

Blazing new deer trails on Sunnyside Station

BRITTANY PICKETT/FAIRFAX NZ

Monowai farmer Richard Greer at Sunnyside Station.

For Richard Greer changing the systems on his Monowai station has proved to be a game changer. Brittany Pickett reports.

With a view out onto snowcapped mountains and a sparkling lake nearby Sunnyside Station could be a tourist destination, but for Richard Greer it's his office.

When Greer bought the 1200 hectare station at Monowai, near Fiordland National Park, five years ago, he saw it as a store stock farm.

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Red deer at Sunnyside Station, Monowai.

Greer also owns a 600ha property in Happy Valley, and initially did not think of the station as his main farming property.

But over the years, and with the help of the Southland Advance Party that has all changed.

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BRITTANY PICKETT/FAIRFAX NZ

Red deer at Sunnyside Station, Monowai.

Sunnyside runs deer, ewes and cattle, while at Happy Valley there are sheep, hoggets and fattening cattle.

The first few years at Sunnyside Greer was running 1500 hinds and selling his fawns as store stock - which are sold to other farmers to finish.

With the encouragement of the advance party, a deer industry initiative to improve deer productivity and profits, he decided to give finishing his fawns a go.

The previous farm owners had also sold their fawns as stores and on a reasonably new farm Greer had not wanted to jump in and make too many changes too fast, he says.

But the opportunity to make more money from finishing the fawns was too good to ignore.

"We're finishing all the lambs well so there shouldn't be any reason we won't try our deer."

At an average of 19 kilograms per lamb, Sunnyside was proving itself with its sheep production, but the deer weren't bringing in the level of revenue sought by Greer.

So last year he tried finishing his fawns for the first time.

"That's been the biggest thing, that's made a huge difference to our bottom line."

Greer saw his gross margin rise from \$355,978 to \$530,253 before costs were added.

He dropped hind numbers to 1300 to accommodate the demand for feed and this year he plans to drop it again to 1100 hinds after scanning.

While finishing them off has made a big impact to both the operation of the farm and the bottom line, Sunnyside has also been engaging in trials to improve deer production.

Greer wanted to know what effect the relatively new and hugely popular fodder beet varieties would have on fawns.

To say they flourished would be an understatement in his eyes.

A mob of 600 stag fawns averaged a growth rate of 121 grams per day on fodder beet, compared with 77 grams per day on chow.

"They got shifted every day, that's to make sure they're getting enough protein off the leaf."

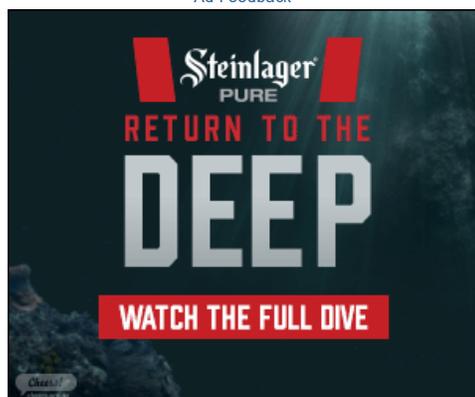
They were also provided with baleage on the side to balance their diet.

The new systems at Sunnyside have Greer joining the chorus of farmers praising the production gains from using fodder beet as a feed source.

The "game changer" crop makes it possible for Greer to have all of his stag fawns sent for processing before Christmas, he says.

But he wants to find a way to extend how long the fawns can spend on fodder beet before their growth rates slow. At between 60 to 80 they stop

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putting on as much weight, he says.

"If we could extend it out, it would be nice. That's why we're giving them daily breaks."

He's even thinking of ways to improve the fodder beet for his hinds next year. He wants to know if different fodder beet varieties will have different outcomes.

Greer focussed on beet with a high dry matter this year, but says the hinds struggled because it was too low to the ground for them to graze easily.

He's also toying with the idea of trying his sheep on it as only cattle and deer have been privy to the fodder beet so far.

Other systems have also changed on the farm. This year Greer has done away with using deer feed pads to reduce wastage.

Instead, the hinds are being fed on fodder beet. The 30ha of paddocks usually reserved for silage, goes to the fawns.

"Not putting it into silage meant we could feed that grass to the fawns and that 30ha was all it took to fatten the stag fawns."

While there has been a lot of insular thinking at Sunnyside Station with a focus on improving production levels in deer, Greer is also thinking about the industry as a whole.

The biggest problem has always been the huge schedule drop once the chilled market closes, he says.

While this year venison prices look steady, his biggest worry is an eventual shortage of supply.

"There's not enough numbers out there. When you over-sell something it's not that easy."

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Greer joined the Southland Advance Party at its inception in 2014. The system developed by Deer Industry NZ to help farmers increase the profitability of their farms, has been popular for Southland deer farmers and even includes Landcorp farms.

When Greer joined he didn't have the experience with deer he believed he needed for the station.

"I'd always had deer before but never on a large scale so I just wanted to upskill a wee bit."

Being around deer farmers who are passionate about the industry keeps him motivated, he says.

The inclusion of Landcorp farms is helpful because it is usually a closed book operation, but as part of the advance party they openly share figures with the group, he says.

"It just takes away a bit of the mystery of what's going on with Landcorp."

Being able to compare and contrast and learn from other farm trials keeps Greer thinking about what more he can do on his farm.

Tracking growth rates each year continues to be important.

"By tracking what you're doing it gives you a goal. It gives you something to strive towards."

He still has to finish his hill country development and he's got fodder beet trials to do, but he is always keeping his eye on what's next.

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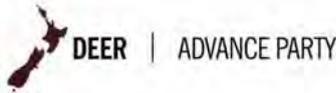
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Follow through and join the party

Lynda Gray

It's difficult to find a deer farmer who isn't an Advance Party member.

More than 200 farmers belong to one of the 23 groups that have started up around the country since late 2013. The farmer-led groups are beefed up discussion groups with the key requirement of "follow-through" by the eight to 10 participants.

Follow-through means each farmer committing to a project to tackle a particular issue limiting production and/or profitability within their own deer-farming business. They're required to come up with an action plan, record what they do and at each meeting give a progress report on how they're tracking.

Deer Industry New Zealand (DINZ) Advance Party co-ordinator Pania Flint said at this year's deer industry conference it was not a discussion group or about a farm advisor telling people what to do.

'We want to build up a good repository of changes farmers have made. They won't be scientific peer-reviewed stories but farmer-proven.'

"We're talking about farmers getting together, talking about the issues and coming up with the solutions".

The other key differences were that they were run by a trained and paid facilitator, and there was a defined group meeting structure to ensure findings from projects filtered back to DINZ.

The AP model seems to be firing up deer farmers judging by feedback from an August CINTA agri-research survey of 90 participants of which 70% attributed their motivation for change to party membership. Their most significant gains have come from changing the quality

and quantity of feed. There were also some unexpected "soft" gains.

"Farmers have talked about the building of trust within the group, camaraderie, and the confidence to make change – that's the big one, a lot of farmers said they had been thinking about making change and the advance party had given them the confidence to go forward and do it," Flint said.

The advance party concept of self-led farmer improvement sounds good but how difficult was it to get the follow-through needed?

Deer farmers have kept up participation, with nearly half being part of a group for one to two years, DINZ P2P manager Innes Moffat said, but an area needing more work was the recording of exactly what, how and why around the outcomes of the projects.

"We want to build up a good repository of changes farmers have made. They won't be scientific peer-reviewed stories but farmer-proven."

Like any group-learning, individual members get out of it what they put in.

"That's what it boils down to and some, not many, have left because they've decided it's not for them."

Composition of the groups will change over time and some will run their course.

"We don't want them to have a finish date but they'll need to keep evolving."

A total of \$450,000 (50% funding each from DINZ and a 2014-2017 Sustainable Farming Fund grant) was being spent on the advance party model. From July 1, 2017 the funding will transfer to MPI's Primary Growth Partnership. Most of the money is used for payment of facilitators, up to \$10,000 a year for each and a yearly national workshop.

The advance parties were part of the industry's P2P or Passion to Profit strategy aimed at producing more deer, heavier, earlier, but were they delivering the results?



Pania Flint, Deer Industry New Zealand Advance Party co-ordinator. The advance party had given farmers the confidence to make changes.

Moffat said the moving forward by two weeks of the industry average kill date in 2015/16 for the first time since recording of kill dates started was encouraging.

"Dry conditions will have had an impact, but with the genetic

gains and the noise the industry has been making about better feeding and earlier killing it's nice to see a movement in the right direction. One year is an anomaly, two years is a coincidence, three years and we'll begin to attribute some causation."

Benchmarking and monitoring of key performance indicators would be one way to further drive industry performance and that was the intention at the outset of the programme. However, it's been side-lined in the meantime because of the difficulty of collecting comparable data across groups, but could be introduced as the groups evolve.



Innes Moffat: nice to see a movement in the right direction.

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Lynda Gray

Matching silage and balage samples to their metabolisable energy and protein levels was a mission impossible for farmers at a recent Southland deer farmer technology day.

Instigator of the exercise, animal nutritionist Dr Simone Hoskin said it was a good way of highlighting the difficulty of visually assessing the feeding value of crops and conserved supplements.

"No one got it right and I think that justifies why you should get feed tested," she said.

Although farmers generally had a good

handle on what a quality pasture looked like they often struggled once it was made into fermented staples such as silage and balage.

"There are a huge number of variables that come into play when and once it's made so I strongly recommend that any fermented feed that's going to be fed in quantity is tested. It helps understand where the limitations are and how it could restrict productivity and ultimately profitability."

The biggest limiting factor was metabolisable energy (ME), related to digestibility, and then protein for growing stock. However, once the levels of each were known a performance target and feeding plan could be figured in to a feeding plan that was target based.

"It's all about the old saying of 'measuring to manage'," Hoskin said.

But the important thing was to plan and test in advance so there was time to fill any nutritional deficit. Winter crops, especially brassicas such as kale and swedes should be tested because of their huge year-to-year variation in ME and protein levels. ME levels could vary from eight to 12 over two consecutive years making potential for a serious mismatch between estimated and actual feeding levels required.

Also with silage, measurement of pH, ammonium nitrate and lactic acid levels were important because they indicated how good fermentation had been. Hoskin recommended that farmers pay for any bought-in supplement on a cents/mega joule (MJ)/kg ME rather than a quantity-based c/kg/drymatter (DM).

Hoskin is well-versed in feed quality with her scientific career focused on forage nutrition from field agronomy and the study of feeding values to experiments

Feed quality testing – what it costs

Hill Laboratories is the main provider of feed quality testing in New Zealand. Testing of fresh feed and forage is \$69 (plus GST) per sample and for silage \$79 (plus GST). The silage sample supplied must have been stacked for at least two weeks.

"This gives the farmer information to assess against the feed requirements for the stock, especially when the pasture is being supplemented with other feed types," Hill Laboratories agriculture client services manager, Janice Christiansen, said.

A more detailed analysis that would include additional tests for trace elements costs \$149 (plus GST) per sample. This type of test was worthwhile when stock were likely to be exposed to stress such as during calving, lambing and lactation.

If the feed is to be used as a winter supplement a single test should be sufficient. But crops grown onfarm could be sample tested for minerals at mid-growth stage to check for any mineral deficiencies that could hamper animal growth rates. Results of tests were usually with farmers within a week of testing.

For more information on feed, crop or silage testing go to hill-laboratories.com – free do-it-yourself sampling kits are also available. Testing for forages and supplements for feed quality gives farmers more certainty in feeding decisions to maximise production.

into forage preference, digestibility and nutrient metabolism. The former Massey University senior lecturer and AgResearch group leader is now the Deer Industry New Zealand Advance Party facilitator of the Hawke's Bay Fast Finishers group, scientific adviser for Fiber Fresh Feeds and also finishes weaner deer and cattle on 88ha near Palmerston North.

This year's 90 weaners – half the number of what was planned because of an overly wet early winter – grazed Relish red clover or plantain mixes from weaning in late February until mid-May, achieving a daily growth average of 285g. They'll graze mostly new Ohau ryegrass-based mixes until spring when they'll be rotated around the herb and legume-based pastures and drafted for the spring chilled season.

"Even on a bad day I know it's got an ME of 11.5-12% and a protein level of 20%-plus."

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Energy and growth

As a general guideline every unit increase in ME increases a weaner deer's daily growth by 50g. According to Deer Hub at deernz.org.nz the ME required for maintenance is typically 8-9 MJ/kg DM.

For moderate growth or during lactation a diet providing 10.5-12 MJ/kg DM is needed and for high growth, above 12 MJ/kg DM. The recommended crude protein levels, expressed as grams/kg are 10-12% for maintenance, 14-16% for growth, 16-18% for lactation or velvet growth and 18-20% for spike initiation.

Another online tool on Deer Hub – the DEERFeed calculator at intake.deerfeed.co.nz – uses the hind weight and the calf weaning weight and days to weaning to calculate the total feed requirements in MJME/day and kg DM/day.

Borlands tackling challenges with gusto



by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The Shabor breeding unit at Oparau, being managed by the Borlands wasn't quite a blank canvas when they took over nearly two years ago, but the outlines of the finished work were still quite sketchy. This presented challenges but also huge opportunities and Steve, Judy and son Chris haven't wasted any time developing the property as part of a well-designed integrated velvet operation. *Deer Industry News* visited the Advance Party farm in mid February, when it was their turn to host the Waipa group.

THE FARM COMES under the umbrella of Shabor Limited, the exotic-sounding name an amalgam of (Bob) Sharp and Borland. The Borlands' property is part of the Waipa/Waikato Advance Party facilitated by vet Ginny Dodunski. Because it's still in a strong development phase, it's an ideal business to be part of the programme. There are plenty of opportunities and the Borlands are keen to share in the group's ideas.

A quick round robin among the group showed most had been enjoying a good season with excellent pasture and quality. The sustained good prices for both velvet and venison were also cause for satisfaction with one member noting the \$7.00 plus schedule later in the season was at a "meaningful" level.

Shabor profile

Steve Borland said the company and operation have been set up as a succession planning exercise for his son Chris, who is taking over as manager of the deer operation, and Bob Sharp's three adult children. Steve is keen for the next generation to apply their own ideas to the opportunities available. "Bob and I are farmers and our thinking is limited. Our kids are the innovators. They can see the potential." As an example, Steve said a 98-hectare bush block at Oparau could be form the basis for an eco-lodge – but that was for the next generation to explore.



From left: Chris Borland, Steve Borland and Bob Sharp.

The Borlands' block is 800 effective hectares (982 total), mainly medium hill country and summer safe. It's near Kawhia in western Waikato and quite isolated but ticks a lot of boxes as a home to a breeding operation that feeds velvet stags into a very productive velvetting business. The velvetting stags are run at Bob Sharp's Whakamaru farm, two and a half hours away. Ideally, each crop of weaner stags will be put straight onto the truck and sent to Whakamaru, but with the wet winter and difficult conditions last year the 183 young stags were carried through winter on their mothers and sent later in the year. This year they were to be weaned straight onto the truck and the CIDRs put in for the AI programme at the same time.

About 700 velvetting stags are carried at Whakamaru at present. Bob Sharp said there was capacity to grow the velvetting herd, perhaps to 900 with some retained at Oparau, but he was wary of the operation getting too intensive. "Until the drought of 2008/09 the last one we'd had down there was in 1977. It's been a bit more torrid recently."

Likewise they would be cautious about building up stock numbers too rapidly at Oparau, as spring can come quite late and there's work to be done lifting fertility. Olsen P over much of the farm is 4–6 units, with some areas up to 12 units. The aim is to increase the figure to 20 plus. Because there is so much potential to lift pasture production, stock capacity and productivity, there are no plans at this stage to use crops. A recent application of triple super to 400 hectares at 400kg/hectare would give fertility a timely boost.

About two-thirds of the stock units at Oparau are made up by nearly 4,000 sheep, a Wiltshire flock that the Borlands bought with the farm. The stock manager for the flock also stayed on. The property also suits cattle for production and pasture control purposes, although the wet winters mean there's a risk of pugging and pasture damage. There are currently only a handful cattle and with stock being in strong demand, those numbers can't be built up too quickly yet.

The Borlands have 500 mixed age hinds, 208 R2s and 200 R1s. They use AI with backup stags and achieve about a 70 percent conception rate. The weaner stags are "sold" to the Whakamaru

velvetting operation for \$350 (for analysis purposes), which provides a premium over their value as venison stores. Cull yearling hinds and stags will go fairly early – in August/September – to catch the chilled market and are finished on the farm.



Breeding hinds at Oparau.

It's early days and there is still much data to gather, but the economics of the operation are looking promising at this stage. Preliminary Farmax® estimates show deer at Oparau, are yielding a creditable 18 cents/kg dry matter (DM) consumed, compared with 14.7 c/kgDM for the sheep (similar to the return for dairy heifers). Beef cows yielded only 9.4c/kgDM, "but they are there to do a job". The assumptions for deer include the nominal \$350 for the velvetting stags supplied to the Whakamaru property and a conservative schedule of \$5.90 (the 12-year average) for the venison income.

On the limited analysis available thus far, velvet returns are an impressive 47c/kgDM consumed. Over a larger number of stags and including spikers this figure will drop, but under current returns the velvet enterprise will still be a great earner.

Facilitator Ginny Dodunski said more robust figures will be available once the first year's accounts are fully analysed, but it's a promising start. "It will be interesting to see where it sits once we have a couple of years of data," she said.

Although the sheep enterprise is peripheral to what the Advance Party is looking at, it's nonetheless integral and did very well last year with a 142 percent lambing performance (scanning 176 percent). Lambs can be finished on the farm – unusual for the area – but if conditions get tight they can be sold as stores, acting as a relief valve for the property. The group discussed the idea of deer fencing some of the easier country currently used for sheep

to run a velvetting herd, but that's a decision yet to be made. The Borlands currently run about 20 stags at Oparau as a small trial to see how their velvetting goes.

The 2015 winter was challenging and feeding out took up to six hours a day. Steve said it was tough not being able to feed their animals as well as they'd like, but they are working hard to prevent a repeat. "The grass stopped growing in April and that was it."

Getting the infrastructure right

The fences at Oparau were built way back in the time of subsidies and infrastructure for deer farming was fairly basic when the Borlands moved in, so they've been busy on both deer and sheep fencing.

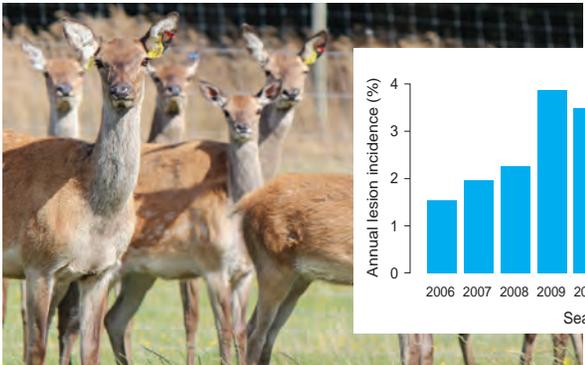
The Advance Party group looked over the "\$1,000 deer shed" and yards, built from recycled materials. It has a well-designed circular central pen that enables drafting in multiple directions and also feeds into the crush. The group was impressed with the shed. Ideally it would have been higher, but that was a limitation of the existing materials used. The only other issue was the metal surface in the yards which did cause some foot problems last season. The group suggested topping the metal with lime fines or crusher dust.

