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Deer Industry News

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF DEER INDUSTRY NEW ZEALAND AND THE NEW ZEALAND DEER FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 125 | March 2025
ISSN 1176-0753

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Cover photo

Background: Spotmatik Ltd/Shutterstock.com
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Deer Industry News is published by Deer Industry New Zealand in March, June, September and December. It is circulated to all known deer farmers, processors, exporters and others with an interest in the deer industry. The opinions expressed in Deer Industry News do not necessarily reflect the views of Deer Industry New Zealand or the New Zealand Deer Farmers' Association. All content is copyright and may not be reproduced without permission and attribution.

Finding the sweet spot

In my role I get to talk with farmers, scientists, vets, processors and many more individuals and groups along the industry chain. Sharing their stories, opinions and experiences in *Deer Industry News* is my key role as editor, and it is one I enjoy. The magazine is an important reference platform for relating insights and new information and giving readers an appreciation of the opportunities, complications, challenges and conundrums along the links of the deer industry chain.

Recently I met and got first-hand views from an end-of-chain customer of our farm-raised venison: Christian Nissen, the founder and managing director of Highland Game, the UK's largest venison supplier (see page 16). Nissen explained how a supply relationship with Silver Fern Farms had been crucial in maintaining and growing his business. He was complimentary of New Zealand's farmed deer industry and quality-backed approach to venison production. He also had words of warning, however, about venison's global placing in the red meat market, and the price of NZ venison.

Globally, demand for venison had increased, he said, but it was still regarded as an occasional rather than an essential source of protein. As such, European wholesalers and retailers would soon replace NZ venison with other proteins if availability was limited and/or the price was too high. Nissen said that NZ venison was approaching a price-tipping point for his own business, and although understanding of the underlying reason – reduced supply – there was a bottom line he needed to operate within to maintain a sustainable profitable business.

Of course, it's not just Nissen who is acutely aware of his financial bottom line. Everyone along the industry chain needs to be making money out of venison. But where's the sweet spot from which we all benefit?

Perhaps one day AI-generated econometric analysis will give us the theoretical answer, but the reality is that the sustainable financial return goalpost is always shifting, due to ever-changing market supply and demand forces often beyond our control (think Covid). The added challenge in the red meat sector is the lag time it takes to ramp up production and is something our industry is grappling with. However, results from a recent DINZ survey (see page 14) suggest that the reduction in the hind breeding herd has bottomed-out, which is confidence-boosting news.

We need to increase demand for our venison, which we are doing through projects such as the North American Retail Accelerator (NARA) programme. The goal of the \$4.9 million project, funded one-third by MPI's Sustainable Food and Fibre Futures programme and two-thirds from DINZ and the five venison exporters, is to lift demand for New Zealand venison through the retail market, delivering an initial return of \$20 million or a 4:1 return on investment. There are early signs of success (see page 18) with the value of venison exports to North America for the year until December 2024 worth just over \$79 million, up almost 15 percent from 2023.

NARA is one strand of the industry's overall strategy to build year-round demand across three broad markets (North America, Asia and Europe), reducing reliance on the seasonal European game market. NARA is off to a promising start, but we can't afford to take our foot off the accelerator (pun intended).

As noted by David Stevens in this issue's preamble about our Golden Anniversary conference, the deer industry has a proud 50-year track record of keeping the foot on the pedal and driving out of rough market patches. We're a small industry in comparison to sheep and beef, but we punch above our weight and need to keep doing so, Stevens said.

Here's looking forward to our golden celebration and the next 50 years of deer farming. ■

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

Correction: In the DFA Branch Chairs article in the December issue of *Deer Industry News*, Michelle Cowley's name was spelled incorrectly as Crowley. The DIN team extend our apologies to Michelle for the error.

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Saying it with flowers

South Canterbury's Raincliff Station and the Morgan family are well known in deer farming circles. However, Brychan and Kylie Morgan have diversified into new territory, developing a budding new agritourism enterprise based around sunflowers and wildflowers. On a recent *Rural Exchange* (REX) podcast, Brychan Morgan explained that they were inspired to give the novel crops a go after seeing photos of the blooms taken by his mum, Jan,



on a recent trip to the UK. The couple has grown two hectares of sunflowers, and 1.5 hectares of a wildflower mix that grew like crazy thanks to excellent growing conditions. Two open days in February attracted good crowds, with entry to the fields by gold coin donation and proceeds going to a nearby youth camp. Visitors got the opportunity to picnic among the blooms, pick sunflowers (\$2 a stem) and get lost in a maze. The cutting of a maze was a last-minute decision and created a bit of a "head spin", Morgan said. The Morgans plan is to do it all again next year with a few refinements. "We'll try to change it every year and keep building it. It's been an experience, and it was great to see the smiles on kids' faces when they got amongst the flowers."

