

Beef farm top family business

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STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD — A local beef farm has been named the U.S. Small Business Association's Vermont Family-Owned Business of the Year.

Ray Shatney and Janet Steward learned last month they won the award, which will be presented to them at an SBA ceremony in June. At their farm in Plainfield, they raise award-winning grass-fed American Scottish Highlands — brownish-orange cattle with long hair and big horns you may have seen grazing in some of the state's pastures.

Steward said they were honored and surprised when they found out. She knew they had been nominated and had filled out a questionnaire for nominees giving details about the business such as goals and long-term growth.

"But we actually never expected to be awarded this," she said. "We're not a big business. We basically just do everything with just Ray and myself."

Steward said they didn't think they fit into a typical business

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STEFAN HARD / STAFF PHOTO

Janet Steward and Ray Shatney groom their prize Scottish Highland bull, "Cinnamon Bear" at their Shat Acres farm in Plainfield. The couple has received the Family-Owned Small Business of the Year Award for Vermont from the Small Business Administration for their Shat Acres Highland Cattle.

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model and weren't what the SBA was looking for. She said they're not interested in getting larger or expanding to national and international markets.

"We want to serve local community members and we want people to be able to see where their food comes from and see how the animals are raised," she said.

Steward said expanding their beef sales into New York or

Boston might be more profitable, but that's not their goal. They want to be close to those consuming their product.

Danny Monahan, the public information officer for the SBA's Vermont district office, said many times the SBA gives the award to businesses because they had a growth in sales or added employees. But innovation is also one of the award criteria and Monahan said that's what came through from Shatney and Steward.

He cited the farm's efforts at crossbreeding as something that stood out.

Monahan added that even

though it's just Shatney and Steward running the show, the farm has gone from around 30 head of cattle in 2004 to 170 today. He said the uniqueness of the business also played a role in their selection, as last year's award winner was a manufacturer and the year before it was a hardware store.

Steward said the farm started breeding the Highlands with Beef Shorthorns, another breed of cattle from the United Kingdom. She said farms that rely solely on selling Highland beef don't last long because the cattle are slow growers that need an additional

winter to mature compared with other beef cattle breeds. Steward said Highland farmers have to put nearly twice as much money into the animals as any other breed.

With crossbreeding with the Shorthorns, she said they can still produce the high-quality beef associated with Highlands without having to wait an extra winter. Steward said they tried crossbreeding with Angus cattle, but those animals are more high strung, nervous and hard to keep fenced in. Shorthorns are more docile like Highlands.

Continuing to crossbreed one

Highland with one Shorthorn also allows them to keep their award-winning Highland genetics intact. Steward said they had 30 crossbred calves last year and will have about that many again this year.

Shatney and Steward take their Highlands to cattle shows and their freezer room is filled with ribbons and awards. Recently, they went to the Virginia Beef Expo where their cow and calf won grand champion cow/calf. The couple were named premier breeder.

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