The Borlands have put a lot of thought into the deer fencing layout and are creating smaller paddocks with a good environment for fawning. A lane that runs right around the farm, with smaller holding paddocks, will help make stock movements easier. Although smaller paddocks help with pasture management, Steve said deer can get unsettled in these, and some larger (20 hectares plus) paddocks will remain.

They were flat out fencing when the Advance Party visited and hoped to have the work completed by the end of this year. They are using a bulldozer in places to even out ground along fencelines so that post spacings don't have to be too close. Steve is keen to avoid fawn losses and has bitten the bullet to invest in 6-inch mesh to prevent escapes. A neighbour requirement is to deer fence the boundary, which will create a great relief valve by enabling deer to be grazed outside the core deer unit in difficult seasons.

Steve admitted that he and Chris are spending a lot of time on the fencing at present and the group suggested some of this work be farmed out so they could spend more time on stock management and operational decision-making.

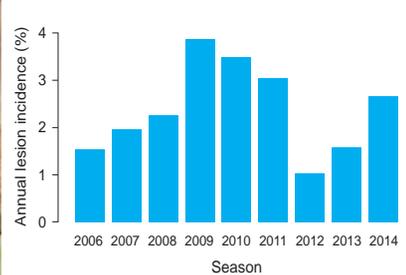
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Season	Annual lesion incidence (%)
2006	1.5
2007	2.0
2008	2.2
2009	3.8
2010	3.5
2011	3.0
2012	1.0
2013	1.5
2014	2.5

Borlands: continued



The Borlands are investing in 6-inch mesh to help prevent losses through mistothering and fawn escapes.

The farm has a good network of tracks with gravel sourced on the property. They proved their worth last year when they withstood a 100mm downpour over three hours.

Work is also being done to improve the quality of stock water.

Steve said that although they are putting in long hours during the development phase and there are only two full-time labour units beside himself, he makes sure the team get time off. “They work a five-day week here – that’s important.”

Environmental work

The Borlands are being mindful of environmental impacts as they undertake their development work and are putting together a Level 2 Land and Environment Plan. “Everything we’ve done here has environmental planning built in,” Steve said. “We fenced off sensitive areas from the beginning because we know we’ll eventually need to do this work.”

The light Mairoa ash soils on a clay base present challenges and sediment runoff is the biggest risk. They need to be careful especially when cultivating, to avoid ruts developing.

The flats at the top of the farm are windy and exposed, and Steve is planning to plant some stands of manuka to provide some protection.



On these soils, care is needed to help prevent ruts developing.

Self-feed silage pit

Feeding out during last year’s wet winter, with inadequate deer paddocks, was a bit of a trial and the Borlands are planning to install a self-feed silage pit to help prevent a repeat. They’ve found a good location next to a hunting block near the back of the farm

in a spot where there is no risk of outflow getting into waterways. Getting concrete to the site may be a challenge, however. The silage for the pit will be cut in adjacent paddocks. Steve pointed out that the cost of putting grass for silage straight into the pit is two-thirds less than the cost of making baleage.

Advance Party group members Brian and Jacqui Wellington were able to provide the Borlands with some useful tips about the location and design of the pit and recommended a nearby north-facing site rather than a knoll that Steve had been considering. (They set up a highly successful self-feed pit at their own property, Te Awamutu Station, for hinds being wintered in a pine block.)



Grassy knoll: The Advance Party group discuss the best spot to locate a self-feed silage pit.

Animal health

There are no major animal health issues among the deer, and ticks – a big problem in the northern North Island – don’t seem to be present. They want to build a cattle herd to perhaps 100 cows but won’t get into trading as they want to avoid introducing pests and diseases through that route. The Borlands are keen to keep animal health inputs at a minimum, providing deer with copper but no clostridial vaccinations, for example.

Overall the sheep are not performing so well on the animal health front and the group discussed the possibility of drench resistance on the farm. Steve noted there had been a lot of goats roaming the farm when he took over. He’s since shot these out, but they could have contributed to parasite problems. The group suggested more could be done to find out what underlying health issues might affect sheep production, such as trace element deficiencies, parasites or viral pneumonia.

Brian Wellington said deer and sheep go well together in terms of both pasture management and worm control.

Advance Party projects

The Borlands have chosen two projects that will help them get a better handle on pasture and animal management and test different scenarios.

They are using Farmax to help them measure and then manage their farm system. The Taranaki hill country pasture growth model that has been adapted for use at Oparau allows for a strong burst of late spring growth. As well as showing total pasture covers, the Farmax software provides a useful breakdown of pasture composition (green leaf, dead and stem). It also shows what will happen to pasture quality if you introduce various stock classes at

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Borlands: continued

different stocking rates. The impact of a dose of urea, or paddocks shut up for crop or silage, will also be reflected in the figures Farmax spits out. A graph showing actual covers getting perilously close to minimum requirements for the September pinch period (without urea or silage/hay cut) showed how useful this scenario modelling can be.

Ginny Dodunski said the Farmax project will help formalise the information coming out of the farm and show more accurately where the profits are coming from.

The second project at Oparau is to use a Gallagher tag reader mounted in a gateway to help pair up dams and fawns. The technology is based on a unit developed for sheep and has a solar-powered unit and data collector. Steve said it doesn't require much more than is used for a regular weighing system – all that's needed is the additional reader in the gateway. ■

Advancing the cause

by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor



P2P

Advance Party

Advance Parties, a farm-based programme that's a key part of Passion2Profit, have been picking up pace in recent months. The stability of the groups and positive reports from participants show the initiative is already yielding rewards.

THERE ARE NOW 17 Advance Parties into their programmes, five more being formed and and DINZ is now planning for at least another 10. Dr Pania Flint coordinates the programme and also facilitates the Central Regions Advance Party in her own patch (see *Deer Industry News*, February/March 2016).

She updated the conference on the programme before introducing a panel of five farmers who told their own stories.

Message from MPI

Before the session kicked off, Justine Gilliland of the Ministry for Primary Industries congratulated the industry as it approached the end of the first year of the seven-year P2P Primary Growth Partnership (PGP). She said there had already been great progress in both the on-farm and in-market sides of the programme and

was pleased to see the five processor/exporters, which account for more than 95 percent of exported venison, cooperating in year two of a programme to boost out-of-season consumption in Europe.

"The number of Advance Parties, partly funded through the Sustainable Farming Fund, has exceeded the original targets – a great sign they're providing value to farmers."

She said the collaboration with other PGP programmes such as the Red Meat Profit Partnership and Farm^{IQ} would allow the programme to share and leverage findings and improve chances of success.

Flint said the groups are self-starting and usually had eight-to-10 members. The presence of Landcorp farms in some of the groups was a great bonus, as they already had good systems for

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Advance Parties: continued



Advance Party coordinator, Dr Pania Flint

generating and recording data – an important part of what the participants do.

She identified several critical success factors:

- The groups are farmer centred and driven.
- They are facilitated, but the facilitator is only there to get discussion under way – not to tell farmers what to do.
- There is a formal structure for recording discussions and reporting back.
- Members need to make a commitment to action once an issue has been identified on their property.
- There is an atmosphere of trust and camaraderie within the groups, giving members the confidence to try things out.
- There is scope to extend what the group has learned to other farmers through their local DFA branch and via field days.

Flint said the groups encompass a range of people, from the very experienced to farmers new to the industry. Showing you're never too old to learn, she quoted the example of Mike and Jan Holdaway. The couple are retiring from the industry, but before they did, were persuaded to join the Central Regions Advance Party where they quickly became highly valued members of the group.

As well as sharing their experience and helping add a touch of realism if people got too carried away by an idea, the Holdaways themselves kept trying new things and learning, right to the end. For example, Flint said, the Holdaways were worried about R2 fawning performance, so committed to some more intensive monitoring (e.g., double scanning and measuring paddock-by-paddock performance) to get a better fix on what was going on. They also committed to a pasture renewal programme with three



Regassing programme on the Holdaways' property – a mix of Rohan NEA2 ryegrass with Apex white clover and Tonic plantain.

different mixes in three paddocks, including a “left field” diploid/tetraploid mix to provide better fuel for their weaners.

As it turned out, there were no fetal losses among the R2s and the 2015/16 season saw some very good survival figures for all the paddocks. Flint said this confirmed the Holdaways had been providing a good fawning environment and performance had improved following a bad year in 2013. “It’s not so much about the result as it is about committing to action and following through – then discussing it with your peers. We’ve identified a couple of issues with the first fawners that we can follow through with the new owners.”

Five Advance Party members from different groups shared their experiences and perspectives on what their participation had done for them.



Advance Party discussion panel, from left: Dr Pania Flint, Tim Aitken, Ben Beadle, Glen Harrex, Cam Nicolson and Richard Greer.

Richard Greer, Sunnyside Station: Southland Advance Party

Basic facts and figures

This sheep, beef and deer breeding/finishing operation has 1,600ha effective, of which 1,200ha is deer fenced. It runs from river flats to steep hill with National Park boundary.

The livestock classes are 4,260 deer stock units (SU), 3,260



Sunnyside station: Deer gross margins lifted by 53 percent.

cattle SU and 7,090 sheep SU. Deer are stocked at 3.5 deer SU/ha, with overall stocking rate 9.1 SU/ha.

Advance Party projects: Finishing and cutting feed wastage

Greer said he had worked with deer for 20 years but not in a big way – an invitation to join the Advance Party was an opportunity to upskill in this sector. The station had previously sold its weaners but made a strategic decision to finish their own. Doing a gross

margins comparison project between store and finishing showed a significant financial gain from retaining finishers. With overall deer SUs lifted from 4100 to 5,248 and a change to finishing, the deer gross margin was raised from \$317,417 to \$487,790. Gross margin per hectare lifted by 53 percent and per stock unit by 21 percent.

In a separate project, the station made changes to cut down the estimated annual wastage of 70,000kg of silage when 500 hinds were wintered on two 33 metre whole crop silage bunkers. Increasing the number of hinds wintered from 900 to 1,000 using these pits and cutting down the time they spent on the pads halved the wastage and saved an estimated \$10,500. Using boards as a barrier stopped hinds getting their feet through to pull the silage forward, standing on it. "They just have to stand there and eat it."

Ben Beadle, Landcorp: Southland Advance Party

Basic facts and figures

Of the 2,300ha of flat to rolling land at Te Anau, 308ha is deer fenced for finishing weaners supplied by other Landcorp breeding properties. With intakes in autumn and spring, 3,200 deer are finished, stocked at 10.1 deer SU/ha. Ben said the finishing operation is somewhat "at the mercy of the breeders" but they set a minimum entry weight of 50kg.

The farm also carries 16,000 sheep (breeding and finishing)



Landcorp Te Anau: Trialled different forages for finishing.

and 6,240 cattle SU (finishing), with an overall stocking rate of 11 SU/ha.

Advance Party project: Growth rates on different forages

The farm carried out a comparative trial to look at growth rates among wapiti cross weaners on three different forage systems through winter and summer: plantain, lucerne and grass/clover.

For April and May the plantain-fed weaners grew fastest, with lucerne-fed weaners next and grass/clover-fed third. The differences started to level out in May. In spring the overall growth rates were, as expected, much higher, but for October and November there was little difference between the three systems. In December the growth rates on grass started to lag behind the other

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Advance Parties: continued

forages, and even more so in January, when plantain was again giving the best growth rates with lucerne next (see the video of this session on <http://bit.ly/246yq2a> for the comparative figures).

Beadle said the differences weren't quite as pronounced in sheep. In the wake of this trial, another member of the Southland Advance Party is now considering trying a plantain/clover mix on his property. On the Landcorp farm they are looking at increasing the stocking rate on the plantain to see how much pressure the crop can cope with.

Glen and Renee Harrex, St Bathans: Otago Advance Party



Moving fawning off the irrigated pasture made a big difference.

Basic facts and figures

The Harrexes breed and finish deer on 300 of their 800ha of flat to rolling country. They also finish cattle. They currently carry 2,800 deer SU including 730 hinds at 9.3 deer SU/ha.

Advance Party project: Increasing deer fenced area on dryland

The Harrexes had been fawning and finishing on irrigated land. Fawning performance wasn't very good, although the weaners did well. Taking the lead from others, they deer fenced some of the dryland, using fawn-proof netting, and put most of the hinds on there for fawning. This led to much improved fawn survival, with no escapes. Glen Harrex highly recommended the 16-line netting used, which costs somewhere between the prices of 6 and 12 inch netting. The change also meant they could utilise the irrigated land more profitably.

The change enabled better use of the irrigated land, with an extra cut of 50 R1 deer away in October and carcass weights up by 1kg, with an estimated financial benefit of \$3,200. The better performance also flowed through to mating, with heavier R2s better set up as first fawners.

A separate project is trialling leptospirosis vaccination on half the R2 hinds to see if it has an impact on scanning percentages and fawn survival.

Cam and Amy Nicolson, Ida Valley: Otago Advance Party

Basic facts and figures

The Nicolsons run 360 red hinds which are mated to a terminal sire. Their dryland property has just 383mm annual rainfall and has cold, sunless winters – not a great environment for growing. Of the 500ha effective, 358ha is deer fenced. They also breed and finish sheep (2,800 sheep SU) and carry 100 cattle SU. The 1,760 deer SU are run at 5 deer SU/ha, with an overall stocking rate of 9.3 SU/ha.



The Nicolsons farm in a cold, dry environment but have found regular weighing and recording are a big help.

Advance Party project: weighing

The Nicolsons aim to get big weaners away to slaughter as early as possible and started an intensive weighing regime to keep on top of their performance against targets. They weigh everything from weaning onwards and monitor growth rates.

Cam Nicolson admitted the weighing and report card regime was “like a drug” and very useful. They achieved growth rates of 115g/day last winter – better than expected and providing a benchmark to be improved on. The weaners are drafted by weight and fed accordingly. They were delighted last season to have 93 percent of their stag fawns away by a mean kill date of 20 October, with an average carcass weight of 53kg.

Nicolson said he wouldn't want to leave the Advance Party group. People were open and honest and told you if they disagreed with you. “There's good trust in the group and if someone sees an opportunity it's pointed out. Most people take this on. The group pushes you on to try harder and helps when you have a 50:50 decision to make. These groups could help attract more young people into the industry.”

Tim Aitken, Hawke's Bay Fast Finishers Advance Party

Tim Aitken and Lucy Robertshawe have been farming deer in Central Hawke's Bay for a while now and have been through a three-year Focus Farm programme, but readily agree there is always more to learn.

Aitken said the group has a big range of experience, but “I learned more from our Focus Farm field days than I gave out”. He said the younger ones in his Advance Party group really challenge him and keep him on his toes. “I'm in the group to learn.”

He said facilitator Dr Simone Hoskin is a nutritionist, which was a good fit with a finishing group, but beyond that she facilitates rather than telling the group what to do. As well as comprehensive minutes she also guides the group to useful reading materials to expand their knowledge.

Where to from here?

While the Advance Parties are highly successful, conference attendees were keen to know how the benefits and lessons could be spread out to the wider industry.

Paddy Boyd (a member of the Mackenzie Advance Party) noted that once it's clear a group is getting value out of the programme, the lessons for other deer farmers can be documented. The

Pasture pest focus at Regional Workshop

by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

More deer please! That was the theme for a P2P Regional Workshop last month, led by facilitator Simon Glennie (AbacusBio), at Landcorp's Dawson Downs finishing property. Members of the Otago Advance Party were joined at the workshop by members of the newly formed South Otago Advance Party, of which Dawson Downs is a part. The new Advance Party is to be facilitated by Peter Kalb of Clutha Vets.

DAWSON DOWNS, MANAGED by Thomas Dalley, is on 946 hectares (876 effective) of flat and gently rolling country about 18km west of Balclutha.

The pastures were bolting away when the 20 visitors gathered at the property on 10 November and staff were scrambling to find enough mouths to keep on top of the feed before the next big mob of lambs was due to arrive. Baling the surplus is an option for maintaining grass quality in the meantime, and as insurance against a dry summer ahead, but the combination of a wet spring and heavy demand for contractors had caused its own headaches.

Large bare patches in one paddock showed the farm wasn't entirely a Garden of Eden, however: grass grub and porina are an issue in places and AgResearch scientist Colin Ferguson was on hand with some good advice on managing pasture pests (see below).

To ensure flexibility, the property carries no capital stock and is entirely dedicated to finishing, with about 20 percent of the area deer fenced. Landcorp would like to increase the amount of deer finishing, but supply of weaners from its farms is a real constraint at present, mirroring the situation in the wider industry as capital herds are rebuilt. They would dearly love more weaner deer, not just because venison is good business at the moment, but because they fit in well around the other stock classes.

This year, just under 1,000 deer are being finished. They came onto the property from Landcorp breeding farms relatively late, with mobs arriving in mid-July (556), late August (298) and late September (119). Most went onto winter rape initially, with the heavier weaners going straight onto grass, but in the end all the deer were moved off the rape and onto grass. Lambs were used to clean up the rape instead.



A finishing mob at Dawson Downs.

The farm also finishes 20,000 seasonal lambs (12,000 at any one time) and winters 7–8,000 trade hoggets. They are looking to provide grazing for up to 2,000 replacement hoggets which can act as a relief valve for some of the Landcorp breeding units. There are 500 hoggets on the farm at present. Spring purchase of ewes with lambs at foot is also undertaken with numbers dependent on feed supply and market returns.

Some 623 R2 cattle will be finished this year. There are also 132 R1s, most of which will be sold in autumn. With its wet winters, Landcorp has moved away from wintering cattle at Dawson Downs, although running some in the blocks of exotic plantation in September/October is a possibility.

The farm aims to produce 650kg of liveweight per hectare, with 60kg deer carcasses contributing to that (kill figures provided for 2015/16 showed there is a bit of work to do to reach that carcass weight objective, however).

Rape is used in winter and summer, and a red/white clover mix is also used. We were shown a paddock where newly sown red and white clover hadn't established well, having been overrun with fat hen. The paddock had then been oversown with Moata Italian ryegrass, and the resulting mix was working well, giving excellent growth rates. Thomas Dalley said it can be grazed through to May and then be started again in September. Even with 25 deer/hectare in September, they were struggling to keep up with the growth. Lambs will graze the mix once the deer are gone.

Animal health

Despite the great conditions, the finishers weren't stacking on the weight as fast as might be expected (they were gaining about 280–300g/day in early November).