Caring and sharing



WINNERS: (left to right) Nathan Coburn (B.A.D Deer), Al Clarke (Front Row Wapiti) and Tony Roberts (Top Deck)

Tony Roberts, Southland DFA chair, said there was a good turnout at the branch's annual velvet competition, which received 17 entries. He made special mention of the after-competition drinks and food, funded by a donation from the Hawke's Bay DFA. "Southland were really supportive of us following Cyclone Gabrielle," Hawke's Bay chair Miles Hellberg said. "We were aware of the terrible spring they had and so donated some money to their branch to put towards a social event."

Thumbs up for deer farming

Deer farming is perceived in an increasingly positive light according to 'Public perceptions of New Zealand's food producing industries'. Of the 1050 New Zealanders canvassed in the online

survey, 52 percent held a positive view of deer farming, up 9 points from a comparable 2021 survey. The positive outlook was reflected across all livestock industries, with 66% upbeat about sheep and beef farming (up 8 points) and 63% supportive of dairy farming (up 8 points). The January report by Primary Purpose Ltd said the economics benefits and food security that our food production sector generates are the main reasons for the upbeat sentiment. However, the public's view is not entirely positive. Concerns persist about the agricultural sector's perceived negative environmental impacts, especially in the areas of water and land degradation that some New Zealanders link to an overuse of pesticides and fertilisers. The high cost of locally produced food also generated negative feedback. To take a look at the survey, go to: primarypurpose.co.nz/news

Get focused



A reminder to get snapping on your phone or camera and capture deer in all their glory for the 2025 MSD Animal Health Deer Industry Photo Competition. There are great prizes on offer: \$500 for the winner; \$150 for runner-up; \$100 for third place; \$150 and a free one-year-membership to the Elk/Wapiti Society for Elk/Wapiti category winner; a premium gift pack for the People's Choice winner, and framed photos of all the winning shots. Entries close 5pm, Friday 25 April 2025. Last year's winning shot was from Kristen Rowe, while the People's Choice shot was snapped by Mike Thomas.

Flipping good time



FAMILY TIME: (L TO R) Jock, Tom and Jock Richmond at work on the Central Regions' fundraising BBQ last year.

In a long-established tradition, the Central Regions DFA branch went flipping mad at their Central Districts Field Days stand, serving up around 2000 venison burgers.

"It's a fundraiser and a way to promote venison, but also there's great camaraderie," branch chair Mike Humphrey says. "This year we had three generations from the Richmond family cooking on the BBQ."

The annual fundraiser was a branch highlight for 2024. Other

social highlights were the annual mid-winter Christmas dinner/AGM, and a September meeting attended by 60 members where DINZ board members and Colin Stevenson from CK Imports/Exports spoke, attracting around 60 people. Read about other DFA branch happenings and highlights (see page 20)

TB-Free

Chantee McCloy is the new TB-Free deer branch representative on the OSPRI committee, taking over from Malcolm Gilbert. McCloy, a Canterbury vet, says fellow vet Lorna Humm “voluntold” her into the role, but that she “loves the deer industry and am keen to support it.”



For more from McCloy, (see page 31), as well as find out about Gilbert’s special award acknowledging his deer industry contribution (see page 8.)

Hunting and shooting museum



Deer hunters rejoice as there’s a new national hunting and shooting museum and reference library at Deerstalkers House, Wellington. The museum was opened in mid-February by James Meager, Minister for Hunting and Fishing, and Nicole McKee, Associate Minister for Justice (Firearms).

The volunteer-run museum is designed to offer Kiwis a window into New Zealand’s rich hunting history and heritage by showcasing the big game species that live in the forests and mountains, including deer.

NZ Deerstalkers Association (NZDA) Chief Executive Gwyn Thurlow said the museum is a tribute to the generations of hunters and shooters whose passion for their sport has helped shape New Zealand’s outdoor recreational culture.

Bob Badland, founding trustee and chairman of the NZDA National Heritage Trust, said the NZDA is thrilled to unveil a living archive to New Zealand’s hunting and shooting legacy.

“This museum was a dream I had, and it’s a fitting tribute to the past, as well as a resource for the future, ensuring that the stories and achievements of our forebearers inspire generations to come.” ■

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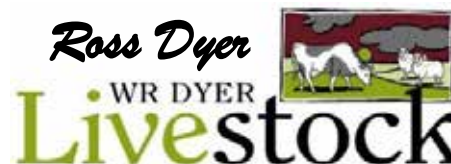
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Elk head

Glen Whyte, a third-generation deer farmer, is the new president of the Elk & Wapiti Society NZ (EWS). Glen and wife MJ live at Mount Possession with daughters Grace (2) and Morgan (1), where they farm 5000 deer, comprised of elk and wapiti and red velvet stags. Mount Possession is one of four Canterbury deer, sheep and cattle farms owned and run by Whyte Farming, a family company established by Glen's parents, Donald and Leigh. The deer side of the business is made up of weaner breeding and finishing, velvet and trophy head production, and the breeding and selling of wapiti terminal sires.

How long have you been a member of EWS?

I have been involved since I was a child, helping at velvet competitions and competing.

Why did you put your name forward for the president's role?

I have held the role before, and I think I have more to add to the EWS and the deer industry. The next generation needs to be made aware that elk farming can be a highly profitable farming enterprise. They also need to support this unique farming opportunity by joining the committee; if we don't step up, our society and our collective voice will disappear.

