

The Big Deer Tour 2017



By Brianna Kelleher

On Sunday afternoon the 27th of September, the Deer Industry New Zealand's Big Deer tour began. I felt like my tour began before I even arrived in Dunedin, when I was seated on the plane by a retired deer farmer. We spent the flight talking about current issues and challenges in the agriculture industry, and the changes in deer farming that have occurred over the years.

We all arrived in Dunedin and were greeted by Tony Pearce. After arriving at the hotel, Tony gave us a broad overview/introduction to the deer industry and what Deer Industry New Zealand does. We learnt about the key issues the industry is facing right now, including fallen deer numbers, the mix match between supply and demand, environmental issues, a poor history of recording and lack of KPI's. This was a great introduction to all the topics and issues, which we went into more depth in throughout the rest of the week.

On Monday morning we visited the amazing Silver Fern Farms office to learn about the marketing of venison. It was interesting to learn about the European product, of feral deer, which traditionally need to be slow cooked and stewed, and all the strategies Silver Fern Farms are using to teach the market about NZ venison, which can be cooked rare and can be a more summer food, not just over the hunting season. Over the last three years this work has been seeing improvements to the market, with summer sales increasing. New Zealand venison is showing the world that the meat doesn't have to be tough, chewy and gamey meat. It was really interesting to learn about some of the online media persons which Silver Ferns have partnered with, such as Chicks Love Food, run by foodie bloggers Nina and Elise in the Netherlands, and Jord Althuizen, a famous German barbequer and restaurant owner.

Chickslovefood.com; Nina and Elise, and Jord Althuizen



After Silver Fern Farms, we went to DeerPro Ltd and talked with Solis Norton about Johnes disease. We learnt about how DeerPro is contributing to the deer industry by providing an animal health reporting system for deer farmers and the deer industry. And adding a range of benchmarked venison performance information to Johnes Management Ltd. We also learnt about the cycle of the bacterial gut disease and how farmers are controlling it, as well as all the work being done to help farmers manage the disease. This was a really interesting session, as previously, my knowledge of Johnes was only that it was a disease deer get.

After visiting Solis, we went to Abacusbio and met Simon Glennie and Jason Archer. Simon and Jason took us to our first farm visit, the 2800 effective hectare property, Minchmoor station. We got to learn about the farming system run on Minchmoor and were aware of some of the issues they faced. It was interesting to hear about the use of cropping on Minchmoor and how they've overcome some of the issues they've faced such as copper deficiency reducing fawning percentage. After our visit, we went back to Abacusbio and had a debrief. We discussed how when visiting any farm, you should be gaining a feel for the farmer's values, so that when making suggestions, the information will fit the way they run their farming system. We also got to hear from Anna Campbell, managing director of Abacusbio, who presented her experiences in the Agriculture Industry.

Minchmoor Station, owned by James and Jane Reid



For dinner on Monday night we went to Dunedin's Vault 21 with the Abacusbio crew, for the most incredible meal I have ever had. The chef prepared three venison dishes, which really showed the amazing things these brilliant chefs can do with venison. I had never tasted meat as tender as the venison tartare I have never seen food so beautifully presented as in the Vault 21's Silver Fern Farms 'Best Venison Dish', of Cured Silver Fern Farms venison short loin.

Vault 21's cured venison short loin



On Tuesday we went to Invermay Agresearch, and met Jamie Ward, Geoff Asher, David Stevens, Sharon McIntyre, Rory O'Brien, Bryan Thompson and Suzanne Rowe. We learnt about the Hitting Targets Project, formed after the realization that the deer industry was falling behind, and where the funding is being targeted. The biggest themes are genetics, animal health and feeding, which we covered in more depth during our visit. We also got to learn about the environmental issues faced by the deer industry, and what's being done on the Invermay farm. Geoff discussed the changes that have been going on at Invermay and the improvements they've seen in the waterways, from changes as simple as fencing off wallowing areas to significantly reduce the sediment runoff into waterways. Waterways, which were once so dirty you couldn't see the bottom, are now clear enough to reveal that the stream has rocks, which no one previously realized. I also enjoyed learning about deer behaviour and the relationship between stress and productivity.

Fenced off wetlands and springs at Invermay



On Wednesday we left sunny Dunedin and flew up to Christchurch. We were met by Rhys Griffiths and went to a Korean restaurant to start learning about the culture of the significant velvet market that is Korea. It was a bit of a culture shock, but we really got into it and tried some very interesting food.

Korean with Rhys



After lunch, we went to a velvet processor ProVelCo and met Ross Chambers. We have an overview of velvet marketing and the products velvet is used in overseas. Ross Chambers showed us some really interesting products, and we tried some velvet wine, which I won't be trying again. We had a tour of the processing facilities, which was really interesting, although no velvet was being processed at that time.

Following our afternoon of velvet, we went on to the ARA institute of Canterbury and met Emily Cross and Marianne Wilson. Here, we got to work in a commercial kitchen to cook venison in every way imaginable. We smoked venison, stir fried it, put it in pasta and a salad, sous-vide it and cooked medallions too. We had mountain meals at the end.

Venison cooking experience at ARA



On Thursday morning we departed for Mountain River Processors, Rakaia. We met up with Wayne Allan and had a tour of the processing facilities. We went into a -20 plus degree freezer and were impressed by the work put into ensuring the processing facilities were spotless. By this stage of the tour, the connections in the food value chain were reinforced, and I realised just how many different aspects there were to the production of venison and velvet.