Conditions were favourable for high exposure to gutworm parasites (there had also been lungworm evident) and visitors wondered whether the standard monthly Oxfen drenching programme was doing the job. Dalley was concerned that using off-label dose rates would cause withholding period headaches. Veterinarian Peter Kalb suggested using a double dose of Oxfen plus a Cydectin Injection earlier in the year (say in August) and outside the 91-day withholding period, with further on-label treatments with Oxfen later on if needed.

It was also suggested trace element status should be checked, in case deficiencies were holding back growth.

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Dawson Downs: continued

Pasture pests

Invermay AgResearch scientist, Colin Ferguson, gave some useful tips on pasture pests.

Clover pests

Clover is an important part of the pastures at Dawson Downs, a fact not lost on the clover root weevil, which turned up in 2010. At this time of the year most of the adults had died but larvae were in the soil. The characteristic notching in the edges of leaves was not much in evidence but this will change when the new adult weevils emerge in December.

Ferguson said the parasitic wasp that had been introduced in 2012 to control the weevil is now well established in the area and helping keep it in check. That said, the released wasps are female only and genetically identical, so are vulnerable to population crashes. An alternative biological control for the weevil would be useful insurance, he said.

Slugs were also in evidence among the clover. Ferguson said baits, in established pasture, are ineffective, as slugs still prefer clover over the baits. “The best way to control slugs in clover is to graze it down.”

Other pests such as army worm and greasy cutworm were in evidence, but these are not economic to control, he said.



AgResearch scientist Colin Ferguson shows evidence of pasture pest damage to clover at Dawson Downs.

Grass grub and porina

The major pasture pests are grass grub and porina. The farm tour at Dawson Downs included a paddock badly affected by porina (see photo). This paddock had been cultivated and regrassed two years previously and porina had hit it hard.

Colin Ferguson said cultivation killed existing pests, but it also killed the natural fungal pathogens that kept them in check. This applies to both these pests and allows them a head start in recolonising cultivated paddocks. It was usually 3–4 years before the natural balance was restored. This, Ferguson said, was why typically pastures in their third winter are damaged by these pests.

Grass grub are root feeders and spend most of their lives in soil. In November they pupate and turn into beetles that leave the soil to mate. This happens immediately on emergence and the



This paddock, regrassed two years earlier, had been hit hard by porina.

female beetles burrow back into the soil, close to where they had lived as grubs, to lay their eggs. Consequently populations are localised starting as small patches that spread outwards and can be easily recognised.

Grass grub can be expensive. AgResearch figures provided on the day showed the cost of the pest to deer production could be \$154–\$385/hectare at grub densities of eight per spade (200/m²) and \$308–\$770/ha at densities of 16 grubs per spade (400/m²).

Ferguson said rolling with a standard flat roller is ineffective at killing grass grub. The apparent perking up of affected grass after rolling comes about because the clipped-off roots are pushed back into contact with the soil, not because grubs have been killed.

Some pasture species such as tall fescue and cocksfoot are tolerant of grass grub. The larvae aren’t affected at all by AR37 ryegrass. (It does kill porina – see below – but deer are quite vulnerable to ryegrass staggers on this cultivar.)

The only form of grass grub control is Diazinon, which can be applied as a spray or prill. Either way, it needs to be washed into the soil by rain or irrigation to get to the larvae below. Ferguson said prills are probably the more effective of the two options and could be broadcast or direct drilled. “Spraying is cheaper but it doesn’t work so well.”

Porina also spend most of their lives in the soil, coming to the pasture surface at night to graze on plant foliage. There are several species that emerge at different times of the year (generally late October, mid January and, in a few places, late February).

Similarly to grass grub they mate straight away but unlike grass grub, porina lay many of their eggs on the wing and are capable of laying more than 3,000. This “Johnny Appleseed” effect means the pest could be spread widely by just a few moths. Porina moths usually fly towards light or downwind from where they emerged.

Ferguson said eggs and larvae are easily desiccated, but could survive well in damp conditions and long grass. As with grass grub, cultivation for new pasture upsets the natural balance and gives porina an advantage for a time.

In severe infestations, plants are killed and there will be bare patches in pasture. These are generally more extensive and less defined than grass grub patches. Most damage happens from autumn to early spring and shows up in winter as growth slows.

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Dawson Downs: continued

Ferguson said clover is susceptible to porina, as well as ryegrasses, but tall fescue, cocksfoot and red clover although, fed on by porina, are better able to tolerate that feeding.

Porina is also expensive in production terms. AgResearch figures showed a cost to deer production of \$204/ha at two porina per spade (50/m²) and \$460/hectare at 4 grubs/spade (100/m²).

The best form of control is the insect growth regulator diflubenzuron (Dimilin®), although Diazinon or chlorpyrifos can also be used. Dimilin is most effective when the caterpillars are at their earlier stages of growth (10–20mm long) and feeding during warm weather, so it is useful to know when porina moths have been flying. “If there has been more than one main flight of porina, you’ll need to time a Dimilin application following each flight,” Ferguson advised. It is best applied to short, fresh pasture and allowed to dry on the foliage.

He said a good kill would be about 70 percent of the porina population. This would effectively knock them back but leave enough of a population to maintain the natural pathogens in the environment. An organophosphate would wipe out more than 95 percent of the porina, but this would also kill off the natural disease agents and allow the moth to bounce back more easily.

Ferguson said that as a general rule, healthy pasture is more resistant/tolerant to attack from grass grub or porina. Infestation by the pests “is a kind of grazing”. If nitrogen levels are high, the insect larvae are generally better fed and therefore eat less.

Learning from experience

Members of the Otago Advance Party passed on a few tips to the new South Otago group. They said their location gave them great access to southern-based experts such as Sharon McIntyre (Deer Select), David Stevens (AgResearch – deer nutrition), Geoff Asher (AgResearch – deer reproduction), Jason Archer (AbacusBio and P2P – genetics) and Solis Norton (John’s Management). The nearby location of AgResearch Invermay also provided a real boost as seen by the expert and practical contribution from Colin Ferguson at this Regional Workshop.

They said the Otago group is quite diverse, and the commitment to projects on individual farms is a good thing because it provides a focus and motivation for bringing in outside experts.

DINZ Producer Manager Tony Pearse said the issues being tackled by Advance Parties often boiled down to reproductive success, feeding and parasite control. ■

Opportunities at Dawson Downs

Advance Party members brainstormed opportunities for the operation at Dawson Downs. Here’s a sampling of the ideas:

- get weaners in at an earlier age and plant more red clover to get them a good start in autumn before finishing them in spring (for animal welfare reasons Landcorp does not transport young deer lighter than 45kg)
- consider subterranean clover to complement red and white clover (but be careful not to over-rely on clover or there will be a winter feed deficit – also, deer are natural browsers so could become bored with a clover-only diet)
- extend finishing to take advantage of additional income from spiker velvet (the additional \$50 or more could help compensate for a lower schedule later in the season)
- run pregnant adult hinds to help keep on top of the spring pasture surplus
- consider running a velvetting mob (Landcorp does not target velvet, however, and regards it as a byproduct from venison production)
- graze more hoggets to help promote pasture quality.

Goudies Station showcases high-performing operation

by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

It started life as a firebreak in the 1950s. It's long and skinny (18km by about 1km), quite elevated (450–550 metres), and it can fry in summer then freeze in winter. Yet Landcorp's Goudies Station is fairly humming along. This high-performing sheep, cattle and deer enterprise grows 450kg of product per hectare, pumps \$1 million into Landcorp's profits and returns a healthy 6 percent on capital.

THE WAIPA ADVANCE Party visited Goudies on 18 October, inviting along members of the Waipa, Waikato and Kaipara Branches of NZDFA as part of a series of P2P Regional Workshops¹. About 35 people attended, enjoying a rare opportunity to see a large-scale and successful venison operation close up.



Yearling hinds at Goudies Station (Ginny Dodunski photo).

Goudies profile

The 1,988 hectare (1,750 effective) block is in the central North Island, near Reporoa. Annual rainfall is usually 1200–1300mm, but it has topped 2000mm over the past 12 months, giving a great start for the current season. Sulphur is the main limiting growth factor for grass.

All farm water is supplied from two bores on the property. Much of the reticulation system has been upgraded recently, with more than 80km of new pipe going in over the past 6 years.

Its primary focus is a Romney sheep breeding programme, but there are also significant deer and beef cattle breeding and finishing operations.

Deer have been on the farm since the early 2000s, when Landcorp made a strategic shift towards more deer and dairying. (Dairying was ruled out on this block because DDT soil residues were too high.) The breeding herd originated from Landcorp's

Rangitaiki Station, east of Taupo.

There are seven staff, three of whom generously made their time available to host the visit. Manager Ken Burt came to Goudies in 2008, inheriting a property that was badly affected by drought and poor pasture production. He cut back deer numbers to the current level of 1200–1300 hinds to improve the balance between stock classes. He also started a cropping and pasture renewal programme that continues today, and has put greater emphasis on rotational grazing.

Breeding operation

In 2016, 1,272 red hinds were mated, comprising:

- 520 mixed age hinds (7–12 years old) to wapiti sires (54-day mating from 25 February)
- 550 younger mixed age hinds to red sires (50-day mating from 1 March)
- 202 R2 hinds to red sires (94-day mating from 25 January).

Weaning is done pre rut (wapiti cross by 20 February and all by 1 March) and hinds are usually cycling within 10–14 days of weaning.

All sires are supplied from Landcorp farms at Te Anau, with a ratio of 40 percent wapiti and 60 percent red. Sires are recorded and are selected primarily for growth rate. The R2 hinds go to mating at a very healthy average weight of 110kg, nearly 90 percent of their mature weight.

The hinds are multi-sire mated in large mobs (550 for the MA hinds) at ratios of 1:25 for the wapiti sires and 1:30–35 for the red sires. The yearling hinds are mated with the new (2 and 3 year-old) red sires at a ratio of 1:12–15. Spikers have not been used for mating for several years. Mating mobs are grazed on a 25-day rotation.

Reproductive success at Goudies is consistently high. This year's scanning results (8 June) are typical:

- First fawners: 93%
- MA red sire hinds: 97%
- MA wapiti sire hinds: 98%

The lowest conception rates have been is 90 percent in first fawners and 96 percent in mixed age hinds – figures that most commercial farmers would be very pleased with! The weaning rate (to hinds mated) is 94–95 percent, indicating excellent fawning management with very few pre-weaning losses.

The Goudies Station deer operation has a very tight – and

¹ A programme of Regional Workshops has been running since August as part of the P2P Programme run by DINZ. They are designed to communicate the lessons from within the Advance Parties and the Deer Select/Deer Progeny Test programmes to the deer farming community. A series of 12 further regional workshops is planned for 2017.



From left: Ginny Dodunski (Waipa Advance Party facilitator), Chris Smith (deer manager), Deb Simon (farm technician) and Ken Burt (manager).

early – fawning spread. Deer can extend gestation if conditions are tough, so special care is taken to maintain their condition in the five or six weeks leading up to fawning. This does not seem to cause any issues with dystocia and the rate of hind loss from this is only about 0.5 percent. Late hinds are culled rigorously.

In addition to getting hinds in good condition for mating, the key to this reproductive success has been careful fawning management. Fawning paddocks are away from the central lane and stocking rates are kept light (4–6/ha) with fawning mobs of 35–50. Stocking rates for fawning had been higher at 7–8 hinds/ha, but deer manager Chris Smith found that reducing this rate helped cut fawn losses.

Set stocking for fawning is done as late as possible, usually well into October onto covers of about 2500kg/ha; fawning is normally

finished by mid-November. About two-thirds of the hinds are set stocked onto browntop and the rest onto ryegrass. By mid-December the hinds and fawns are brought into mobs of 150–200.

Feeding

Goudies was awash with good feed when we visited, and that's down to good management as much as the benign season.

It's a grass- and crop-based system and completely self sufficient. No PKE (no longer used by Landcorp) or maize is bought in. Surplus grass is never cut, but is controlled through bringing in additional trading cattle.

First fawners are rotationally grazed on ryegrass with some lucerne silage through winter, with the mixed age hinds wintered on swedes and kale. Weaners thrive on ryecorn at Goudies and graze on it, with Asset AR37 short-rotation Italian ryegrass, through the winter. Young wapiti cross stags are putting on more than 300 grams/day on this feed as they go into winter, giving a great head start.

The programme of pasture renewal is now locked in at Goudies, with 200–300 hectares at any one time being part of the three-year cycle. This starts with ryecorn/ryegrass followed by a swede and kale crop to winter the hinds, then a summer brassica mix (12kg rye, 3kg Hunter brassica, 2kg Puna chicory and 1kg plantain), followed by permanent pasture. Direct drilling is used for everything except new pasture establishment.

Because of financial constraints, 800 hectares (nearly half) of the farm had no maintenance fertiliser last year and 400 hectares has had none for the past two years. Fertiliser is still used for crops

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Goudies: continued



There were excellent pasture covers at Goudies Station by mid October. and new pastures, however.

The management of feed supply and demand at Goudies is an excellent example of the value of good recording and monitoring systems. Farm technician Deb Simon regularly measures pasture covers and they use a formal grass budget.

Goudies uses FarmIQ, which is linked to the NAIT system. FARMAX is used for planning and monitoring pasture and animal production, and pasture cage cuts have been used to validate and refine the program's performance and accuracy. Pasture covers go between a minimum of 1350kgDM/ha in winter to just over 2000kg in peak season. When we visited Goudies in mid-October the annual feed surplus had already arrived.

Venison production

Most venison producers would be green with envy at the quantities and timing of venison production at Goudies Station.

All venison is marketed under Landcorp's Pāmu brand, via Duncan New Zealand.

Progress to target weights starts early, with fawns growing an average 500-600g/day during the 110 day lactation. Weaning weights this year were:

- Red hinds (replacements): 57.5kg
- Red stags: 63.5kg
- Wapiti cross hinds: 62.0kg
- Wapiti cross stags: 68.5kg

This year, all yearlings (except replacement hinds) were killed by the end of October, with the first draft going off by 14 September. By mid-October, 303 yearling wapiti cross stags had been processed (average carcass weight 69kg) and 120 red yearling stags (64kg). The remaining drafts were scheduled to go on 19 and 26 October.



Deer make a strong contribution to the performance of Goudies Station.

Staying healthy

Vaccinations

All deer are vaccinated with a combined leptospirosis (also for human health and safety reasons) and clostridial vaccine.

Drenching

With the exception of stags following the rut and 14-month hinds prior to mating, no adult deer at Goudies Station are drenched. Weaners get an oral triple combination (moxidectin/levamisole/albendazole) drench monthly from weaning, and stretching out to 5-6 weekly intervals before the last of these is given in June/July to allow the 91-day withholding period. If necessary, Oxfen (registered for deer, with a 10-day default withholding period) is given after the last triple combination.

Trace elements

Cobalt and selenium are supplied through fertiliser. Copper levels are monitored via liver samples. Weaners get three shots of copper from weaning until 12 months and hinds and stags receive it annually.

Facial eczema

No specific prevention programme is used for deer other than good feeding. Vet Ginny Dodunski, who is facilitator for the Waipa Advance Party, commented that facial eczema is finding its way to higher altitudes each year, so it is a good idea to keep a weather eye out for it. Spore counts at Goudies can exceed 150,000. (Visitors were interested to know if the sire stags brought up from Te Anau were susceptible to the disease in the warmer northern climes, but no problems have been detected to date.)

Lessons learned

The Waipa Advance Party and other NZDFA guests at this day were blown away by the level of productivity achieved in this integrated operation and left with plenty of food for thought on their own enterprises. Take-home messages that resonated with the visitors included:

- Get everything right before mating.*
- Fully feed your stock all year round.*
- Condense fawning as much as possible.*
- Give R2s more time with the stag during mating.*
- Get hinds well fed before set stocking for fawning.*
- Use a lower stocking rate for fawning (most visitors were running at least two hinds/hectare more than at Goudies).*
- Choose set stocking paddocks carefully.*
- Feed lactating hinds better in January/February, perhaps using chicory to compensate for poorer grass quality.*
- Get rid of late-fawning hinds – early fawning gives hinds more time to get back in shape for the next mating.*
- Feed budget to beat the late winter/early spring feed pinch.*
- Drill ryegrass with Pasja.*
- Put more focus on pasture cover targets and make better use of grass budgeting.*

- **Acknowledgement:** Ginny Dodunski for her comprehensive meeting notes, which were invaluable in the preparation of this article. ■

Fast finishers targeting higher venison productivity

by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor



The Hawke's Bay "Fast Finishers" Advance Party met at Richard and Emma Lawson's farm, Glenbarr, on 15 March to talk over progress since they had set some objectives six months earlier. *Deer Industry News* tagged along.

Farm profile

GLENBARR (258 HECTARES) is one of four properties totalling 700 hectares that make up the Lawson family's Riverslea Trust. Deer are run on three of the four blocks in an integrated breeding and finishing operation, with 430 hectares deer fenced. The trust's land ranges from flat to rolling and goes from 250 to 540 metres above sea level.

The main enterprises are deer breeding and finishing for Firstlight Venison, with cattle finishing and some sheep. Crops on the lower blocks include lucerne, plantain, barley, maize, grass seed and potatoes.



From left: Nick Lawson (Richard's father), Emma and Richard Lawson.

Rainfall over the properties ranges from 900–1800mm with the summer safe Glenbarr the deer breeding base. Pasture growth slows right down in winter on this property and the Lawsons need to take care to avoid feed getting too tight – otherwise fence pacing increases and there is greater risk of runoff and sediment loss. The terrain and altitude mean that baleage can't be easily fed out in wet conditions.

Weaners are trucked from Glenbarr to the finishing blocks at Te Katea and Orua Wharo Road at the beginning of March and the

replacement hinds come back up to Glenbarr as R2s, ready to go to the spikers. The fourth block, the 150-hectare Kindar, is partly irrigated and used for cropping and wintering cattle, and does not carry deer. Richard Lawson said the freight cost for the weaners is only \$3-\$4/head as there is a backload with the replacement hinds.

Glenbarr carries 750 hinds producing about 700 home-bred weaners. These are supplemented by a further 100–200 bought-in weaners but the Lawsons are keen to source up to 300–400 this year to boost their finishing operation on the lower blocks. About 120–140 replacements are retained from the home-bred hinds each year, selected on breeding, weight and conformation. Of these, about 95 eventually go to the stag.

They are using a half-English Deer Improvement stag this year and have also been using Firstlight stags. Good growth, hardiness and temperament are among their breeding objectives and they are looking for a balance of those characteristics in their sire stags.

Spikers are used for the R2 hinds and for some of the mixed-age hinds, which are usually between 95–100kg by mating. Older stags are also used in the mixed-age hinds, either as single or multiple sires. Richard said the size of their breeding hinds has been gradually increasing; the mature weight is now 115–120kg and he'd like to keep it about there. Their oldest hind was born in 1997 and has reliably pumped out a fawn every year since. "Keep her daughters," was one comment from the group.