What is the role of EWS?

It's a breed society with 60 members that advocates for all elk and wapiti farmers and promotes the breed for the benefit of members. The goals of the society include:

- providing information and assistance for anybody interested in farming elk and wapiti
- driving changes to make farming elk and wapiti even more profitable
- undertaking research for the benefit of members
- providing a network of like-minded farmers passionate about elk and wapiti

What up-and-coming EWS activities are planned?

2026 will be our 40th velvet and hard antler competition, which will be held in Dunedin alongside the International Deer Biology conference.

Recent deer farming highlights

As we expand our business, MJ and I have just taken over the running of Edendale Deer. We bought all the stock and plant from the Whyte Farming Company and across our two properties. We now have a team of 14 staff, all hugely passionate about deer.

What do you enjoy about farming deer?

I really enjoy farming a unique animal and being involved in such an innovative industry, which is striving to lead the way in all aspects of farming. We're proactive and don't sit back waiting to be told how to farm.

Is there anything you don't enjoy about farming deer?

This year, I'm deeply disappointed that a few people have been able to drop the velvet market price as dramatically as they have,

resulting in a more than 20 percent drop in income for most velvet producers. We need to ensure as an industry we don't allow these people to dictate the price we get for our high-end product. We need to stick together and communicate better to prevent a repeat of this year's collapse of red deer velvet prices. I hope DINZ will take the lead in this.

Tell us a bit about the bison at Edendale Farming. How long have you had them, how many, and what do you do with them?

I have 120 bison, and they are my expensive hobby. I bought my first five animals in 2010 with the view of supplying a niche market with bison meat. There are a few challenges to overcome to make this happen, such as finding a processor who has the capability to process a very agile horned animal. Currently I supply a limited number of bulls into the trophy market each year.

What are your interests beyond farming?

I enjoy spending time with my young family, teaching my girls all about deer farming. I also enjoy going fishing out at sea when I get the chance, which isn't very often.

What's planned farming-wise for 2025?

We'll keep doing what we do best, producing top-quality velvet and venison. ■



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Modest Malcolm honoured

Malcolm Gilbert says he was honoured and humbled by the life membership presentation at the Canterbury-West Coast DFA February field day.



A JOB WELL DONE: Malcolm Gilbert (far right) after receiving a NZDFA CaWC branch life membership, with John Tacon (left) and Tony Pearse. PHOTO: Lindsay Fung

“I don’t think I’ve done anything out of the ordinary,” he says. It’s a predictable response from the likes of Gilbert – quiet, unassuming practical people, whose actions make a real difference.

In presenting the award, CaWC branch member John Tacon said feedback from other members mentioned Gilbert’s practical and down to earth approach, as well as his sound and logical reasoning, which had served the branch well over the years. Gilbert has been a CaWC member for more than 30 years, filling the chair’s role for two stints, which was an impressive effort. It was his involvement in TB management and control, however, that has earned him outstanding contribution status.



BACK IN THE DAY: Malcolm Gilbert in dogged pursuit of TB.

Like many other deer farmers during the 1990s, Gilbert and wife Dawn faced the devastation and stress of the disease. In 1992, the first of many TB reactors were detected on their North Canterbury farm at Omaha, bringing with them huge financial costs, extra work, and also questions from Gilbert about how and why the disease was spreading. Speaking out got him elected to the Canterbury Regional Health Committee and eventually into the position of committee chair, a role held for 14 years. Over the same time, Gilbert facilitated 20 local farmer self-help groups, which carried out the control and monitoring of TB-carrying pests. His dedication in helping fight the battle against TB earned him the 2006 Matuschka Award. The testimonies supporting that award summed up Gilbert’s

dedication, contribution and commitment to the DFA “and the mana he holds in the deer farming community,” Tacon says.

Gilbert says he was chuffed to receive the award. An almost-retired deer farmer, he helps out with velvetting on a farm owned by a newcomer to the industry. It’s a win-win situation. “He’s on a learning curve, I’m happy to help, and I get my deer fix.” ■

Changing of the guard

Grant Hasse stepped aside as president at the Elk & Wapiti Society AGM, saying that after four years, the time was right for a change, and he was pleased with what had been achieved.



IN AND OUT: Outgoing EWS president Grant Hasse (left) and incoming president Glen Whyte.

“I went in with the mandate to raise the profile of the society, and I think we’ve achieved that.”

The society has worked hard to build relationships within the industry, with a successful example of that work seen in the society’s co-hosting of the 2023 Next Generation event in Ashburton, Hasse said.

Taking over the president role is Glen Whyte (see page 6). Committee members are Geoff Pullar, Tony Pullar, John Falconer, Tracey McLean, Callum McLean, Laura Waller, David Morgan and Grant Hasse.

The AGM was part of the society’s Waitangi weekend gathering in Cromwell, attended by 40 people. Notable this year was the family representation.

“We had young and old, and the May family had three generations present. It was great to see that family connectivity,” Hasse said.

The sponsorship by Hawker Velvet, Clachanburn Elk and Mountain River Venison was greatly appreciated, he said.

