue planting hedge rows to minimise potential drift into untargeted areas.

"We are also fully committed to the implementation of IPM principles," Mr Schreurs said.

"One of the principles of IPM that we follow is to identify potential pests before they become a problem."

Top Sprayers

- **First:** Darren Schreurs, Vic
- **Second:** Evan Lord, NSW
- **Third:** Andrew Kennedy, SA



Syngenta SPRAY awards winner, Darren Schreurs, Devon Meadows, Victoria, celebrates with his wife, Anne-Maree



Award runner-up, Evan Lord, Ardlethan, NSW, and third-placed Andrew Kennedy, Mount Gambier, SA.