They aim to have all weaners finished by the end of February each year to make way for the next crop. The weaner hinds and stags are run separately and the supply of finishers to Firstlight has to be managed carefully to ensure a steady flow. Because velvetted stags can't be used for the UK markets being supplied, the stags need to be processed either before their spikes reach the 110mm limit, or later once they have calcified and been removed as hard antler – acceptable by UK customers.

Heifers are wintered on the Kindar block and then walked up to Glenbarr where they are put to work helping control the spring and summer growth (Glenbarr isn't suitable for wintering cattle). The 300 or so sheep at Glenbarr are used for ragwort control.

The pastures at Glenbarr are largely old with a high proportion of native grasses, so pasture renewal is on the agenda. The light

soils mean it's not suitable for cropping, but 50 hectares of Moata ryegrass has just gone in on three of the Trust's blocks, including at Glenbarr. The new ryegrass suppresses the native grasses, but plantain, chicory and clover require herbicide to help keep the native grasses at bay. Regrassing has to be done carefully at Glenbarr to avoid topsoil loss.

Richard said they would like to get better winter grasses such as Moata established to maintain weights through the year and then get the young stock "smoking" in spring as lucerne growth starts to kick in on the finishing blocks.

Silage (450 tonnes in silage tubes) and baleage (200 bales) is made from surplus grass and fed out in winter. The 75-metre silage tubes each hold about 90 tonnes and are to be fed in situ to the weaners with cattle coming in to clean up what the young deer leave behind. Richard said the marginal cost of putting silage in the tubes rather than in a stack is only 2 cents/kg. This is the first year they are being used, with the nearest contractor with the gear coming up from Manawatu. Ideally they'd like to make lucerne and maize silage too, but it's a useful way to conserve surplus grass for now.

Hay and straw is also made from the grass seed crop grown at Kindar. Maize is the only imported feed and is fed before and after weaning to get fawns accustomed to it before they are shipped off to the finishing blocks.



Mixed-age hinds tuck into some maize at Glenbarr.

Animal health

The animal health programme at Glenbarr is fairly simple and the Lawsons agree it needs reviewing. Fawns are drenched at weaning with Genesis® Hi Min Oral (abamectin plus closantel). Advance Party facilitator Simone Hoskin was concerned that this drenching schedule could be helping accelerate drench resistance by limiting the refugia (populations of susceptible parasite larvae) on pastures at the finishing blocks.

The weaners stay on this at five-weekly intervals or Oxfen® C (oxfendazole plus levamisole) four weekly. It was suggested more attention could be paid to internal parasites, with a faecal egg count reduction test done to establish drench effectiveness and quarantine drenches with multiple active ingredients used when stock are moved between properties. Vet advice is essential for this.

No vaccines are given. Richard said "Darwinian" principles apply to the adult hinds – no drenches or other treatments are given.

Copper and selenium deficiencies are likely issues on Glenbarr and better monitoring of levels will give the Lawsons a clearer

Ragwort

Ragwort is an ongoing issue at Glenbarr and despite use of sheep spraying (Conquest®) and the presence of a couple of moth species that dine on the weed, it seems to be getting the upper hand recently. Use of Conquest to kill the weed is effective but something of a pyrrhic victory as it also suppresses clover and thus the volume of quality feed available for deer. Weaning weights were back a little this year and the loss of clover may have been a factor (although low copper may also have been a factor). The Lawsons are considering using maize to supplement pasture where the clover has been knocked back. The sheep used are "addicted" to ragwort and members of the group suggested offering hogget grazing to neighbouring sheep farmers to help get on top of the problem.



picture of where and when supplementation might be needed. Richard has seen some clinical signs of copper deficiency in animals last year. He said copper used to be applied with fertiliser but it became too expensive to apply this way. His vet had advised it can be applied to pasture as copper sulphate at 4kg/ha and grazed a week later, but this can be toxic to sheep so may not be safe on this property. Getting some blood tests done in spring (when levels are lowest) to provide a benchmark for the property will be an essential first step.

He noted the cattle had responded strongly to a selenium supplement and wondered if deer may also respond. "What's in the selenised drench isn't enough," he said.

Damage to feet in the concrete deer yards was not generally a problem, but could occur occasionally. Weaners are trucked on only the lower tier in the stock truck, where less foot damage is likely, and wet conditions are avoided (wet, soft feet are more



Advance Party facilitator, Simone Hoskin (right) leads discussion following a tour of the farm.

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Lawsons: continued



The willow paddock, one of the fawning paddocks used in the trial to help reduce fawning losses. The woolshed and deer shed are in the middle distance on the right.

prone to damage). Group members suggested a build-up of dirt and hair on the concrete actually helps protect young hoofs from damage.



Richard Lawson (left) discusses the outriggers they have been adding to help improve fence security.

Areas for improvement at Glenbarr

At their September 2015 meeting, the Lawsons and their Advance Party group had identified areas for improvement. Richard and Emma are keen to reduce losses between mating and tagging and were to focus on three possible sources of these: reproductive performance, in-utero losses and dystocia plus losses between birth and tagging.

The Lawsons have been monitoring reproductive performance for several seasons. Only a sample of the mixed-age hinds are pregnancy scanned, but all R2s are scanned.

In the mixed-age hinds the average performance over three seasons to 2014 has been reasonable (average 92.4% fawns tagged to hinds set stocked) but the range (77–100%) is highly variable, showing there is room to improve. Scanning percentages for the R2s have also been highly variable (50–99%) and the tagging percentage among pregnant R2s has ranged from 72–88% (average 80.8%), again showing there is plenty of scope to improve performance.

I get around

Having EID tagged all of the hinds, the Lawsons were in a position to gather good data and try to find out where the losses were occurring and they carried out a paddock-by-paddock assessment.

Data gathered over several years showed that fawn survival varied considerably between paddocks. To a certain extent the variation could be explained by the characteristics of each paddock (fences, gates gully guts, slope, cover and so on).

More intensive monitoring was carried out in 2015 in five paddocks used for fawning, covering about 40 hectares. Hinds were EID tagged and scanned in at set stocking in October and out of each paddock in mid January when hinds and fawns were mustered for tagging.

The results showed that the fences are a bit more permeable than they had realised, with each paddock having gained or lost hinds and fawns. Some turned up in other fawning paddocks (not necessarily a neighbouring one) or went missing altogether. It wasn't clear whether the breakouts were initiated by the hinds, or if they were following fawns that had found a way through a fence. The deer fences at Glenbarr are converted sheep fencing

Californian thistle tip

Richard Lawson has found a good trick for killing Californian thistle without spraying. He tows a horizontal metal bar behind his quad bike through the thistle, preferably just before rain. The bar lacks a sharp edge and knocks down the plant, scraping and bruising it, rather than cutting it off at the base. Richard says the thistle grows back if it's mown, but leaving it knocked over and bruised in wet conditions allows pathogens to invade and kill the plant.



and the Lawsons have started adding outriggers between some of the fawning paddocks to help improve security. The group strongly suggested use of 150mm mesh to help stop fawns slipping through or under (in gullies). Sheep netting was mentioned as a fairly inexpensive way to trial fawn proofing. The group agreed paddocks need to be completely fawn proof or allow a controlled creep system for fawns to get in and out – perhaps with lamb creep gates in gateways.

At its September 2015 meeting the group had suggested the set stocking rate for fawning of seven hinds per hectare was too high, and this was lowered to five per hectare where possible.

Fawning dates

Traditionally the stag had come out quite late at Glenbarr (first week of May) and it was suggested fawning could be tightened up somewhat by progressively bringing the stag-out date forward to 20 April by next year.

Improving growth rates in weaners

Suggestions from the group included:

- Managing the weaners in smaller mobs with more rotations and subdivision.
- When choosing replacement hinds, ensure fair comparisons between mobs are being made.
- Conversion out of native pastures on finishing blocks by transitioning through summer fallow, then Moata and then

lucerne or chicory.

- Make greater use of chicory, which can add significantly to carcass weight (although it needs to be grazed through the summer and can't be conserved like lucerne, so stock demand needs to match supply).
- More use of cattle to promote pasture quality (perhaps being put behind tapes to control areas of the large paddocks that have been left by the deer, e.g. in gullies).

Better data use

The group suggested more intensive collection and use of data so that the Lawsons can get a better handle on opportunities to improve performance in terms of weaning percentage, venison production per hectare and management of feed supply and demand. Avenues for this included:

- Pregnancy scanning all mixed-age hinds rather than just a sample (albeit cost is a constraint).
- Fetal ageing to identify late fawners as well as early conceivers (elite hinds).
- Testing for diseases that might be causing in utero fawn losses (e.g., leptospirosis, Johne's disease, toxoplasmosis).
- More use of weighing data (fawns are weighed at weaning and again about 170 days later, but there is scope to weight them more frequently on the finishing blocks to help stay on track to target weights).
- Animal health monitoring (faecal egg counts, copper status).
- Use of cents/kg dry matter consumed and other indicators. ■

Methven workshop creates a buzz



by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

About 65 Advance Party members plus facilitators and experts descended on Methven on 13–14 June for an intensive and well-planned workshop to share what they've been learning with the wider group.

THE ADVANCE PARTY philosophy is one of active rather than passive participation with all members committed to making changes and trying new things. That flowed through to the workshops where six groups of about 10 farmers talked over productivity issues such as winter feeding, reproduction and animal health. Rather than being talked at as a group, each member brought their own experiences and questions to the table, guided by a facilitator and with experts on hand to answer questions. The members swapped good practical advice, some of it new, some of it reinforcing good practice. The value that attendees got from the meeting was listening to others talk about their own challenges and the changes they had made.

These workshops were punctuated by presentations from members of nine of the current Advance Parties on the results of projects done within their groups. These were as diverse as the increased profit from feeding a deer supplement with fodder beet and baleage (+\$52.30 per deer over 100 days), to the uptake of new technology and genetics, to a “spray and pray” project (the prayer worked). See article on page 15 for a summary of the presentations.

To give an extra edge, a trophy was awarded for the best presentation and this was taken out by the “Hawke’s Bay Originals” Advance Party for their work on winter cropping systems – effectively a large-scale trial that was so successful the group is repeating it this year.



Daniel Spiers (centre) representing the “Hawke’s Bay Originals” Advance Party, holds the trophy awarded to the group for best presentation at the Methven workshop. From left are: Mark Forrester (North Canterbury), Matt Dalley (Central Regions), Dan Harper (Canterbury), Hamish Mackenzie (Mackenzie), Daniel Spiers (Hawke’s Bay), Simone Hoskin (Hawke’s Bay Fast Finishers), Gavin Sheath (P2P Advisory Group), Murray Hagen (Southland Elk/Wapiti), John Hamilton (partially obscured, Southland Elk/Wapiti), Adrian Moody (Wairarapa) and Justin Geary (South Canterbury/North Otago).

The event was meticulously planned and run by Advance Party coordinator, Pania Flint and P2P Project Coordinator, Rob Aloe, and the benefits of that showed through the wealth of good ideas and case studies that the group shared. Advance Parties are a central component of the P2P programme and are currently funded by Deer Industry New Zealand and MPI’s Sustainable Farming Fund.

To take a look at the regional Advance Party presentations and notes from the workshop, visit: <http://ap.org.nz/nationalworkshop2016>

Or simply read on for a *Deer Industry News* summary of the best bits.

Theme groups – what they were talking about

The following is a sampling of the advice farmers gave each other during the Methven workshops. This is not “official advice” or recommended best practice, but does give an insight into the issues that interest Advance Party members and how they are thinking about improving productivity on their own farms.

Winter feeding

- Feed budgeting with winter feeding/crops is vital – know what balance of energy, protein and fibre the stock are getting.
- Take care when transitioning deer between feed sources.
- If you’re using self-feed silage pads, set them up carefully to make sure not too much silage is trampled and wasted. Watch also that dominant hinds are not beating up smaller ones.
- All deer can tire of a crop over winter, especially as grass growth starts up in spring. One option is to have separate mobs on different crops and swap them over to help prevent boredom.
- Pasture quality makes a big difference to animal performance over winter – don’t expect run-out pastures to support good growth.
- Hinds can do well if run in a block of trees over winter with access to silage or baleage.
- Winter crops give pastures a rest and also help with parasite control.

Fodder beet

On the plus side:

- High yielding, making it a cheap feed
- Keeps well – can be lifted and sold or fed elsewhere
- High energy

- Big window for feeding (e.g., can start early in autumn if needed)
- Easier to shift break fence than kale
- Suits deer and cattle; holds high stock numbers
- Takes pressure off other parts of farm
- Cleans up paddock for subsequent specialist crops
- Good break crop to slow down rotation
- Good to follow swedes/kale instead of double cropping.
- But...
- Needs other feeds to supplement it (runoff pasture, baleage etc)
- Deer can tire of it
- Crop failures are expensive
- Direct drilling possible but cultivation is recommended
- Growing two years in a row in the same paddock not recommended.

Early spring growth

- Early spring can be a pinch time on many farms as winter crops start to run out and pasture growth is still slow.
- Investigate the forage, grass, specialist crop and strategic bought-in feed options to help get you through this period and allow pasture growth to get underway.
- Getting weaner deer up to target weights and away early takes pressure off later in the season and creates opportunities for other stock classes.
- Feed budget and prioritise stock classes to take advantage of spring feed – it's the cheapest of all to grow.
- Utilise different stock classes to maintain pasture quality.
- Identify the limiting factors and opportunities for your property (rainfall, altitude, environmental constraints, etc).

Early weaner finishing

- If you are buying in, pay close attention to the source and quality of your weaners.
- Give your supplier feedback on how their stock have performed.
- Take care with transition feed before and after weaning (e.g., ensure they have a full stomach going onto new feeds).
- Autumn growth rates are crucial. New pastures with good clover content and use of herbs like chicory and plantain can help with reaching targets.
- Spring growth is a challenge – high ME, high protein, low-cost feed is needed from about mid August.
- Reserve the higher-cost feeds for when you're likely to get the biggest weight gain response.
- As a rule of thumb, get liveweights to 70kg by 1 June as a platform for reaching spring targets. The growth chart the deer industry put out is good for tracking weight.
- Mob size for weaners can be an issue, but up to 200 seems OK.

Reproductive success and fawn survival

- R2 hinds should be at least 85 percent of their mature weight by mating.
- Mating and fawning mobs need to be settled – stress caused by disruption of social groupings can affect reproductive success.
- For mating mixed-age hinds, a stag ratio of between 1:30 and 1:40 is ideal. Anything over 1:40 carries a higher risk of failure. Mating ratios for first fawners should be much lower.

- Double scan if you suspect fetal wastage is an issue.
- First fawners should be fawned separately.
- Provide cover/long grass for fawning.
- If you're losing fawns, analyse performance paddock by paddock in case there are localised problems, e.g., fences not fawn proofed.
- Fetal ageing helps you sort out hinds into fawning groups, but don't put them in a situation where they're competing for places to fawn if they all drop within a short period.
- If reproductive performance is lacking, analyse where the problem is occurring: conception, fetal wastage, perinatal death, mismothering, or health issues between birth and weaning.



Avoid putting hinds into situations where they are competing for fawning space. Photo: Rhiannon McIntyre.

Feeding during lactation

- Feeding hinds and fawns well in the period before weaning has a double advantage: good weaning weights and better conditioned hinds for good reproductive performance.
- The better the feed available for fawns, the more pasture/forage they will consume and the quicker they will adapt from milk to becoming a ruminant.
- Try to maintain pasture quality during lactation, e.g. through topping or using cattle, increasing stocking rate and feeding supplements, starting rotations as early as possible and using late-flowering pasture species if suitable.
- Feeding higher costing supplements during late lactation can pay back financially as fawns have a high growth potential, while an earlier conception date will contribute to heavier weaner weights the following year.
- Work with your local fertiliser and seed reps to develop the best options to suit your environment and farming system.

Velvet genetics

- Rapid gains are possible – one velvet farmer lifted 2 year velvet weights from less than 3kg to 5.8kg in 10 years.
- The gene pool for the national velvet herd is relatively small, so establishing parentage is useful.
- Having more velvet studs joining DEERSelect will help the industry.
- Culling older stags more heavily will help accelerate genetic gain.

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Methven workshops: continued

- Culling on weights should take regrowth into account, as this can sometimes be almost as heavy as the first cut.
- Because some stags are later maturing than others, it's not always a good idea to set the bar too high for culling two-year-olds. Some that grow a mediocre head at two years can go on to be great producers.
- As the supply of velvetting stags increases, farmers will be able to be more choosy and reject non-traditional types, favouring clean styles.

Venison genetics

- Venison genetics are cheaper than velvet – you can get a good sire for less than \$5,000.
- While running a dual-purpose herd can have its challenges, some English sires (run mainly for velvet) do have quite good breeding values for growth.
- Select sires that will give you growth and good muscling – you don't want big rangy animals if you are targeting the chilled season.
- Feed hinds well if you want them to reliably get back in fawn as a fawn with higher growth potential will create a higher lactation demand on the hind.
- When you select for maternal traits, don't sacrifice fertility for growth.
- Choose genetics that suit your system in terms of growth rates, mature weights and so on. DEERSelect can help you – stag BVs are on the website.
- There is no free lunch. You can't grow more venison per hectare without feeding appropriately.
- To accelerate genetic gain, select your replacement hinds from younger dams. Don't hang onto stags or hinds for too long for sentimental reasons.
- By using DNA for parentage matching, you can more easily root out the poor doers.



DEERSelect can help you identify the venison genetics to suit your breeding objectives.
Photo: Jamie Ward.

Feeding velvet stags

- Key priorities for velvetting stags are, in order: Genetics, feed types and timing, and limiting post-rut weight loss.
- The best gains are made from feeding post-rut until June, and then again from about three weeks before button drop (around mid August).
- Supplements like velvet nuts can return double the investment through increased weights, but this needs to be monitored carefully to ensure you are getting the payback.
- Not giving two-year-old stags special treatment will give you a clearer picture of their true genetic merit, not masked by over-generous feeding.
- Crops such as fodder beet, kale and swedes work fine for

velvetting stags over winter but, like all deer, they can get sick of the crop after two or three months.

Animal health

- Health and feeding go hand in hand; fewer health issues are seen when deer are well fed, but feed can be wasted if the deer aren't healthy.
- Minimising stress is another vital part of keeping deer healthy.
- Managing health risks is different for every property
- Be able to justify what you do for animal health, when you do it, why you do it, and with what.
- A health review and plan for the farm is an investment.
- Drench options are limited but use existing products to their best potential in the meantime. Under-dosing can help cause drench resistance; use the most appropriate products at the most effective dose rates.
- Parasite management is more than drenching – manage holistically on finishing land. (See <http://bit.ly/2ayJrKK> for further information.)
- Adult stock rarely need drenching, and are a good source of refugia.¹ Don't waste money drenching adult stock if it is not justified.
- Copper supplementation needs to be justified – test and discuss risk with your vet.
- Leptospirosis is also a human health risk and farm health and safety issue.
- Identifying and controlling Johne's disease has been hard work and expensive, but worth it financially on properties that have tackled it.
- Take care when transitioning between feed sources. Deer health can suffer when rumen bugs are disrupted.
- Vaccination timing is critical; ensure time between shots is correct and keep vaccines at the correct temperature.
- On farms with foot issues, changing to rubber flooring in sheds has made a big difference.
- Information is key to making good decisions – growth rates, trace element test results, slaughter data, and many more ways of assessing performance are all going to add value to a health review and plan.