After touring the facilities and sitting down to discuss the processing of venison and challenges and opportunities faced by Mountain Rivers, we visited Northbank Station. Northbank station was incredible to visit, as the focus on intensive finishing showed the range of deer systems there are, and the pivot development and challenge in matching feed supply and demand and use of forages were great to learn about. Adam Waite, manager of Northbank, was passionate about his deer and told us about how valuable the Advance Party initiative is to him, helping him think through ideas and get a discussion going with other farmers about possibilities and opportunities.

After Northbank, we went to another station, Quartz Hill station. This was a real contrast from Northbank, which was flat, irrigated, intensive finishing. Quartz Hill station, farmer by Georgie and Dan Harper, was real high, steep hill country. We again heard about the value of the Advance Party for providing advice and facilitating discussion on farm, helping explore ideas and provide alternatives. We looked at the cost effectiveness of wintering deer and the importance of providing quality feed to hinds and fawns in late lactation and to velvet stags from early August, when traditional pastures are in winter mode. We looked at the Quartz Hill velveting shed and heard about the changes Dan is making to get the shed up to scratch for the new regulations.

On Friday morning we went to MRB Limited and listened in on presentations on new precision agriculture technology and a spring chemical update. With Andy MacFarlane, we went to visit David and Hilary Wards farm, where we looked at the integration of other enterprises, arable production, with deer farming. It was incredible to look at how intensively the Wards farm with the philosophy of no tillage. It was great to hear about all the initiatives the Wards are taking to mitigate the environmental impacts of farming, and create environments for insects through planting natives and looking at flowering times to encourage bees. The natives planted along the roadside looked brilliant.

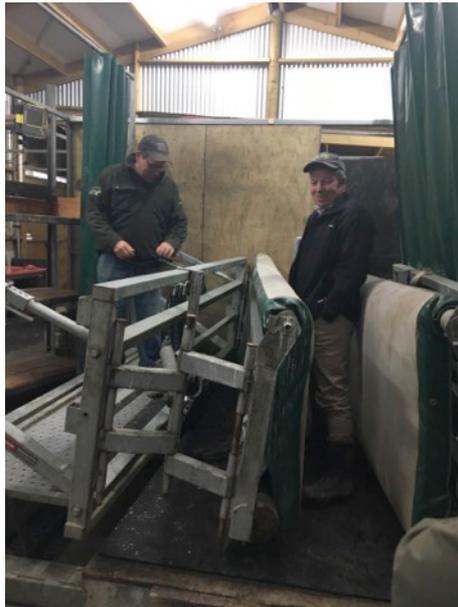
After lunch on Friday we met Tom MacFarlane and visited Tom's farm, The Kowhai's Ltd. We continued to look at the integration of deer systems with other enterprises, this time beef finishing. It was also interesting to see how irrigation fit in with hill country. A highlight of this visit was being able to get up close to the deer in the shed, and seeing how quiet they were with Tom. We got to look at some different breeds of deer in close proximity, and get up close enough to pat the deer.

Tom MacFarlane and his hinds



After visiting The Kowhai's Ltd we went to the incredibly passionate David Morgan's Raincliff Station. At Raincliff we got to hear about all David's exciting ideas, such as winter housing for deer, and looked at the stud, velvet and trophy side of deer farming. We went into the woolshed-converted deer shed and got to see some stags up close, and really appreciated the size of these animals. We got to see some incredible infrastructure and saw the crush in action, with Andy as the stag.

Raincliff crush and stags



On Saturday morning we met up with Andy again and headed off to Haldon Station. Even the drive there was incredible, seeing the contrast from flat to steep and so little country in between. We drove down a long gravel road and finally arrived at the iconic station. We met Paddy and Barbara Boyd and heard about the history of deer farming on Haldon. This involved seeing an antique net gun used in the deer catching days, recently sent back from a museum. We also looked at some merino fleeces and talked about the management of the merinos on farm.

Net gun and merino fleeces



After having a cup of tea and talking about the integration of enterprises on Haldon and Haldon's future, we went out for a farm drive. Andy dug some holes and we compared the irrigated soils to the barren, unirrigated soils to look and the differences in structure and organic matter formation the summer water supply has allowed.

Irrigated vs. non irrigated pastures



We heard about the amazing cost effectiveness of wintering hinds on the hill country, in their natural habitat, and how carrying deer on this country allows the stocking rate to be increased with little impact on feed. Paddy told us how deer wintered on intensive flat land will eat twice as much as deer in the hill country, since the hill country deer will find a quiet sheltered spot and hibernate, significantly reducing their feed requirement. This really showed the story that the deer industry markets, of deer in their natural habitat, living the way they have adapted to do so. We also got to see the Mackenzie country rabbits. Paddy told us about the shooter he employs for 3 hours an evening, who shoots on average 270 rabbits a night, which really put the issue into perspective.

After visiting Haldon Station, we finished our tour in the best way imaginable – a tour of the Mackenzie country from the sky. We climbed on board and got to see some breathtaking views. This was an incredible way to finish off our journey.



Overall, the Big Deer Tour was an incredible opportunity and one I'll never forget. I gained a great appreciation for this incredible industry of passionate people. The farmers we visited loved their deer and were some of the most enthusiastic farmers I have ever met. They cared greatly about the environment and were looking into ways they could mitigate their environmental impact. The integration of deer systems with other enterprises was fascinating and the strategies to meet feed demand and supply were interesting to hear about. We got to see deer up close and admire these incredible animals.

Before The Big Deer Tour, I knew very little about deer and deer farming systems. The Big Deer Tour taught me more than any paper at Uni could have, and gave me great insight into the industry which we have had little opportunity to learn about. I intend to apply the knowledge I have gained from the tour to my future career as a rural professional, and hope that the programme will continue to offer this incredible opportunity to interested students like myself.