At the AGM, a presentation was made to former AgResearch scientist and deer advocate Jamie Ward in recognition of his work and support of the society.

The velvet competition, the event’s major drawcard, attracted 30 velvet and nine hard antler entries from seven farms. The ‘Champion of Champions’ and winner of the Open Non-typical Elk Wapiti Hard Antler was Whyte Farming, while the Reserve Champion of Champions was Achnahanat. ■

Wild deer out of control

Wild deer are out of control, reported a recent *Waikato Times* story pointing to Department of Conservation statistics that showed ungulates – hoofed animals including deer and goats – occur at 82% of sites on DOC-managed public conservation land, an increase from 63% in 2013.



Photo: PXHere

DOC said the increases had been more pronounced in the North Island, a key reason being reduced commercial helicopter recovery of wild venison due to a drop in demand from international markets.

Waikato vet, deer farmer and 2004 Deer Industry Award winner Ian Scott explained in the story that although the price for farmed venison had picked up post-Covid, the picture for wild venison was much bleaker. When the price dived during Covid, aerial venison recovery operators started selling or not replacing helicopters, and the market hadn't fully recovered. At the same time pine tree planting in the back country had reduced the need for spraying work by helicopter operators, further reducing their income.

But pine planting created a perfect environment for deer, thanks to the clover and grasses growing between the tiny pine seedlings.

Scott said funding was needed to control the population of wild deer and he was critical of land being retired to the conservation estate in places like Molesworth Station.

Meanwhile, Federated Farmers pest management spokesperson Richard McIntyre said DOC didn't adequately control pest species on its land, meaning animals overflowed onto neighbouring farms. A survey of Feds' members showed wild animals were costing farmers at least \$213 million annually, including both pest control and lost production costs.

Forest and Bird's Nicky Snoyink says her organisation's own bush reserves are being hammered by wild deer coming from public conservation land. She is part of a wild animal coordination group established by DOC, pushing for an integrated approach that puts biodiversity at the forefront

Forest and Bird wrote to key government agencies in December asking for a nationally coordinated approach and increased funding.

She says there is an opportunity for the ministers of conservation and primary industries and the new Minister of Hunting and Fishing to call for a coordinated approach to wild animal control across all land tenure.

DOC national programmes director Ben Reddiex said numbers of deer and goat species had increased in farm/forest margins where good feed is readily available on the farmland and where control work has not been undertaken.

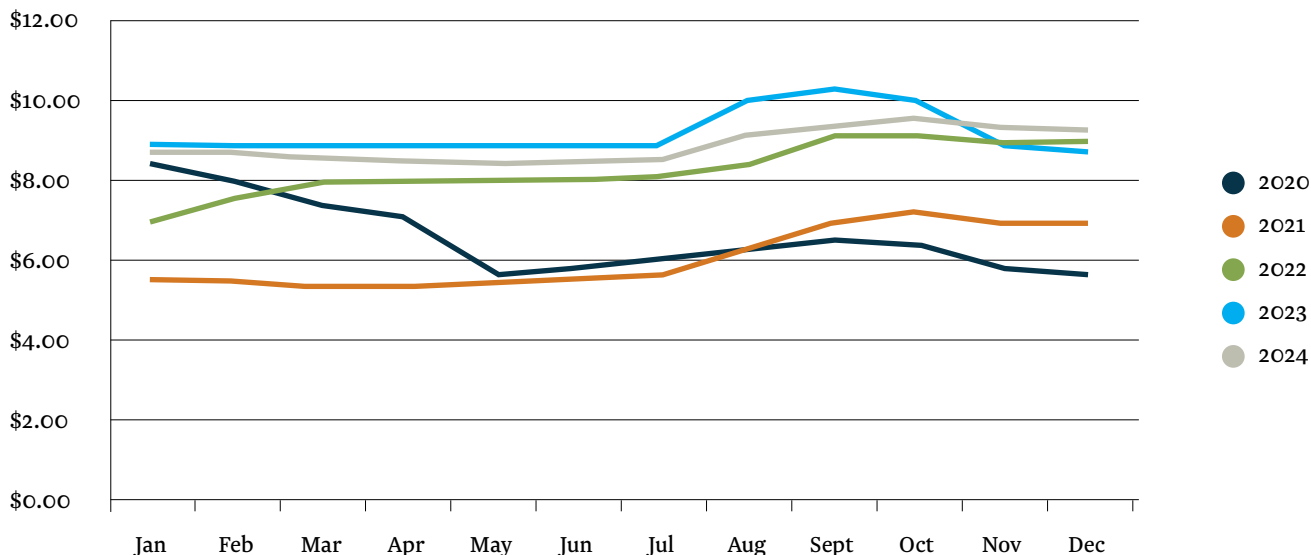
The solution lay in better collective effort by all stakeholders to find solutions, rather than DOC reprioritising management at farm/forest margins over areas of high biodiversity value, he said.

Newly appointed Hunting and Fishing Minister James Meager said high numbers of wild animals were a complex matter with no easy solution.