Decision recording tools

- Before you start investing in recording tools, work out what decisions you need to be making, what information you need to support those decisions and – only then – what tools would be best suited to the job on your property.
- You will probably need information from more than one source to make well-informed decisions (e.g. kill sheets, Johne's Management Ltd).
- Invest time getting to know how to use new equipment or software (e.g. electronic weigh scales, FARMAX).
- Make sure you have good support if you have any problems with new technology.
- There is no single integrated farm information system that will cover all of your needs (although FarmIQ does cover quite a range), but several good tools for capturing, recording and analysing data are already being well used. These include:
 - > Gallagher TSi and "Orange Box"
 - > Tru-text XR5000

¹ A population of parasites on pasture that is predominantly susceptible to drench.

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Methven Advance Party presentations



by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Nine Advance Parties, all part of the P2P programme, gave presentations at the July Advance party workshop on the projects they'd been running and these yielded a wealth of information for members of other groups. Here's a summary.

Canterbury: Up the hill

DAN HARPER REPORTED on a project at Quartz Hill Station (Rakaia Gorge), where a newly deer fenced 220-hectare hill block was being put to work to help cut winter feed costs while lifting weaning weights.

In the first year the block was stocked conservatively at 1.2 hinds/ha and pasture covers and quality were assessed during summer, along with hind condition. The hinds and fawns were brought off the block in late February, just before weaning. The hinds were wintered on the hill block, coming down to the flats in August to silage and grain.

The strategy was repeated the following year with a few tweaks. The stocking rate for fawning was lifted to about between 1.8–2.0 hinds/ha and the hinds and fawns came off the block earlier (mid January) to fescue and clover. The hinds were wintered on there for longer (four months, to the first week of September).

Harper said fawn survival was maintained and weaner weights to 10 April improved by 4kg. Wintering hinds on the hill block has cut winter feed costs (silage and grain) significantly. He said

regular monitoring of pasture covers and hind condition scores had given them the confidence to increase the stocking rates. In future seasons, separating out the late fawners would allow them to bring hinds and fawns down onto specialised feeds earlier.

While the fencing of the block had been expensive, the ongoing savings in winter feed costs were significant.



A hind on the hill block at Quartz Hill Station, 2014. Photo courtesy Dan Harper.

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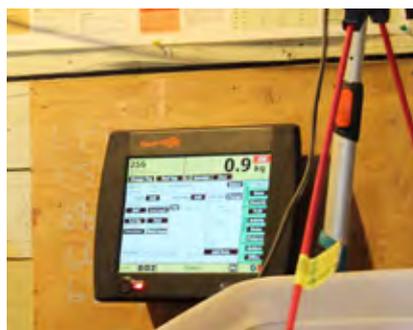
Methven workshops: continued

- > FarmIQ
- > FARMAX
- > DEERSelect
- > P2P deer growth curve chart and spreadsheet
- > P2P farm production recording spreadsheets with KPIs
- For a detailed summary for the recording and decision-making workshops visit: <http://ap.org.nz/nationalworkshop2016>

Integrated livestock classes

Advantages:

- Ragwort control (sheep)
- Better parasite/tick management
- Pasture quality control (cattle)
- Diversified cash flow and risk



Technology like this Gallagher TSI is becoming more commonplace in deer sheds.

- Cattle can be used as a lever, more flexibility in system. But...
- It can create a complicated system
- Wider range of resources and labour skills needed
- Workloads can be higher, e.g. in spring (lambing/velvetting)
- Cattle can interfere with fawning
- Some diseases (e.g. leptospirosis, Johne's disease) can be passed between stock classes
- Sheep can graze pasture too low.

Hill country management

The following were among the issues identified:

- Fencing: paddock size is important for pasture and stock management
- Waterways: not always easy to fence off
- Security: Losses through poaching or washed-out floodgates
- Feeding: More priority needed for deer, especially during lactation, with specialist crops and forages for deer
- Regulations: Environmental constraints and limits on nutrient loss can limit options. ■

Methven presentations: continued

Southland Elk/Wapiti: When is the right time?

It's well known that you can be chasing your tail when trying to pick the best time to send finishing stock to slaughter. Do you go early and catch the peak schedule but with lighter carcass weights? Or do you keep piling on the liveweight – and velvet weight on the males – and send them off later but with a falling schedule and higher feed costs?

The Southland Elk/Wapiti Advance Party did a small trial with two separate mobs to test the cost versus benefits of each strategy. **John Hamilton** and **Murray Hagen** presented the findings.

Each mob was ready for slaughter in early October. One was held back for 21 days and the other for 40 days. Overall the 40-day delay yielded almost double the benefit of the 21-day delay.

The mob held back for 21 days grew an extra 3kg of venison on a steady \$8.75 schedule, a gain of \$26/head. Added to this the spiker velvet returned \$27/head. The cost of additional feed was \$13/head, meaning a **net benefit from the 20-day delay of \$40/head**.

The mob held back for 40 days did better, despite a falling schedule. They added 21kg liveweight, while the schedule dropped from \$8.75 to \$8.00. The extra venison earned \$49/head and the return for spiker velvet was \$54/head. Taking the extra feed cost of \$24/head into account, **the net benefit from the 40-day delay was \$79/head**.

Presenting the results, John Hamilton said holding the animals back longer also gave a better idea of the velvet potential of the stags; in the 40-day mob a couple of males were spared an early trip to the works and kept on as velvetting stags.

While many seasonal and price variables can affect these outcomes, John Hamilton said it was worth talking to your meat company and considering holding some animals back. "It's there for the taking," he concluded.



Murray Hagen (left) and John Hamilton answer questions about their group's trial looking at the cost benefits of delaying slaughter by 21 or 40 days. Photo: Phil Stewart.

Hawke's Bay: Winter crops

The experience of the Hawke's Bay Advance Party trialling winter crops has been well documented in *Deer Industry News* (see August/September 2015 issue) and the initial experience was so successful that the group has repeated it this year.

Daniel Spiers said the group wanted to develop more efficient

winter feed systems, get condition back onto stags quickly after the rut and to winter mixed age hinds. They also wanted to save on expensive bought-in supplements and to use the crops as part of a regressing programme.

The group's facilitator organised and undertook cutting and measuring the crops and results were shared, so the group was effectively able to run quite a large trial between them – something that wouldn't have been possible farm by farm.

Spiers said a lot was learnt, not only about growing the crops, but also about how best to feed them (break sizes, stock classes and so on). On their own property (Maranoa), for example, they had found Regal Kestrel kale grew too high, with stalks "like baseball bats" so utilisation wasn't so good. The thinner-stalked Sovereign kale had been much better for deer.

The exercise had also upskilled the Advance Party members on feed budgeting for crops in terms of protein levels and metabolisable energy, etc.

At Maranoa the winter feeding had helped lift average velvet weights in mixed age stags by 650g.

Agronomist Hamish Best had been brought in as an outside expert and he had also learned plenty from the project. (See also article on page 3 featuring an update on the Hawke's Bay crops programme.)



Hinds on winter kale at Maranoa, August 2016. Photo: Phil Stewart.

Wairarapa: Spray and pray

Adrian Moody described a project to improve high country pasture on a steep, north-facing 12-hectare paddock in a summer dry part of the Wairarapa. A common problem for Advance Party members in this area is maintaining pasture quality to feed hinds and fawns well through summer and autumn.

The paddock was strip grazed with beef cows for a month to late August and sprayed out in late September (Roundup at 4 litres/ha). (Thanks to a faulty nozzle, the spray-out wasn't entirely successful.) A mix of plantain, chicory and white and sub clover was sown by air on 20 October and urea applied on 11 November.

Moody said the strike was patchy but acceptable and they would consider borrowing a mob of sheep from a neighbour to help tread in the seed if the exercise was repeated.

The "prayer" part of the exercise worked and forecast rain came at the right time two days after the seed was dropped. The crop looked good by February and hinds and fawns went on then. By May the paddock was still the "best on the farm". The total cost of the exercise was \$582/hectare.



While the strike was patchy, the overall results weren't too bad. Photo courtesy Adrian Moody.

Hawke's Bay Fast Finishers: The Herbs

Simone Hoskin (facilitator) said the group members all use herbs to varying extents to promote fast growth and achieve finishing target dates and weights. Chicory and plantain are the main species used, but with a range of varieties, mixes and sowing times. She said management of the forages and clover content are vital for success (omitting clover means animals miss out on protein and the paddock misses out on nitrogen fixing).

Irrigation could give high yields but a "soft" crop, potentially more susceptible to root rot, while drier conditions gave lower yielding but stronger crops. However, persistence is ultimately dependent on grazing management.

Hoskin said crop costs could be highly variable depending on cultivars and sowing methods used. Chicory could persist for up to four seasons, depending on how it's used as part of a regrassing programme, but it might be only one or two seasons, with grass progressively added after that. "As soon as grass is added to the mix you'll be compromising the chicory."

Plantain is more persistent and typically lasts four to six seasons, but has a lower feeding value.

Hoskin said the seed mixes used depended partly on soil type, but clovers are key. New red clovers were more grazing tolerant than before while chicory provided superior grazing but didn't persist so long.

Plantain and chicory shouldn't be planted together as they are largely competitive. Palatability was another factor to consider, as each crop can become bitter at different stages of the season, but generally deer prefer chicory to plantain.



Herbs in the forage help promote fast growth but need to be managed well. Photo: Simone Hoskin.

Thistle control was an issue in these crops and Hoskin suggested mechanical topping or using a "weed wiper". Chicory was not thistle herbicide tolerant but some plantain cultivars were being selected for herbicide tolerance, making thistle control easier.

Hoskin said deer are more tolerant than sheep and cattle of highly soluble carbohydrate and protein, so adapt to herbs quickly. The big issue with the crop is rotational grazing – fast rotations are needed in spring to keep on top of the growth.

North Canterbury: Pre-rut weaning gives a flying start

Mark Forrester is a member of the newly formed North Canterbury Advance Party and runs sheep, beef, deer and dairy grazers on three blocks totalling 1,600 hectares. They breed and finish from 850 straight red hinds, also buying in 250 weaner stags. They had been getting a few deer into the chilled trade but not many – there was room to improve.

He had been watching what the Zino brothers had been achieving on their farms during the Focus Farm programme – a key difference had been the timing of weaning. The Zinos had pre-rut weaned, as had nearby deer farmer Lyndon Matthews, while Forrester had post-rut weaned. Comparing growth rates with those on Matthews' operation, Forrester said his weaners were 9kg behind by 1 June.

This year Forrester changed to pre-rut weaning and has already seen the benefits. By 1 June his weaners were 10kg ahead of where they had been last year. Strategic feeding to take advantage of weaners' fast autumn growth had helped.

He managed to take advantage of January rains to get a good rape crop in this autumn and had trained the weaners with an electric fence so they could go onto a break. "Once they get a zap they remember it for life."

Regular weighing was an important part of the change, giving a good fix on growth rates. Another benefit of the pre-rut weaning this year was that the hinds were in better condition for mating and he'd noticed earlier mating activity this year.

Another change he made recently was to use a self-feed silage pad to free up some pasture and help get finishing stock off to a flying start in spring.

Forrester is upbeat about prospects for the industry and looking to increase deer numbers while reducing sheep. He said the Advance Party is a diverse mix and they are learning a lot from each other.



Pre-rut weaning helped Mark Forrester reach weight targets faster. Photo: Courtesy Mark Forrester.

continued on page 18

Methven presentations: continued

South Canterbury/North Otago: Supplement gives good return

Facilitator **Justin Geary** presented on behalf of Kris Orange, outlining a cost benefit trial to evaluate ways to supplement a winter diet of fodder beet and baleage for finishing stock.

Orange, with equity partner and farm manager, Dave France, had been wanting to improve winter growth rates for the weaners they finish, so trialled four variations using complementary feeds built around a fodder beet/baleage regime:

1. Fodder beet/baleage
2. Fodder beet/baleage/PKE
3. Fodder beet/baleage/PKE/minerals
4. Fodder beet/baleage/Deer Supreme*

The trial took place over 100 days. Deer fed the basic fodder beet/baleage diet gained 3.24kg carcass weight over the period, while those that had the Deer Supreme added gained 8.64kg carcass weight over the same period and were the best performers by a long way.

The Deer Supreme supplement was also the most profitable option, yielding a net gain over the period of \$52.30 per deer, versus \$24.30 for those on fodder beet and baleage alone. Those with the added PKE yielded \$31.45/head and the PKE/minerals mob gained \$36.80.

Geary said that at a \$7.50 schedule, the Deer Supreme option would give an extra 5,400kg carcass weight and \$40,500 in revenue over 1,000 weaners, less \$13,750 for the feed and any feeding out costs (they were fed using Advantage Feeders at a ratio of 1:200). This gave an overall net benefit of \$26,750 per 1,000 weaners finished (\$26.75/head).

He said the weaners eat all the leaf off fodder beet first, and with it, all the protein. The Deer Supreme feed's 22 percent crude protein filled an important gap in the diet, and other high-protein supplements could give the same results.

* A 22 percent protein loose feed incorporating PKE, soya hull pellets, wheat, barley, dried distillers grain, soyabean meal, lime flour, salt, magnesium oxide, molasses and vitamins and minerals.



Kris Orange (left) and Dave France: Looking for a cost-effective way to boost weight gains over winter. Photo: Mike Bradstock.

Central Regions: New knowledge paying off

Matt Dalley recounted the experience of industry newcomers Bruce and Margaret Niven, who farm near Otaki. (See *Deer Industry News* February/March 2016 for an extensive article on the Nivens' experience.)

Dalley said the Nivens faced several challenges when they took over the property. These included overstocking, pasture quality, fertility and the genetic base of the herd.

The couple have wasted no time tackling these, changing to a 75:25 venison: velvet mix, investing in better genetics, starting a regrassing programme and employing a soil and fertiliser consultant.

Things had started to turn around on the 76-hectare farm but one of the most significant changes had been the Nivens' upskilling and willingness to learn – the collegial nature of the Advance Party was a perfect environment for this to happen.



Bruce Niven feeding out maize. Photo: Lindsay Keats.

Mackenzie: Giving deer a higher priority

Hamish Mackenzie said most members of the Mackenzie Advance Party had seen deer as a lower-priority stock class (although this is definitely not the case at Clayton Station and Haldon Station).

Joining the group had focused their attention on the deer enterprise and encouraged them to start recording and monitoring progress. When the group started, only two farms had weigh scales. "Now seven farms have them."

Animal health plans are living documents that are reviewed annually and body condition scoring for deer is done routinely throughout the year within the group.

"We don't record for the sake of it. We get the information we need."

Mackenzie said members are far more aware of hind feed requirements and weaner growth, especially in late lactation and going into winter. Pasture development and strategic feeding were also managed more actively.

"We are thinking more about getting the right genetics for our production systems. Three of the farms have invested in new genetics since the group was set up."

Because deer were being prioritised, some have been performing better, despite a couple of poor summers.

He said the concentration on deer within the group was a relief from having to talk about Merinos and footrot. "Members of the group are gaining confidence in their deer operations and having fun doing it. I used to consider myself a sheep and beef farmer, with deer, now I'm a sheep, beef and deer farmer". ■

Ups and downs of weight targets

by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Getting great weaning weights is just half the battle when it comes to hitting your targets for venison finishing from autumn through to spring. This was shown graphically at a P2P Regional Workshop on 27 October at Quartz Hill Station, Canterbury.

NEARLY 50 PEOPLE attended the day, hosted by Dan and Georgie Harper, with Colin and Hilary Guild, and facilitated by Wayne Allan. The day was sponsored by Farmlands, Alliance Group and Canterbury West Coast NZDFA. Quartz Hill Station is part of the Canterbury Advance Party and the workshop focused on increasing profits through better feeding, both finishing and for lactation.

The station is a mixed sheep, beef and deer operation on 3,000 hectares, of which 830 hectares is deer fenced. In winter 2016, it carried 17,205 stock units (SU), including 4,005 deer SU (Table 1). It is a venison breeding and finishing operation with red sires used to breed red replacement hinds and wapiti sires for finishing progeny. There is also a velvetting herd and this is being expanded.

Deer reproductive performance on the property is excellent, with 95 percent fawning (to hinds mated) achieved in 2015, up from 92 percent the previous year. Dan Harper puts part of this down to the great fawning environment, with plenty of

While they started “ahead of the curve”, they didn’t kick on. Harper said they initially went onto old pasture to get settled and



The good natural cover on this fawning block is part of the reason for the farm’s excellent reproductive performance.

Table 1: 2016 deer numbers wintered by class

Class	Winter 2016
Mixed age hinds	813
R2 hinds	144
Mixed sex weaners	850
Mixed age stags	240
R2 stags	98
Total	2,145 (4,005 SU)

natural tussock cover, especially on the 200-hectare hill block. All 900 breeding hinds are wintered on the block from July to early October. It’s then given a three-week spell before hinds are returned on 25 October and set stocked for fawning. This season 362 hinds are set stocked on the block and will come down with their fawns in January to get into the higher quality feed during the later part of lactation.

Production slow-down

Dan Harper says his wapiti cross finishing animals had a good start this year, recording average weaning weights of 61kg. But through autumn and winter they flatlined and although their growth picked up again in spring, he suspects the early growth check probably cost each of them a few kilos of liveweight by slaughter.

The progress of the Quartz Hill weaners can be seen on Fig. 1 (page 16). This was plotted and presented at the workshop by Jason Archer (AbacusBio) using the P2P venison production growth curves tool (www.deernz.org.nz/deer-growth-curves).

CONNEMARA WAPITI
VENISON - VELVET - TEMPERAMENT

**6TH ANNUAL
SIRE BULL
AUCTION**



Sunday 15th January 2017 at 2.00pm
Welcome for inspection from 1.00pm
On the property at MI & BM Hagen,
415 Weir Road, Manapouri
On offer approx. 30 - NZ & Fiordland Wap x Bulls

Enquiries: Murray Hagen 021 220 7889
Jim Cameron 021 220 7871

Auctioneers: Craig North 027 473 0864
(Rural Livestock) Adam Whaanga 027 418 3438

continued on page 16

Quartz Hill: continued

then onto rape. Later on they transferred to pasture and fodder beet. “They did better on the fodder beet and grew well in spring, but I don’t think they ever quite caught up to where they could have been.”

He is regretting not monitoring them more closely, especially during the early stages. Nonetheless, the overall performance of the venison side of the business has been very good this year. They had 70 percent of the animals away for slaughter by late November, putting them about a month ahead of where they were at the same time last year.

As well as capturing the greater value of the spring chilled venison market, it’s important to get the deer away promptly to avoid a clash with grazing priorities for the sheep and cattle.

Follow the leader with tall fescue

One technique discussed at the workshop that aroused great interest was the “leader-follower” system, and Harper has started using this on the tall fescue pastures they have sown.

Deer are given first crack at the pasture with covers of 2,700kgDM/ha and graze it down to about 1,700kg. They are followed by sheep and cattle, which take the covers down further. Harper says this sacrifices some quality for the sheep and cattle, but the tall fescue comes back very quickly in spring and also grows early, which suits the growth curves of the finishing weaners much better than conventional pasture.

“It comes away in September whereas everything else doesn’t get going until October,” he says.

Harper is a big fan of the fescue. They planted 40 hectares last year and a further 60 hectares in 2016. The seed mix is 19kg fescue, 6kg red clover and 3kg white clover.

Farmlands agronomist Sam Lucas says the main advantage of



Workshop visitors admire the lush tall fescue and clover pasture at Quartz Hill Station.

tall fescue is its robustness and persistence, and the fact that it gives early spring growth – important for weaner deer. He says growth in late spring can “explode”, so pasture management needs to be watched.

“It’s not as dense as ryegrass, so works very well with red and white clover, as well as chicory and plantain.”

Lucas says fescue has become very popular in the Rakaia area, where a lot of farms have 10–15 percent of their land in the grass.

Fodder beet

Fodder beet is becoming an essential part of the feed regime for deer at Quartz Hill. Twelve hectares were used this year, with 20 hectares being sown for next winter. Harper said they achieved a reasonable 18 tonnes/ha yield this year but would like to push that up to 20 tonnes.

He said utilisation can be an issue with deer, which are reluctant to eat the bulb below ground level. “We’ve changed to a cultivar that has a softer bulb that sits higher out of the ground, which should suit the deer better.”

Building velvet herd

Velvetting is being built up as another string to the bow at Quartz Hill Station and next winter, fodder beet will be used to help the stags build up condition in the lead-up to button drop. Harper said they will go onto the crop at the beginning of July and will be supplemented with grain and ad lib baleage.

“This year they had kale and silage, but the timing might have been a bit off.”

Harper said velvet weights were tracking about 100g below target this year, but puts that down in part to the lack of culling pressure as they expand the velvetting herd. “Once we’ve got the numbers up we’ll be able to cull more heavily on weight.” ■

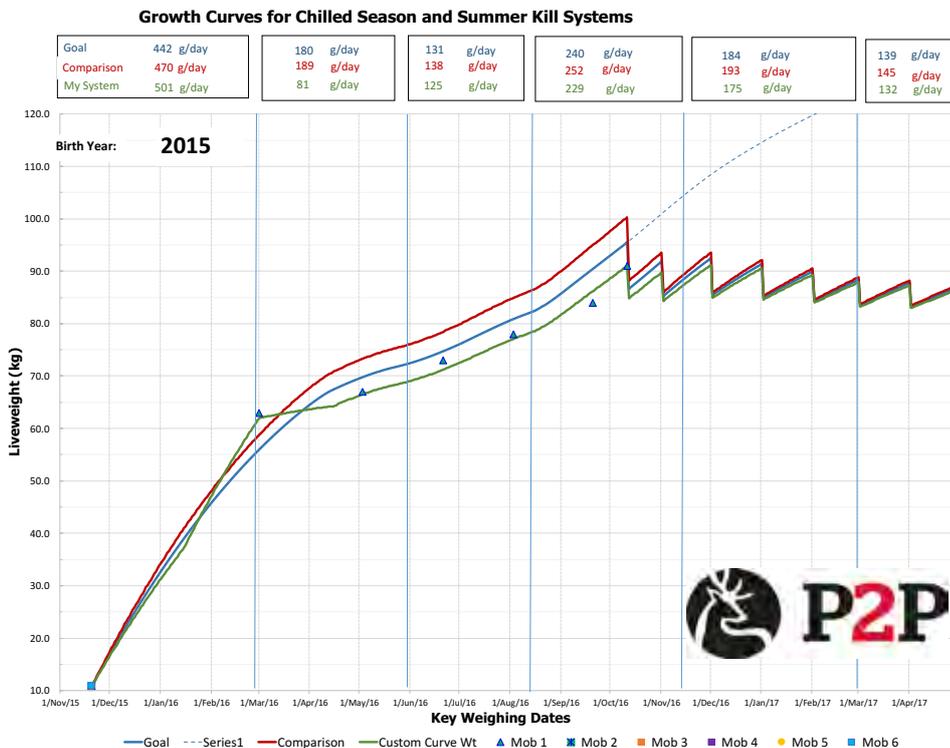


Figure 1: Performance of finishing animals at Quartz Hill, 2016. Weigh points are plotted as triangles and green line approximates growth performance. Blue line is typical growth curve for red progeny and red line represents the potential growth curve for the wapiti cross venison finishers. Graph courtesy of Jason Archer.

Confident deer farmers rebuild

Annette Scott 5 months ago

A



GROWING: Europe is still the strongest customer for New Zealand venison and while new markets are being sought there are no plans to abandon any existing ones.

strong decline in hind slaughter numbers and price improvements in venison's main markets have prompted an air of confidence in the deer industry.

Good prices, strong demand and low stock boded well for solid and sustainable markets and returns across both the venison and velvet sectors, Deer Industry New Zealand (DINZ) Passion 2 Profit (P2P) manager Innes Moffatt said.

The strong decline in hind slaughter was pleasing to note.

"Hind slaughter down 25% in the first six months of this year is a strong vote of confidence from farmers increasing their deer herds," Moffatt said.

Venison export receipts were up on last year, largely because more product was sold chilled to markets such as the United States and China and less was traded as a frozen commodity.

The NZ dollar sitting below the Euro for most of the past 12 months had also helped increase export returns.

The benefits of new models for farmer engagement were emerging with 20 well established Advance Parties working very successfully from Southland to Northland, he said.

"The success is such that we are setting up three more."

The Advance Parties programme run by DINZ was based on farmers learning from farmers.

The concept was an innovative approach to encourage the uptake of new technology focused on performance and management systems aimed at improving profitability.

Given the positive results being reported the programme remained strong and integral to the industry's sustainable future.

On the market front DINZ and exporters were working hard to increase returns from the whole carcass by increasing demand for new cuts.

Venison production to April this year was down 20% on the corresponding period last year, driven by the herd rebuilding, but market development activity around the sale of more venison outside the traditional European markets was returning encouraging results.

DINZ was supporting company initiatives to reduce the reliance on the spring peak by growing sales in non-seasonal markets and in new markets promoting value-added items.

Food service promotion, rather than retail, was aimed at chefs.

"Where the chef was enthusiastic about it, the passion filtered through to diners," Moffatt said.

"Where venison is just on the menu it was seen as just a traditional winter eating item.

"So it's about using common messages to the food service sector about venison being an ideal meat for outdoor summer eating. That's been the real push in the first year of trial," Moffatt said.

Based on the first-year results the companies, Alliance, First Light Foods and Silver Fern Farms, supported by Mountain River Processing and Duncan NZ, were repeating the promotion this European summer.

While the increase in volume of venison sold through the Cervena promotion was significant, it was not yet enough to increase farmgate returns.

"But as part of the overall longer term plan the trial results are substantial towards a manageable trade over the summer months," Moffatt said.

A second branded Cervena trial market was planned for overseas but where that would be had not yet been decided.

It was not expected that Britain's exit from the European Union would affect venison markets.

"Venison is not subjected to tariff conditions so it's not expected there will be any change of access conditions into EU or the United Kingdom," Moffatt said.

"Obviously there will be some changes to meat access for some other products and we will be observing that."

The industry's short-term concern was currency and in the longer-term any wider economic impact from actions that might be taken as a result of Brexit.

"But the EU is still our biggest market and with 500 million reasonably affluent people there is no plan to abandon any markets, particularly Germany, one of the strongest economies in the world.

"Hind slaughter down 25% in the first six months of this year is a strong vote of confidence from farmers increasing their deer herds."
Innes Moffatt
DINZ

“We are fortunate to be aligned with Germany and its very solid economy and while we seek new markets and trade opportunities, we will always respect and look after the good we have got,” Moffatt said.

With the hind kill down 25%, the average stag venison schedule stood at \$7.55 a kilogram, compared to \$6.67 a year ago.

Moffatt said further currency appreciation could knock the top off the spring schedule, despite the impact of the reduction in supply.

Frozen venison stocks in the EU market were cleared in 2015, stimulating the higher prices received last year.

A big part of the challenge was the widening price gap between venison and other premium proteins.

South African ostrich, a game season substitute for venison, had regained access to Europe.

While there was clearly a limit to what customers were willing to pay, culinary fashion might help.

DINZ consultant chef Graham Brown said there was a growing trend for chefs to incorporate cuts from the shoulder, neck and brisket, even offals such as hearts, livers, sweetbreads and tongues, into their menus.

“Braised and slow-cooked meats are very fashionable and they provide chefs with a challenge and a point of difference,” Brown said.

Meanwhile, with venison supply falling and velvet supply increasing, it was important to keep venison processors and velvet buyers well-informed on production intentions in the new season.

While individual farmers would make decisions based on what they believed was best for their farming businesses, exporters would benefit from knowing how much venison and velvet was coming down the pipeline and when it was likely to arrive, DINZ chief executive Dan Coup said.

“This will give exporters the best chance of managing supply to customers and maintaining market stability.”

Velvet remained steady as the developing story for NZ velvet in mainland China continued.

NZ velvet in China had a record year with health product manufacturers, helped by a reduction in volume from other global suppliers, improving demand for NZ velvet.

“But still, before deciding when to cut and when to kill, it would pay to ask your buyers how they see world markets,” Coup said.

Confident deer farmers rebuild

Annette Scott 3 months ago

A



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Nutting it out

Country Wide

Lynda Gray June 2016

Although Geoff Pullar can't claim the 60kg increase in cut velvet from his Wapiti stags is because of solely nut feeding, he's sure it's helped.

This season 310kg-plus regrowth was cut from 59 animals compared with 250kg-plus regrowth the previous season.

"We've only done it for one year so it's hard to say what the biggest contributing factor is.

"I'm hoping it's a combination of nuts, genetics and improved grasses," Geoff says.

Until joining the Southland elk and Wapiti Advance Party a mixture of barley and nuts was fed in the lead-up to button drop.

But time and time again the stags would vacuum up the whole barley and leave the nuts.

Advance Party members suggested feeding only nuts, which he did for the 2015 button drop.

All the velvet stags got a 1kg allowance from just before button drop until harvest.

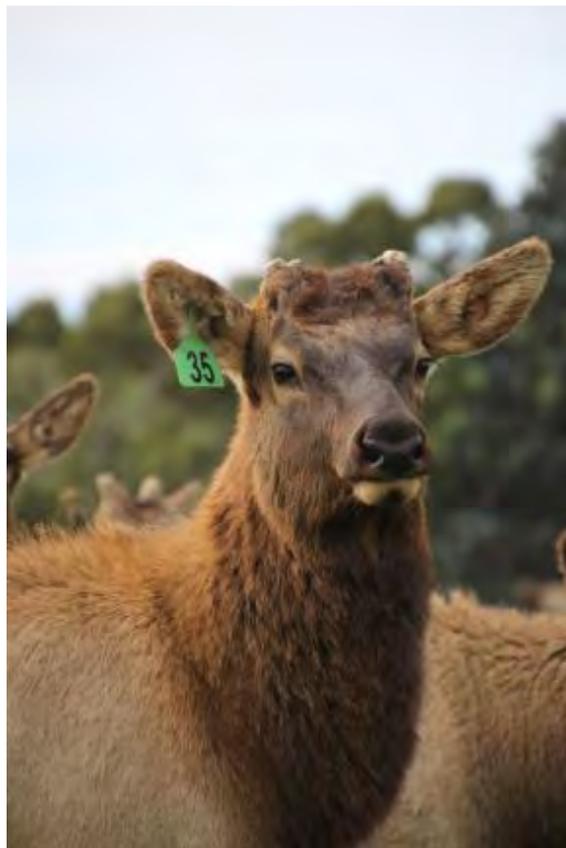
The 20 rising-three-year-olds made the biggest velvet weight gain, cutting a 5.7kg average that was 1kg up on the previous season.

The 25 rising-two-year-olds cut a 4.3kg average, 600g ahead of the previous season.

Geoff estimates the \$10,000 expense of nuts was cancelled out by the saving on barley.

The payback of the all nut feeding works out at about \$7800 based on a velvet price average of \$130/kg for the extra 60kg of velvet.

The nuts cost \$880/tonne, more than twice the price of barley at \$400/tonne, but the high metabolisable of 12.9 and crude protein of 19% plus the mineral supplements make them a much more efficient and effective supplementary feed.





The 60kg increase in this season's cut velvet from Littlebourne wapiti isn't just because of nut feeding but has probably been a contributor, Geoff Pullar says.

Although Geoff's stopped feeding barley to the velveters he still feeds it to the indoor-wintered weaners and ewes when feed is tight during winter.

The cereal used to be grown onfarm but, for the first time, was bought-in last season.

The change freed up a couple of paddocks on the deer unit for an Aber Magic ryegrass, Quest white clover, Tuscan red clover and plantain-chicory mix pasture.

The only downside of not growing barley is the absence of stubble that came in handy during winter as a feeding pad for balage.

Geoff says the likely solution will be putting deer on the lime quarry feeding pads earlier.

Two quarries, one used for the R2 stags and the other for the R3 stags, are an important component of the wintering programme.

They're fed balage on the limestone from the start of May until spring growth starts, which can be any time from mid-August.

When they move out, the hinds move in staying on the platform until the balage runs out or more grass starts growing, whichever happens first.

Another Advance Party-initiated project Geoff has completed is replacement of the reticulated stock water system.

The rain-fed system had fallen into disrepair because of years of poking and prodding by newly velveted bulls with itchy heads.



Sam Pullar with Billy the Kid, a hand-reared eight-week-old Wapiti fawn.

Delivery efficiency had reduced to the point where Sam or Jack, Geoff's dad, were spending one to two hours a day in peak summer carting bought-in water.

The new 19-trough and 1.8km-piped system, installed in two stages over June and October, cost \$13,000. It has twice the water storage (40,000 litres) because of the addition of another tank.

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Aiming for a pasture cover of at least 2000kg/drymatter/ha at fawning was another recommendation.

Another animal health change made was adoption of the industry-recommended treatment of a triple combination for internal parasite control.

A Cydecton injection and Oxfen C Plus and Oxfen C mixed in equal parts is administered to hinds and fawns one month before weaning.

After weaning the fawns are drenched monthly until moving inside for wintering. All R2 deer get a couple of drenches, as required, through summer.

On par

Chances are that if Geoff Pullar isn't onfarm he's on par at a golf course.

He's been hooked on the game since a teenager and is a past Southland representative player.

He's involved in the administration of the sport, fulfilling various roles at the Winton club and currently a board member of Southland Golf.

At this year's New Zealand Open at Sir Michael Hill's Arrowtown course Geoff caddied for NZ Golf board chairman Murray Ward. Four years ago he was caddie for pro Steve Jeffery.

"I've enjoyed playing and enjoy the organising side as well as caddying."



FARM FACTS

Geoff and Sam Pullar – Winton

- 160ha including 63ha of deer fencing

Littlebourne Wapiti stud – velvet production plus lamb finishing

- 160ha of which 63ha is deer fenced

Deer (Wapiti)

- 100 hinds
- 26 R2 hinds
- 25 R2 stags
- 25 R3 stags
- 80 mixed-sex weaners
- 9 mixed-age stags

Sheep (Coopworth-cross)

- 1000 ewes (including two-tooths)
- 400 hoggets

The wapiti stags are fed 1kg of nuts a day from the lead-up to button drop until velveting.



Deer groups hunt profit



Annette Scott

annette.scott@nzx.com

BENEFITS are emerging from Deer Industry New Zealand's (DINZ) Advance Parties programme based on farmers learning from farmers.

DINZ has been running Advance Parties (APs) for the past 18 months in a trial part-funded by the Ministry for Primary Industries' Sustainable Farming Fund.

APs were an innovative way to encourage the uptake of new technology focused on farmers learning from each other.

The parties were based on three main principles – that farmers learnt best from other farmers, that participants were open and frank with each other about their farm performance and that they agreed to test changes to their management systems with the aim of improving profitability.

PassiontoProfit (P2P) manager Innes Moffat said 15 APs had been established involving 120 farms in Canterbury, Otago, Southland, Hawke's Bay and Wairarapa.

Each party had from six to nine participants with some parties specifically just velvet or venison.

"Members are and remain keen to stay involved, particularly those who have made beneficial changes to their deer operations as a result," Moffat said.



WORKING TOGETHER: Members of Deer Industry New Zealand's Passion2Profit Advance Parties have found farmers learn best from other farmers.

Given the positive results being reported through the industry grapevine, interest in forming new APs remained strong.

"Expanding existing APs is not usually an option because of the high level of trust and knowledge of each other's operations that participants have built since their AP was formed," Moffat said.

AP meetings were not open to other farmers without the consent of everyone involved.

Moffat said APs tended to evolve.

"Initially, farmers are often motivated by the scrutiny of their peers to make management changes that they probably knew they should do.

"This gives them some early wins, then, after a year or more they move on to more strategic questions

about farm management and the need to monitor performance."

Day-to-day fixes that had benefitted members included the strategic use of nitrogen on hill country, the use of binoculars to pair hinds and fawns for genetic selection, extending reticulated water supply and use of better netting on fences to prevent fawn deaths.

More strategic projects that whole groups had moved on included leptospirosis monitoring and management, winter feed options and budgeting and better financial analysis of deer performance.

An AP was a well-supported group of motivated deer farmers who identified and implemented focused opportunities to lift profit on their individual

farms, which were consistent with P2P and its mission of more deer, heavier, earlier and better.

The industry was supporting the AP concept because it knew deer farmers were collaborative by nature and wanted to learn from each other, Moffat said.

"We also know that most deer farmers tend to learn best where they can see changes, relate them to their own farms and are able to trial them.

"APs are a new way to support change using these attributes and preferences by learning and trialling different techniques as part of a supportive group to see their effect on profit and sharing the results."

The purpose of an AP was to be a catalyst for demonstrating new or different deer farming methods or technologies to inspire change for increased profit.

The name AP was used to differentiate the group from a discussion group as an AP was not primarily about discussion – members were committed to shared personal and farm business development, their data, methods, plans, results, problems and successes.

The benefits were not limited to the farmers in the group.

They were a means of testing and refining profit gain opportunities and demonstrating those methods and their limitations to the wider deer farming community.



Collaborative trials test performance

DEER

HAWKE'S BAY farmers involved in the deer industry's Advance Party programme are changing their management systems to make their farms more productive and profitable.