"Sensible, common-sense management will need lots of groups working closely together to be effective."

Watch this space! ■

National published schedule for farmed deer: 2020 - 2024 (monthly average)



Going for gold

All roads lead to Queenstown for the deer industry's annual conference, this year being the Golden Anniversary of the NZDFA.



DEER INDUSTRY CONFERENCE

50 years of NZDFA



Registrations are open for Conference 2025: 50 Years of the NZDFA. Visit the Deer Industry website deernz.org for details.

The tourist mecca played host to the 1985 and 2000 events, and so is the appropriate venue for the milestone 50-year celebration.

This year's annual get-together is unlikely to have the glitz, glamour, and excess of 1985, but conference convenor Lindsay Fung is promising an enticing mix of nostalgia, thought-provoking chat, and entertainment.

Confirmed as *Deer Industry News* went to print was attendance by Minister of Agriculture Todd McClay (subject to availability), adventurer and motivational speaker Kevin Biggar, and the field day venue of Fairlight Station.

Southland deer farmer David Stevens attended the 1985 and 2000 conferences, recalling both as memorable for varied reasons. The stand-out from the 1985 event, which attracted more than 900 people, was the entertainment and catering.

"It was massive, it was exciting, and there was a huge mix of people," he says.

"There were local deer farmers, Auckland and corporate businessmen, and politicians all rubbing shoulders and caught up in the hype of deer farming."

The corporate businessmen, or 'Queen Street farmers,' lured to

the deer farming industry by generous tax breaks, had helped fast-track development of the industry, he says.

In 1985, everyone was riding high on the first decade of success and was in the mood to celebrate. The organising committee didn't disappoint. Led by local deer farmer Rob Brookes, the group booked out three floors of a downtown hotel. He spared no expense, and Stevens says the financial outcome of the conference was never revealed because Brookes underwrote it all.

The 1985 conference and post-conference activities, which included a couple of deer sales and an optional flight to Invermay to check in on deer-related research, was spread over five days.

Brookes made the impossible happen, such as bringing the *TSS Earnslaw* out of dry dock for split sailings to and from Kingston. In the lead up to the conference dinner, he got truckloads of gravel delivered and spread onto one of the floors, creating the footprint of a goldmining village through which delegates could wander.

The banquet-style conference dinner featured bathtubs full of expensive booze and tables of platters piled high with crayfish, oysters and (of course) venison.

“It blew everyone away; it really was an amazing experience.”

Stevens watched in awe from the sidelines during the business-side of the conference as some of the corporate deer farming investors, skilled and proficient in the etiquette and process of meetings, engaged in lively debates.

The big topic of discussion was whether compulsory TB testing should be introduced. The proposal was overwhelmingly supported by the NZDFA but after further deliberations post-conference, it was shelved for a few years. There was also unanimous support for producer-funded market development, highlighting “farmer willingness to front up with the resources needed to ensure that NZ venison and velvet exports have a profitable long-term future,” *The Deer Farmer* editor Trevor Walton noted in a conference review.

The conference left those who attended in no doubt that the only way was up for the trailblazing pastoral sector. They were proven wrong when six months later the brakes went on investment as the new Labour government rolled out agricultural reforms and a new tax regime.

“I remember the day well,” Stevens says.

“It was 12 December 1985, the day that Roger Douglas, then Minister of Finance, changed the livestock tax scheme.”

Silver to Gold

Stevens was a sideline participant at the first Queenstown conference but in the limelight as NZDFA president at the 2000 event, attended by around 400 people. He recalls a few periods of stress for him, including the occasional reining in of some of the 280 members attending the AGM.

The ‘Silver to Gold’ conference, celebrating 25 years of the NZDFA, didn’t have the hype and excitement of 1985, but the industry was “humming along well”.

“Prices for venison were good, NZDFA membership was 2900, and there were about 5000 farms with deer in New Zealand.

“We didn’t have the same number of corporate investors, but we had evolved into a structured industry,” Stevens says.

Governor General Sir Michael Hardie Boyes paid tribute to the vision and courage of deer farming’s pioneers during his opening address.

The entertainment had toned down from 15 years earlier, although people got into the spirit of things – including Sir Peter Elworthy, the inaugural NZDFA president – who bought an auctioned swede for \$1000.

A highlight for Stevens was a President’s Roll Call, a lineup of the men (or a family representative) who had led the DFA over the first 25 years.

Stevens didn’t think he’d be coming along to the 2025 conference, “but I’m still putting stags out, so I’ll be going and am looking forward to it.”

Although it will be a downsized event from the previous Queenstown events, he’s confident the can-do attitude that built the industry over the first 50 years will prevail.

“We’ve always fought above our weight size-wise, and we need to keep doing that.” ■



KEYNOTE SPEAKER: At the 1985 conference, David Yerex (centre) – the NZDFA’s first secretary, first editor of *The Deer Farmer* and author of three deer farming books – overviewed the rise of the industry since the formation of the NZDFA in 1975. He concluded that deer farming had “a somewhat unconventional upbringing, but now as it enters its teens, has all the attributes to grow to greatness.”