Winter feeding has been a recent focus, but all aspects of deer management are being examined. New systems are being tried and the outcomes are being recorded and analysed.

Programme co-ordinator Pania Flint says deer farmers are using a range of tools to record and analyse farm performance information.

"Regular weighing of young deer from the time they are weaned is becoming more commonplace and many farmers are now taking advantage of the NAIT electronic identification eartags to record mob averages or keep individual animal records."

Advance Parties are jointly funded by Deer Industry NZ (DINZ) and the Ministry for Primary Industries' Sustainable Farming Fund. They are based on the principle that farmers can motivate other farmers to make the management changes needed to increase the profitability. They work in tandem with Passion2Profit (P2P), a Primary Growth Partnership (PGP) programme between DINZ and MPI. Each Advance Party member identifies an opportunity on

their farm and develops a plan for addressing it with the help and advice of the other members. To take part, farmers must commit to making management changes and recording the results.

James and Sue Hewitt run a venison finishing farm at Wanstead in Central

Hawke's Bay, supplying Firstlight Foods, their venison marketing company. They are members of the Hawke's Bay Fast Finishers Advance Party.

Growth rates in young stock keep "ticking along" during winter with the aid of some maize in an all-grass feeding system.

They're looking at a wider range of feeding options to enable their young stock to realise their genetic growth potential.

"Based on our target liveweights for finishing animals we have been working backwards to find the optimal feed regime that will give them the desired growth rates

for the least cost. Calculating the true input costs and working out returns in terms of cents per kilogram of dry matter consumed is challenging." The Hewitts regularly weigh their stock, and receive 'value sheets' from Firstlight, which give them a detailed breakdown on the carcass of each animal.



BEST DEER: Wanstead deer farmers Sue and James Hewitt, who are recording and analysing many aspects of their herd's performance to find the animals and feeding systems that perform best.

PHOTO/ PHIL STEWART

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THE COUNTRY

THURSDAY, September 1, 2016



Taking a close look at performance

Farmers join forces to use a range of tools to measure productivity

DEER

HAWKE'S BAY farmers involved in the deer industry's Advance Party programme are changing their management systems to make their farms more productive and profitable.

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James and Sue Hewitt run a venison finishing farm at Wanstead in Central Hawke's Bay, supplying Firstlight Foods, their venison market-



ing company. They are members of the Hawke's Bay Fast Finishers Advance Party.

James says growth rates in young stock keep "ticking along" during winter with the aid of some maize supplementation in what is otherwise an all-grass feeding system. With the Advance Party they're looking at a wider range of feeding options to

enable their young stock to realise their genetic potential for growth.

"Based on our target liveweights for finishing animals we have been working backwards to find the optimal feed regime that will give them the desired growth rates for the least cost," says Sue. "Calculating the true input costs and working out returns in terms of cents per kilogram of dry matter consumed is challenging."

The Hewitts regularly weigh their finishing stock. In addition, they receive 'value sheets' from Firstlight, which give them a detailed breakdown on the carcass of each animal processed. They export all this informa-

tion onto Excel spreadsheets and break the data down to compare the performance of weaners supplied from different breeders.

Daniel Spiers is in the 'Hawke's Bay Originals' Advance Party, formed in 2014. Members last year undertook a trial measuring the yields and benefits of using winter crops for their deer.

"It was a dynamic trial with farmers picking up plenty of tips from others and making adjustments as the season progressed. We repeated the exercise this winter, with changes based on what we learned in 2015. It's given us a much better understanding of feed budgeting and metabolisable energy, and also better insights into how to feed crops."

Spiers said the kale crop grown on his family's farm contributed last year to a 650g increase in velvet weights, allowed hinds to enter fawning in better condition and saved silage.

To build their records, Flint says many Advance Party farmers now routinely use systems such as Gallagher's Livestock Manager TSi 2, its 'Orange Box' Weigh Scale and Data Recorder, or Tru-Test's XR5000 weigh scales. Some are using farm management information systems such as FarmIQ (developed by another PGP programme of the same name) and the feed budgeting and financial analysis

service, FARMAX.

Flint points to the Deer Growth Curve tool developed by DINZ under P2P as a useful way to keep track of deer growth: www.deernz.org/deer-growth-curves. ■



BEST DEER: Wanstead deer farmers Sue and James Hewitt, who are recording and analysing many aspects of their herd's performance to find the animals and feeding systems that perform best.

PHOTO/ PHIL STEWART

Manawatu deer farmers prepare for mating hinds

WARWICK SMITH/FAIRFAX NZ

A red deer herd. Hind mating is almost underway.

As autumn days shorten, deer farmers are getting their hinds and stags organised into mating groups in one of the most crucial phases of the breeding season.

Pohangina Valley farmer Tony Gray is paying special attention to his rising two-year-old (R2) hinds which will be the first fawners.

Gray runs deer, sheep and beef on his Apiti property. Starting this season, he is breeding his own replacements rather than buying them in, and for the past few weeks has been carefully preparing his mob of 47 R2 hinds.

He supplied 'Firstlight Venison' and was using two of the company's two-year-old stags with the first fawners.

Gray said he used a conservative stag-to-hind ratio and the two sires had been run with the young hinds since they arrived on the property in December.

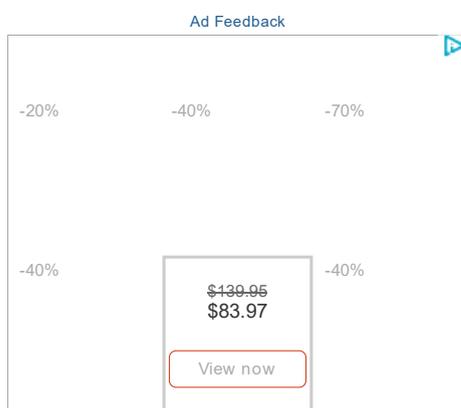
"They're very used to each other by now," he said.

Deer Industry New Zealand's Advance Party programme facilitator and veterinarian Pania Flint said high conception rates could be harder to achieve in R2 hinds than mature hinds.

"Empty hinds are a lost opportunity and a drain on productivity. Also by having high conception and fawning rates among your R2 hinds you can accelerate genetic progress," she said.

Flint says the Advance Parties – consisting of teams of about eight to 10 deer farms that work together to improve productivity on each farm – are showing how good management can help close the reproductive performance gap between R2 hinds and their mixed age herd mates. Gray is a member of the Central Regions Advance Party.

"One of the most important factors is feeding the R2s well so they achieve target weights. To reach puberty in time, they need to be treated as priority stock throughout their first 18 months of life. They need to have a body condition score of 3.5 and be at least 75 to 80 per cent of their mature weight at mating."



That actual weight in kilograms will vary depending on the hinds' genetic makeup, but a typical large red hind that matures to 125–130kg will need to be at least 93kg and preferably about 100kg to get pregnant, she said.

Gray had been paying close attention to live weights.

"If we get all of the R2s over 100kg by mating, we should get at least 90 per cent in fawn".

His R2 mob reached an average of 104kg by early December and, encouragingly, appeared to be holding on to those gains through a dry summer.

"This time next year we'll know how we've done," he said.

The other big influence on reproductive success with R2 hinds is behavioural.

Flint said young hinds should be sorted into mating groups with stags introduced in February or earlier, to allow social structures to settle down before mating began in late March to early April.

"On average, yearling hinds conceive around two weeks later than pre-rut weaned mature hinds. Moving young hinds from one farm to another can have a significant effect on mating success, particularly if moving to a harsher climate and/or lower-quality feed."

She said the use of single sires or multiple sires was acceptable, but it was important to get the ratios right.

"If you are using spiker stags, there should be no more than 10 R2 hinds per stag. With older stags the ratio can be higher.

"In a multiple-sire mating mob it is preferable to have at least three stags. This ensures that if two stags spend a lot of time fighting, the third still has the opportunity to mate the hinds."

She said in single-sire mating mobs it was always advisable to use a back-up stag.

Advance Parties are jointly funded by Deer Industry NZ and the Ministry for Primary Industries Sustainable Farming Fund.

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Deer farmers go high-tech

Technology, monitoring paying off

Dunedin

Deer farming may conjure up images of helicopter capture, but those days are long gone.

Today's deer farmers are focused on making their deer herds more productive and profitable using the latest farm technology.

Pania Flint, co-ordinator of the deer industry's Advance Party programme, said deer farmers were using a range of useful tools to record and analyse their herds' performance.

Cameron Nicolson, who farms 350 red breeding hinds in Ida Valley with wife Amy, is typical of many farmers in the programme.

Members of the Otago Advance Party, the Nicolsons intensively weigh and monitor their wapiti crossbred weaners to make sure they are reaching target weights for spring slaughter.

"It's paying dividends. Each extra kilogram of weaning weight is worth \$6 to us because it translates to an earlier slaughter date," Mr Nicolson said.

The Nicolsons were motivated by the price premium for supplying the chilled venison market in spring, as well as the need to get animals off the property before the dry Ida Valley summer kicked in.

Last winter they achieved average weight gains of 115g a day with a top rate of 150g/day, and were pleased to have 93% of their yearling stags processed by late October.

This year, they had added barley to the turnips, grass and baleage feed regime and had been achieving growth rates as high as 260g/day.

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Each Advance Party member identified an opportunity on their farm and developed a plan for addressing it with the help of the other members.

To participate, farmers must commit themselves to make management changes and record the results.

Winter feeding had been a recent focus, but all aspects of deer management were being examined by programme members. It could be as varied as using a new pasture mix, better genetics for fast growth or better monitoring of animal health.

To build their records, Ms Flint said many Advance Party farmers now routinely used systems such as Gallaghers Livestock Manager TSi 2, its Orange Box Weigh Scale and Data Recorder, or Tru-Tests XR5000 weigh scales.

Some were using farm management information systems such as FarmIQ and the feed budgeting and financial analysis service, Farmax.

Many also used the deer industry's genetics database, Deer Select, which allowed buyers to identify sires based on estimated breeding values.

— Otago Daily Times



Winter feed for deer in the spotlight

South Waikato deer farmers involved in an industry improvement programme are fixing their management systems to make their farms more productive and profitable.

All aspects of deer management are being examined in Deer Industry New Zealand's advance party programme, with a special focus on winter feeding. As part of the programme, new systems are being tried and the outcomes are being recorded and analysed.

A range of tools to record and analyse farm performance information was also being used, programme co-ordinator Pania Flint said.

"Regular weighing of young deer from the time they are weaned is becoming more commonplace and many farmers are now taking advantage of the NAIT electronic identification eartags to record mob averages or keep individual animal records."

Advance Parties are jointly funded by DINZ and the Ministry for Primary Industries' Sustainable Farming Fund and work in tandem with Passion2Profit (P2P), a Primary Growth Partnership (PGP) programme between DINZ and MPI.

Waipa Advance Party member William Oliver grows venison and velvet antler on his 730-hectare farm, Waerenga, 12 kilometres east of Te Kuiti. Working with the programme emphasised the importance of using stags with high breeding values for 12-month weight, he said.

"We're using the genetics from Eastern European red deer bloodlines to help get our

weaner weights up. Feeding weaners well through winter, weighing regularly and tracking their growth against target weights is an important part of this."

Flint said the deer industry had established key performance indicators that farmers could use to set targets and measure their performance.

"For farmers wanting to finish deer in the spring for the valuable chilled market, achieving target liveweights from weaning through winter is vitally important. Using new monitoring and recording technology, farmers can run their deer through the yards quickly, keeping track of individuals and mobs."

"Because June weights are an accurate predictor of weights in the spring, farmers can then adjust feeding levels if necessary to ensure young animals hit their target slaughter weights," she said.

For the past 15 years Oliver has wintered his mixed age hinds on an 80:20 mix of swede and kale, supplemented with silage and hay. They usually start on the crop about mid-June and stay there happily until about the end of August.

The venison finishers and replacement hinds are wintered on new grass and plantain, supplemented with maize grown on another property.

The winter cropping and forage mixes – such as chicory, plantain and clover – are part of a three-year pasture renewal cycle which ends with the sowing of new grass. Aside from their role in the establishment of new pasture, crops and forages provide non-grass feeding options.



Lynda Gray

Although Geoff Pullar can't claim the 60kg increase in cut velvet from his wapiti stags is because of solely nut feeding, he's sure it's helped. This season 310kg-plus regrowth was cut from 59 animals compared with 250kg-plus regrowth the previous season.

"We've only done it for one year so it's hard to say what the biggest contributing factor is. I'm hoping it's a combination of nuts, genetics and improved grasses," Geoff says.

Until joining the Southland elk and wapiti Advance Party a mixture of barley and nuts was fed in the lead-up to button drop. But time and time again the stags would vacuum up the whole barley and leave the nuts. Advance Party members suggested feeding only nuts, which he did for the 2015 button drop.

All the velvet stags got a 1kg allowance from just before button drop until harvest. The 20 rising-three-year-olds made the biggest velvet weight gain, cutting a 5.7kg average that was 1kg up on the previous season.

The 25 rising-two-year-olds cut a 4.3kg average, 600g ahead of the previous season.

Geoff estimates the \$10,000 expense of nuts was cancelled out by the saving

on barley. The payback of the all nut feeding works out at about \$7800 based on a velvet price average of \$130/kg for the extra 60kg of velvet.

The nuts cost \$880/tonne, more than twice the price of barley at \$400/tonne, but the high metabolisable of 12.9 and crude protein of 19% plus the mineral supplements make them a much more efficient and effective supplementary feed.

Although Geoff's stopped feeding



The 60kg increase in this season's cut velvet from Littlebourne wapiti isn't just because of nut feeding but has probably been a contributor, Geoff Pullar says.

FARM FACTS

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- 160ha including 63ha of deer fencing
- Littlebourne wapiti stud** – velvet production plus lamb finishing
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 - 80 mixed-sex weaners
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- 1000 ewes (including two-tooths)
 - 400 hoggets

barley to the velveters he still feeds it to the indoor-wintered weaners and ewes when feed is tight during winter. The cereal used to be grown onfarm but, for the first time, was bought-in last season. The change freed up a couple of paddocks on the deer unit for an Aber Magic ryegrass, Quest white clover, Tuscan red clover and plantain-chicory mix pasture.

The only downside of not growing barley is the absence of stubble that came in handy during winter as a feeding pad for balage. Geoff says the likely solution will be putting deer on the lime quarry feeding pads earlier.

Two quarries, one used for the R2 stags and the other for the R3 stags, are an important component of the wintering programme. They're fed balage on the limestone from the start of May until spring growth starts, which can be any time from mid-August. When they move out, the hinds move in staying on the platform until the balage runs out or more grass starts growing, which ever happens first.

Another Advance Party-initiated project



The wapiti stags are fed 1kg of nuts a day from the lead-up to button drop until velveting.

On par

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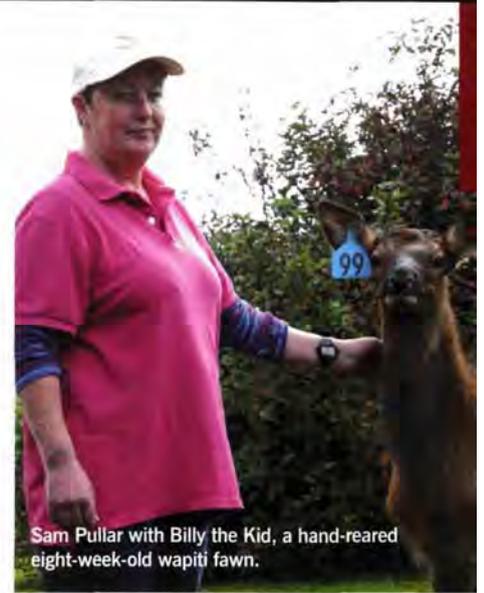
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Sam Pullar with Billy the Kid, a hand-reared eight-week-old wapiti fawn.

recommendation. Another animal health change made was adoption of the industry-recommended treatment of a triple combination for internal parasite control. A Cydecton injection and Oxfen C Plus and Oxfen C mixed in equal parts is administered to hinds and fawns one month before weaning. After weaning the fawns are drenched monthly until moving inside for wintering. All R2 deer get a couple of drenches, as required, through summer.

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Deer weight targets a focus for farmers

Last updated 11:50, September 5 2016

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SUPPLIED

Landcorp's Lynmore Station stock manager Ben Beadle.

Farmers in the deer industry's Advance Party programme are changing their farm management systems to make their deer operations more productive and profitable.

Winter feeding has been a recent focus, but all aspects of deer management are being examined by members of the programme.

These can be as varied by using a new pasture mix, better genetics for fast growth or better monitoring of animal health.

Advance Parties are jointly funded by Deer Industry NZ and the Ministry for Primary Industries' Sustainable Farming Fund.

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[*Learning experience for Southland deer farmers](#)

[*Deer technology expo captures young farmers](#)

[*Blazing new deer trails on Sunnyside Station](#)

They are based on the principle that farmers can help other farmers to make the management changes needed to increase the profitability of their farm businesses.

Southland Advance Party member Ben Beadle is stock manager on Landcorp's Lynmore Station, near Te Anau.

The 2300 hectare station, which finishes 3100 weaner deer bred on other Landcorp farms, also runs 16,000 sheep stock units and 6240 cattle stock units.

For many years weaners on the station have been routinely weighed and recorded on the station using a Gallagher system. The data is fed into Landcorp's Farm Management System and, in turn, FarmIQ.

Each Advance Party member identifies an opportunity on their farm and develops a plan for addressing it with the help and advice of the other members.

Ad Feedback



Last year Beadle was able to use this platform in spring and autumn to run a trial in which mobs of weaners were fed on three different forage types.

"Autumn is a crucial time for getting weight onto weaner deer at Te Anau, so we try to get average weights up to 70 kilograms by June 1. Once winter sets in, they shut up shop until spring, only putting on about 85 grams a day on average," he said.

The trial last year was valuable, but some tweaks would be put into the strategy this spring, he said.

These include separating the weaners into lines by weight and adding another forage option to the mix so there were now four regimes: plantain, perennial ryegrass, lucerne and a short-rotation ryegrass.

Landcorp's Farm Management System makes monitoring management changes like this more straightforward, he said.

It also helped him get venison animals ready for the valuable spring chilled market with greater certainty, he said.

Programme co-ordinator Pania Flint said deer farmers were using a range of useful tools to record and analyse farm performance information.

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The industry had established key performance indicators farmers could use to set targets and measure their performance, she said.

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"Because June weights are an accurate predictor of weights in the spring, farmers can then adjust feeding levels if necessary, to ensure young animals hit their target slaughter weights."

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Advice underpins velvet gains

Kim Newth

Southland deer stud director Geoff Pullar, of Littlebourne Farm, says sound advice at the right time has ensured his stags are on the right feed regime for optimal velvet production.

Geoff is a member of the Southland Elk and Wapiti Advance Party, one of a number of such groups operating around the country to encourage farmers to share data and identify growth opportunities.

He says THAT following the party's advice on deer feed has proved beneficial. At their recommendation, Geoff switched from a mixed-grain-and-nut feed to a straight velvetting-deer-nut feed for his two-year-old and three-year-old bulls, from button drop through to harvest cut. He tried this for the first time for the 2015 button drop, with each of the bulls receiving a one-kilogram deer-nut allocation.

Total velvet production has risen dramatically from around 250kg (including mixed-age bulls, three-year-olds, two-year-olds and spikers) to 350kg. Last season, the two-year-old bulls cut an average 3.7kg of velvet and the three-year-olds cut a 4.7kg average.

Geoff is in no doubt the better feed regime has been a key contributor to the cut-velvet increase. Improved grass management and good genetics are also benefiting production.

Stock condition is looking very good on farm, heading into the annual Southern Elite Elk/Wapiti

Sire Sale in mid-January 2017. Up to 20 three-year-old Littlebourne Wapiti bulls will be offered at the sale.

"We've had a good winter followed by a great spring with heaps of grass growth, so the deer put on extra weight," says Geoff. "They are a couple of weeks ahead of where they'd normally be with velvet."

The stud operation is one of Southland's long-established deer farms, having been set up by Geoff's father, Jack, more than 30 years ago. Geoff joined his father on the 160-hectare property in 1992 after returning home from overseas, and initially managed the property's sheep work. He took over the entire operation after his father retired five years ago.

The farm runs 100 hinds, 80 mixed-sex weaners and nine mixed-age bulls, plus 25 rising two-year-olds and 20 rising three-year-olds. It also

has around 1000 coopworth-cross ewes and 350 replacements.

Since joining the Advance Party, Geoff has rolled out a number of improvements on the farm, including a new reticulated stockwater system costing \$13,000.

"It is working really well and it means every paddock has water," he says.

Ryegrass, clover and plantain-chicory have been planted to improve pasture feed quality: "We have found this gets the fawns up and going for good growth rates."

A triple-drench regime is being administered to help maintain good animal health.

Geoff says the Advanced Parties system, which was developed by Deer Industry New Zealand to help farmers increase profitability, continues to work well for him.

"It helps me to fine-tune what happens on the farm and I get to see what other farmers are doing," he adds.

Meanwhile, Geoff remains a keen member of his local golf course, playing once a week, and is also busy off the farm as a board member for Golf Southland.

We've had a good winter followed by a great spring with heaps of grass growth, so the deer put on extra weight. They are a couple of weeks ahead of where they'd normally be with velvet."



Southland deer farmer Geoff Pullar has increased his velvet production significantly by introducing a better feed regime.



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THE COUNTRY

Taking a close look at performance of deer industry



Wanstead deer farmers Sue and James Hewitt, who are recording and analysing many aspects of their herd's performance to find the animals and feeding systems that perform best. Photo / Phil Stewart

Hawke's Bay farmers involved in the deer industry's Advance Party programme are changing their management systems to make their farms more productive and profitable.

Winter feeding has been a recent focus, but all aspects of deer management are being examined by members of the programme. New systems are being tried and the outcomes are being recorded and analysed.

Programme co-ordinator Pania Flint says deer farmers are using a range of tools to record and analyse farm performance information.

"Regular weighing of young deer from the time they are weaned is becoming more commonplace and many farmers are now taking advantage of the NAIT electronic identification eartags to record mob averages or keep individual animal records."

Advance Parties are jointly funded by Deer Industry NZ (DINZ) and the Ministry for Primary Industries' Sustainable Farming Fund.

They are based on the principle that farmers can motivate other farmers to make the management changes needed to increase the profitability.

They work in tandem with Passion2Profit (P2P), a Primary Growth Partnership (PGP) programme between DINZ and MPI.

Each Advance Party member identifies an opportunity on their farm and develops a plan for addressing it with the help and advice of the other members. To take part, farmers must commit to making management changes and record the results.

James and Sue Hewitt run a venison finishing farm at Wanstead in Central Hawke's Bay, supplying Firstlight Foods, their venison marketing company. They are members of the Hawke's Bay Fast Finishers Advance Party.

James says growth rates in young stock keep "ticking along" during winter with the aid of some maize supplementation in what is otherwise an all-grass feeding system.

With the Advance Party they're looking at a wider range of feeding options to enable their young stock to realise their genetic potential for growth.

"Based on our target liveweights for finishing animals we have been working backwards to find the optimal feed regime that will give them the desired growth rates for the least cost," says Sue. "Calculating the true input costs and working out returns in terms of cents per kilogram of dry matter consumed is challenging."



The Hewitts regularly weigh their finishing stock. In addition, they receive 'value sheets' from Firstlight, which give them a detailed breakdown on the carcass of each animal processed.

They export all this information onto Excel spreadsheets and break the data down to compare the performance of weaners supplied from different breeders.

Daniel Spiers is in the 'Hawke's Bay Originals' Advance Party, formed in 2014. Members last year undertook a trial measuring the yields and benefits of using winter crops for their deer.

"It was a dynamic trial with farmers picking up plenty of tips from others and making adjustments as the season progressed. We repeated the exercise this winter, with changes based on what we learned in 2015. It's given us a much better understanding of feed budgeting and metabolisable energy, and also better insights into how to feed crops."

Spiers said the kale crop grown on his family's farm contributed last year to a 650g increase in velvet weights, allowed hinds to enter fawning in better condition and saved silage.

To build their records, Flint says many Advance Party farmers now routinely use systems such as Gallagher's Livestock Manager TSi 2, its 'Orange Box' Weigh Scale and Data Recorder, or Tru-Test's XR5000 weigh scales.

Some are using farm management information systems such as FarmIQ (developed by another PGP programme of the same name) and the feed budgeting and financial analysis service, FARMAX.

Flint points to the Deer Growth Curve tool developed by DINZ under P2P as a useful way to keep track of deer growth:

www.deernz.org/deer-growth-curves.

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THE COUNTRY

Technology, monitoring paying off for deer farmers

By Phil Stewart



Cameron Nicolson says intensive weighing and recording are paying dividends on his Ida Valley deer farm. Photo / Phil Stewart

Deer farming may conjure up images of helicopter capture, but those days are long gone.

Today's deer farmers are focused on making their deer herds more productive and profitable using the latest farm technology.

Pania Flint, co-ordinator of the deer industry's Advance Party programme, said deer farmers were using a range of useful tools to record and analyse their herds' performance.

Cameron Nicolson, who farms 350 red breeding hinds in Ida Valley with wife Amy, is typical of many farmers in the programme.

Members of the Otago Advance Party, the Nicolsons intensively weigh and monitor their wapiti crossbred weaners to make sure they are reaching target weights for spring slaughter.

"It's paying dividends. Each extra kilogram of weaning weight is worth \$6 to us because it translates to an earlier slaughter date," Mr Nicolson said.

The Nicolsons were motivated by the price premium for supplying the chilled venison market in spring, as well as the need to get animals off the property before the dry Ida Valley summer kicked in.

Last winter they achieved average weight gains of 115g a day with a top rate of 150g/day, and were pleased to have 93% of their yearling stags processed by late October.

This year, they had added barley to the turnips, grass and baleage feed regime and had been achieving growth rates as high as 260g/day.

Advance Parties were jointly funded by Deer Industry NZ (DINZ) and the Ministry for Primary Industries' Sustainable Farming Fund.

They were based on the principle farmers could help other farmers make the management changes needed to increase the profitability of their farm businesses.

They worked in tandem with Passion2Profit (P2P), a Primary Growth Partnership (PGP) programme between DINZ and MPI.

Each Advance Party member identified an opportunity on their farm and developed a plan for addressing it with the help of the other members.

To participate, farmers must commit themselves to make management changes and record the results.

Winter feeding had been a recent focus, but all aspects of deer management were being examined by programme members.

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It could be as varied as using a new pasture mix, better genetics for fast growth or better monitoring of animal health.

To build their records, Ms Flint said many Advance Party farmers now routinely used systems such as Gallaghers Livestock Manager TSi 2, its Orange Box Weigh Scale and Data Recorder, or Tru-Tests XR5000 weigh scales.

"Regular weighing of young deer from the time they are weaned is becoming more commonplace and many farmers are now taking advantage of the Nait electronic identification eartags to record mob averages or keep individual animal records," she said.

Some were using farm management information systems such as FarmIQ and the feed budgeting and financial analysis service, Farmax.

Many also used the deer industry's genetics database, Deer Select, which allowed buyers to identify sires based on estimated breeding values.

The industry had established key performance indicators farmers could use to set targets and measure their performance and they were available to all deer farmers, she said.

Farmers such as the Nicolsons were making progress by collating information on the performance of their own deer enterprises but there was still the potential to extract more value out of the information that could be recorded, Ms Flint said.

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Velvet and venison share top billing

A Central Hawke's Bay deer-farming family is approaching its 29th annual sire stag sale with optimism for venison's future. Kate Taylor reports.

Last updated 09:13, November 9 2016

Kate Taylor

John Spiers with some of this year's sale stags.

Becoming more efficient in their venison stag breeding operation has helped John and Daniel Spiers expand the velvet production side of their business.

The proportion of breeding animals has changed on their Takapau deer farm, Maranoa, with as many hinds being put to velvet stags as venison stags.

"That's a reflection of the number of hinds that have disappeared from the North Island in the wake of velvet returns being stronger than venison," says John.

Kate Taylor

John and Daniel Spiers farm together at Maranoa at Takapau.

This year the 307ha farm wintered 530 in-fawn hinds, 349 mixed-sex yearlings and 486 mixed-age stags, as well as 161 yearling bulls. Maranoa's 29th annual sire sale is on December 16 with about 25 three-year stags likely to be on offer.

"We're not offering as many for sale while still receiving a similar average price for each sire stag.

"We've used it as a chance to be more efficient in our breeding programme with fewer hinds. The quality of our animals is getting better and better," adds Daniel.

Kate Taylor

Daniel Spiers is keen to be part of the deer industry at a political level.

John says they concentrate on early growth rates in young stock.

"They weigh an average of 92kg at the 27th of May with the top hitting 106kg. Then we aim for the 12-month weights to be at the stage where they're all killable. Our top animals weigh in excess of 150kg at their first birthday, which for us is December 1.

"We work out actual growth rates over that time for the sale catalogue. Last year's catalogue included animals doing 350-375 grams a day from weaning to 12 months, which gives buyers an indication of how quickly these animals are growing and how this can impact on their kill dates and returns."

Kate Taylor

About 25 three-year stags will be offered at Maranoa's annual sale on December 16.

Deer are fed on plantain, lucerne, rape and new grass, as well as kale which has been the focus of a trial done through their local industry group known as the Hawke's Bay Advance Party. The results showed the importance of knowing what their deer are eating as well as knowing how much they can eat.

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"The industry model showed a 200kg stag eating 4.7kg of dry matter a day on a forage crop. We've measured crops and measured the intakes and we now know they're eating a lot more than the industry model thought they needed. We didn't get the same results across all of the properties – different animals, genetics, climate and topography – but all said more."

More trials will be done this season to quantify how much more and update industry data, says Daniel.

"Producing this sort of usable data for deer farmers was on the aims when the P2P (Passion to Profit) set up the Advance Party system."

The Hawke's Bay Advance Party group is so successful it is used as an example in the industry. Another two have been set up in the same region – focusing on velvet or venison while the original group has always involved both.

John says a general lift in optimism for venison is due in part to new marketing into Europe. He says Silver Fern Farms' retail venison packs have seen the chilled market extended from November through until March. This has led to a contract baseline of \$8.20 a kilogram, rising to \$9.70 a kilogram, where two years ago venison was lucky to be \$6, says John.

The move to relaunch the use of the Cervena brand in Europe will differentiate New Zealand farmed venison from the local wild game, which was traditionally only eaten at a certain time of year, says Daniel.

"The Silver Fern Farms retail packs show what's inside and give instructions on how to prepare it and cook it. They will see venison as great for a summer barbecue, not just a winter goulash."

Breeding remains John's passion and is the No 1 objective at Maranoa. But velvet has also become a flexible income stream for the business. John has twice won the Veleco Award for commercial velvet and is a director of velvet company Provelco.

Velvet is harvested throughout spring.

"If it turns dry now it doesn't matter for the velvet stags because they can live off the smell of an oily rag in summer. So hand in hand with the breeding stock, the velvet stags have been a good option for the climate here," says John.

The farm has signed up to take water from the Ruataniwha Water Storage Scheme.

"It's premature to say what we'll do with it, but it's about being prepared... future-proofing this area and this farm," says Daniel.

"Having irrigation just to grow grass isn't a runner. High value crops will be more the answer, but again, it's premature to even guess what they might be."

The annual rainfall is 1025mm but John says the area is marginal in terms of reliable rainfall.

"There used to be a good spread of rain but that's changed in the past decade or so. But when was the last time you remember a spring like this one? This is magic."

DEER POLITICS PART OF THE FAMILY

Takapau deer farmer Daniel Spiers is no stranger to deer industry politics – he's following in the footsteps of his father John and late grandfather Ian, both former presidents of the New Zealand Deer Farmers Association and active members of the deer industry at all levels.

Daniel isn't there yet as he's only been back on the family farm for two years after a career in the hospitality industry. But he's inherited both the special stock sense needed to work with deer and the willingness to be part of the industry at a political level.

"Taking an active role in the industry is part of the history of Maranoa," says Daniel.

"Plus I wouldn't want to leave my future in the hands of other people without contributing in some way."

As Daniel and partner Sharnalee Withey wait for the birth of their first child early next year, he says he is proud of the legacy left by his grandfather after his sudden death while president of the Deer Farmers Association. The Ian Spiers Memorial Trust is a sponsor of the industry's Next Generation group as well as a supporter of young people in the industry applying for courses such as the Kellogg's Rural Leadership programme.

"This industry is amazing at drawing in new entrants and new generations, embracing them and getting them to stay. I left home to go to Rathkeale when I was 12 so I haven't been around the farm that much for the past 20 years, except for summers, but coming back was an easy decision to make."

Ian Spiers moved from a Wanstead sheep, cattle and cropping farm to the undeveloped Takapau property in 1965. After finishing a Diploma in Agriculture at Lincoln University, John travelled in the UK and Europe before coming home to the farm with Marie in the mid-1970s.

Having seen the dismal state of frozen lamb carcasses in England, he told his father he didn't think there was a future in sheep farming and encouraged him to diversify into deer farming, an industry still in its infancy.

Maranoa was not a pioneering deer farm but first-generation, John says.

"Our first deer were born on a farm but came from captured hinds on farms in Southland."

A boom time followed as the industry was driven by livestock taxation laws. But then the Government repealed those laws in 1981 and the market collapsed overnight. John says that was a transitional point for the industry and for him.

"This changed the focus from trading livestock to developing the venison industry.

"We battled through. We kept breeding and instead of only putting deer fencing on 30 hectares we did the whole farm."

Almost 40 years later Maranoa carries 4046 stock units on 307 hectares (and has an effective deer-fenced area of 278ha). The stud's 29th annual sire sale will be on December 16 offering about 25 three-year stags and 30 to 50 hinds in lots of five.

"We used to have a hind sale in autumn and our stag sale in late spring but young females will be sold at the stag sale this year given we believe the industry has to be ready for that future growth involving the retention of hinds. This year has been the first year for a long time New Zealand

hasn't killed more hinds than stags."

A cattle finishing operation runs alongside the deer operation.

The realisation R2 cattle were damaging expensive deer fencing as well as the lack of early flexibility and the results of a nutrient management budget led to a decision to start carrying younger cattle.

"R2s destroy the taller posts and deer fencing and plus we could only carry them on half of the farm. The rest is too wet. Younger cattle also gave us more flexibility to build up pastures. We set stock for fawning in late October so now we can sell younger bulls around then as long as they're better than 280 kilograms. We can't do anything in those paddocks once fawning starts so it used to be January by the time we had any flexibility back."

Daniel says the changes also reflected the move to more cropping.

"Our nutrient budget, done under the Tukituki Plan Change 6, showed we were creating hot spots by feeding the big cattle on the crops."

The yearlings will be finished to about 330kg liveweight. John says to get the best out of the bigger bulls they had to get them to 600kg liveweight or 295-320kg carcassweight.

"The last of the two-year-olds went in the middle of the winter when it was dry. That was the finish of the old regime. As Maranoa looks to the future, water will create further opportunity for us to diversify between livestock options and cropping."

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Deer winter feed in the spotlight

South Waikato deer farmers involved in an industry improvement programme are fixing their management systems to make their farms more productive and profitable.

All aspects of deer management are being examined in Deer Industry New Zealand's advance party programme with winter feeding facing a special focus. The programme has seen new systems are being tried and the outcomes are being recorded and analysed. They are also using a range of useful tools to record and analyse farm performance information, programme coordinator Pania Flint said.

"Regular weighing of young deer from the time they are weaned is becoming more commonplace and many farmers are now taking advantage of the NAIT electronic identification eartags to record mob averages or keep individual animal records."

Advance parties are jointly funded by DINZ and the Ministry for Primary Industries' Sustainable Farming Fund and work in tandem with Passion2Pro-

fit, which is a Primary Growth Partnership programme between DINZ and MPI. The deer industry has established performance indicators that farmers can use to set targets and measure their performance. Achieving target liveweights from weaning through winter is vitally important and using new monitoring and recording technology means farmers can run their deer through the yards quickly, keeping track of individuals and mobs, Flint said.

"Because June weights are an accurate predictor of weights in the spring, farmers can then adjust feeding levels if necessary, to ensure young animals hit their target slaughter weights."

Te Kuiti deer farmer and Waipa advanced party member William Oliver said that working with the programme emphasised the importance of using stags with high breeding values for 12-month weight.

"We're using the genetics from Eastern European red deer bloodlines to help get

our weaner weights up. Feeding weaners well through winter, weighing

regularly and tracking their growth against target weights is an important part of this."

For the past 15 years, Oliver has wintered his mixed age hinds on an 80:20 mix of swede and kale, supplemented with silage and hay. They usually start on the crop about mid-June until about the end of August.

"Once the grass starts growing the deer can smell it and they don't want the crop anymore," Oliver said.

The venison finishers and replacement hinds are wintered on new grass and plantain, supplemented with maize grown on another property. The winter cropping and forage mixes are part of a three-year pasture renewal cycle which ends with the sowing of new grass. Aside from their role in the establishment of new pasture, crops and forages provide non-grass feeding options. This is important in the autumn, when facial eczema can strike, Oliver said.



Waikato Farmer, Waikato

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BRIEF DEERPOLICY

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Te Kuiti deer farmer William Oliver is pleased he has reached his weaner target weights. Supplied



Collaborative trials test performance

DEER

Regular weighing now more prevalent in deer farming

HAWKE'S BAY farmers involved in the deer industry's Advance Party programme are changing their management systems to make their farms more productive and profitable.

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Wanstead deer
farmers Sue and
James Hewitt,
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and analysing
many aspects of
their herd's
performance to
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and feeding
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perform best.
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