SILVER TO GOLD: The 2000 conference was a downsized and more sedate version of 1985, but the industry was humming along, David Stevens says.

SAME BUT DIFFERENT: The years have rolled by, but the industry mandate has stayed the same, Stevens says, reflecting on the address he made at the 2000 NZDFA AGM. “I said that the consumer is our judge, that quality is demanded, and that perception is paramount. As producers, we had to continue to sell healthy, price-stable product raised in a way that supports animal and environmental values....it just goes to show that nothing has changed.”



Pāmu confidence in deer industry sees investment in future

Production and productivity will be a sharpened focus for Pāmu Farms of New Zealand in 2025, according to Pāmu General Manager (Lower South Island) Grant McNaughton, speaking at a tour of three Pāmu deer farms in the Te Anau Basin. The tour was put on by Pāmu as they look to expand their deer numbers.

“We wanted to put on this field day to show that we are confident in the deer industry and in our farming systems, that we are investing in our deer strategy, in genetics, and in infrastructure,” McNaughton said. “We’re all about production and productivity going forward and getting more return on investment from the land through optimising our farming systems.”



Grant McNaughton gives a rundown of Pāmu deer operations in Te Anau

The farms toured were Haycocks, Mararoa and Lynmore stations, in that order – starting with the steeper terrain of Haycocks Station, around 40km from Te Anau. At Haycocks, attendees were given a brief overview of Pāmu’s deer involvement and operations. After that, farm manager Paul Ewing gave a short history of Haycocks Station before leading discussions around mating, wintering and fawning in an extensive farming environment.

The farm maps provided showed the challenges of farming Haycocks, with the farm long and narrow (37km from end to end),

meaning moving stock could be a challenge requiring adequate forethought. But Ewing, manager of Haycocks for 32 years, is well-versed in such matter. He’s seen a lot in his time managing the station, including the introduction of deer, 180km of deer fencing erected over three years, and the development of the Hikurangi block at the northern end, incorporated into Haycocks Station in 2008.

From Haycocks, the convoy of white utes and orange vests headed to Mararoa Station, once owned by Sir Tim Wallis’s Alpine Deer Group back in the 1970s-80s, where manager Matt Canton talked about terminal (hybrid) breeding with red deer x wapiti and their flexible approach to weaning. At Mararoa, 40 percent of their hinds are mated with wapiti as they look to supply North American demand for larger cuts.

Canton also discussed their flexible approach to weaning, where they don’t decide on post-or pre-rut until six months out, when factors such as available feed and hind conditions are weighed up.

And finally, it was on to Lynmore Station and its Telstar block, where the conversation turned to finishing. The Telstar block has traditionally been used as the finishing grounds for Haycocks weaners, though weaners from other Pāmu farms, namely Eyre Creek and Mount Hamilton, have also sent weaners for finishing in recent years.



Wayne Webb, farm manager at Lynmore Station, talked about the integrated system between Lynmore and Haycocks, but also talked more about team culture and the importance of building a strong culture among its younger team members. The degree of open communication between the three farm managers was also mentioned as a key component of the farms' successes.

Another area of interest was the various registered QEII covenants across the stations – 373ha at Haycocks, 458ha at Mararoa and 90ha at Lynmore – with an acknowledgement that there are more high-value ecological sites to be investigated. Water testing and quality was also covered, with a clear commitment to ongoing measuring and monitoring of stream health.

“With Pāmu New Zealand’s biggest deer farmer, it was exciting to hear that they are committing to deer due to confidence in the industry,” DINZ CEO Rhys Griffiths said. “It was also good to have some of our DINZ team out in the field with deer industry stakeholders, sharing what DINZ is focused on in those all-important side conversations.” ■

This article originally appeared in *DINZ eNews*.



Haycocks	Mararoa	Lynmore
6,220 eff ha	4,561 eff ha	2,289 eff ha
365 ha QEII	603 ha QEII	86 ha QEII
40,030 S.U. wintered (July 24), 5400 hinds	41,091 S.U. wintered (July 24), 4160 hinds	23,646 S.U. wintered (July 24), 2400 weaner deer
4739 fawns weaned	3900 hinds mated, 40% to wapiti terminal sires	2557 yearling deer finished in 23/24
20% replacement rate	20% replacement rate	54.15 kg/av carcass, \$9.12 kg/av price, \$520 /hd avg

Farm	MA hind	Ylg hind	MA stag	Ylg stag
Haycocks	5414	999	274	53
Mararoa	4162	1555	163	1557
Lynmore	0	574	0	1828
Lower SI total (9 Pamu farms)	18,542	6032	1227	6130

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More inside knowledge

Deer farmers are “cautiously optimistic,” according to results from a recent DINZ survey.

“The sentiment of the deer farming industry is mixed but leans towards cautious optimism,” DINZ Policy and Research Manager Emil Murphy says.



SNAPSHOT: The survey is a starting point for guiding DINZ policy, Emil Murphy says.

The aim of the late 2024 survey was to gauge farmer sentiment and intentions for the future, their attitudes towards farm planning, and also better quantify the current structure of the industry.

“To make good decisions, you need access to the right information, and that was the underlying driver of the survey – to get the information we didn’t have, and add that to what we have, to get a better understanding of where we are now and where the industry is heading.”

Survey results were based on feedback from 144 farmers randomly selected to proportionally represent the geographical spread of deer farming across the country. At the same time, NZDFA branches contacted many of their respective members, and we were pleased to see some similarities with the information from the larger survey, which was incredibly helpful

The survey was successful in throwing more light on a topic of much discussion – how to interpret the number of deer processed. Following Covid, the number of hinds killed increased to form a larger proportion of the kill than stags. However, at the end of last year, venison processors reported that 19,000 fewer animals were processed than projected.

“The reduction was in both stags and hinds. However, the number of hinds slaughtered is falling at a faster rate compared to stags,” Murphy says.

Anecdotal reports to DINZ directors and staff point to an increase in deer numbers, with this position supported by feedback from Advance Party groups, the NZDFA branch chairs network and deer agents.

“We believe that there is a modest firming of herd numbers, based on future intention feedback from farmers,” Murphy says.

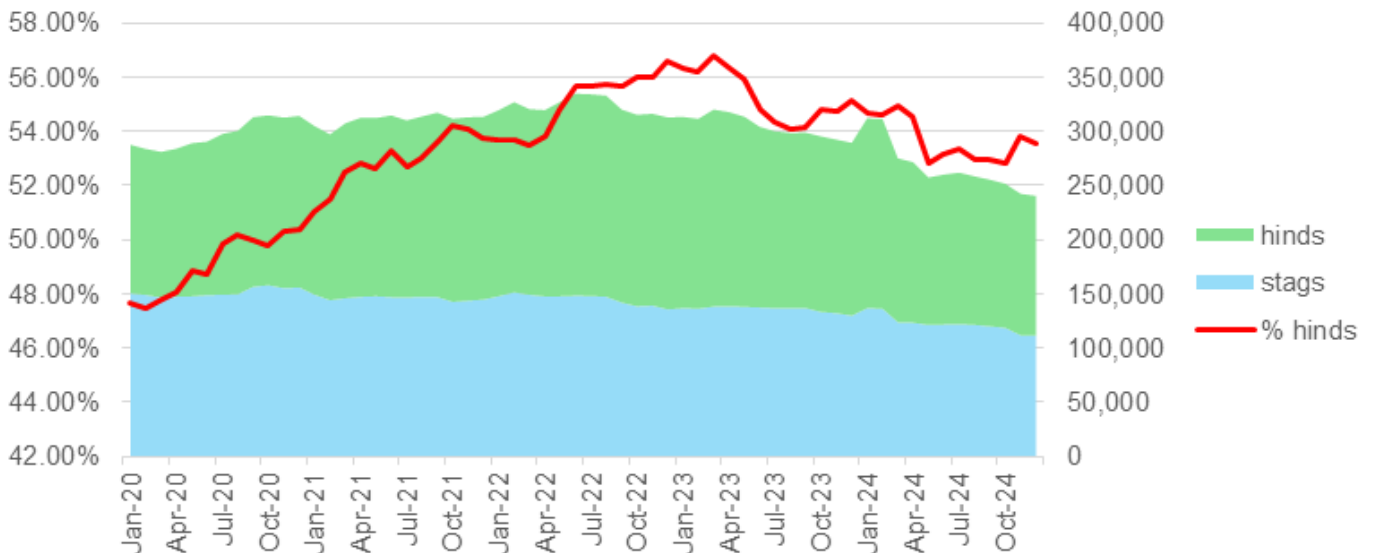
The survey provided updated information on the structure of the industry, highlighting the diversity in farm sizes and the distribution of deer across different operations. The collected data showed that an average-sized deer enterprise farms about 720 deer, with venison-focused operations on average farming slightly fewer animals. About three-quarters of farms with deer also farmed other livestock species.

While velvet-focused farms were the main ones that had increased numbers over the last three years, there was no difference between the future intent of venison and velvet operations going forward.

... the average-sized deer enterprise farms about 720 deer, with venison-focused operations on average farming slightly fewer animals.

Younger farmers, or farmers who have farmed deer for less than 10 years, were more likely to increase their deer numbers. This was also true for larger-scale farmers. These farmers were also more likely to adopt new regulations and practices and showed higher interest in integrated farm planning (IFP).

Animals processed



“In general, farmers are wary of the challenges posed by regulatory changes and the effort required to comply with new standards. Smaller-scale farmers in particular are less likely to see the benefits of integrated farm planning and are more resistant to change,” Murphy says.

Owners of smaller farms and those farming for longer expressed more concerns about the future.

“They are slightly more likely to reduce their herd size, but the majority are looking to maintain current numbers.”

Two-thirds of the farmers who were looking to reduce their herd size said this was due to planned retirement. But Murphy adds that their plans for retirement were influenced by frustration due to the constant changes in environmental regulations and the perceived burden of compliance.

Overall, there was a recognition of the efforts and support provided by DINZ. However, industry feedback reflected a need for more practical, streamlined, and supportive approaches to help farmers navigate regulatory requirements and adopt new practices.

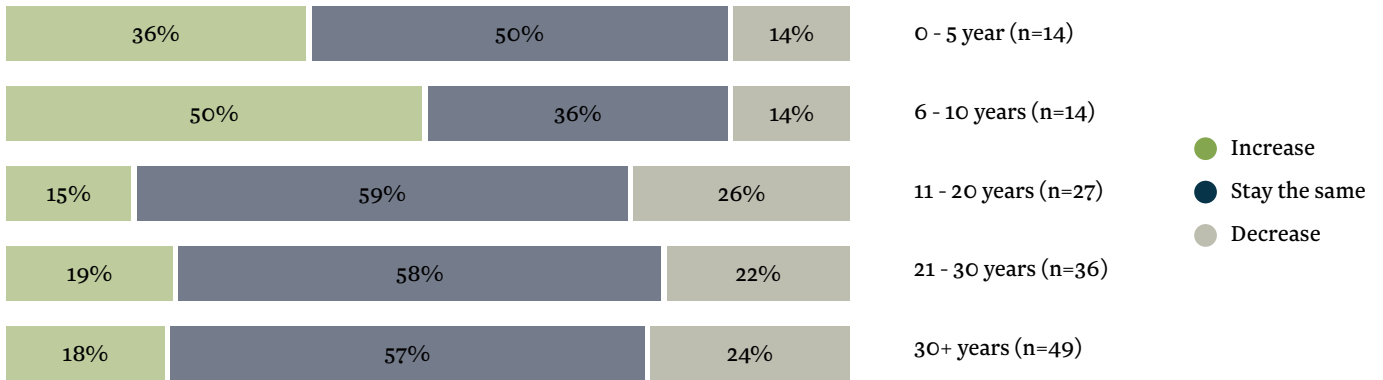
The survey results represent a snapshot in time, Murphy says.

“They are a starting point to help inform and guide DINZ activities and advocacy. It will be followed on by other efforts to capture changes and developments in the industry.” ■



HIND TURNAROUND: The survey shows that the hind slaughter rate is slowing. Photo: Jennifer Jopson

Future deer number change expectations by years in deer farming



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Game plan pays off

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

Venison supplied by Silver Fern Farms has been crucial to the success of the UK's largest venison business, Highland Game.

“New Zealand venison has helped me retain business and will continue to help me in growing the British market,” Highland Game founder and chief executive Christian Nissen says.



KEY INPUT: Silver Fern Farms' venison has been instrumental in growing the Highland Game business, Christian Nissen says.

The Dundee-based business processes about 80,000 carcasses a year into primal and value-added cuts, as well as smallgoods distributed to wholesalers and 5000 retail points throughout the country. Retail partners include Tesco, Sainsbury's, Aldi, and Morrisons.

Venison is now regarded by UK consumers as an “occasional protein alternative” to other red meats.

The business is based on wild deer harvested from mostly national-owned forest and estate land throughout the UK. Highland Game has nine longstanding contracts with Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS), the government agency managing the land. The company has 400 wild venison suppliers, the largest one (FLS) supplying 44,000 carcasses a year.

Silver Fern Farms (SFF) frozen boneless meat cuts have been sourced over the past 15 years to bridge any local supply shortfall. The big advantages of dealing with SFF is the quality assurance.

“I can buy what I need when I need it, but the really important point is that it's consistent quality.”

Venison is now regarded by UK consumers as an “occasional protein alternative” to other red meats, Nissen says.

It's an accepted red meat alternative, and market demand is growing. It is not, however, an essential food, and the market could very easily collapse.

While complimentary of the NZ-supplied product, he's concerned about the limited availability, which is pushing up price. He's aware of the reason for the price increases – reduced venison production due to land use change – but he questions whether the higher farm gate prices are sustainable.

“I guess the [New Zealand] farmer will say, ‘Well, if we don't get that price, then there won't be any availability,’ but the fact is that if it becomes too expensive, demand will likely fall.”

Spelling his message out further, Nissen said if New Zealand venison became too expensive, he'd stop buying it, because Highland Game products would become too expensive for uptake by wholesalers and retailers.

“If that happens, it will be difficult to get back [on shelves] because venison is not an essential food item.”

The end point and solution was to somehow achieve a sustainable price for both farmers and venison consumers, he said.

Danish disruptor

Visionary thinking and follow-through have steadily grown Highland Game's scale and dominance of the UK venison market.

As his name suggests, Christian Nissen is not a born and bred Scottish laird. He is Danish. Nissen moved to Scotland in 1997 to buy the Highland Game business, eyeing the opportunity to grow and develop the UK's appetite for wild harvested venison.

Adamant from the beginning of the need for a high-quality product, he developed strict rules and standards around the harvest-handling and further processing of carcasses supplied and venison processed.

In the beginning, his hard-line requirements were met with resistance from operators in the wild game market, which at the time treated venison as a by-product of hunting and estate management. They were less than complimentary about the outsider with big ideas.

“I came over here as a ‘bloody foreigner’ with no experience in food production. I was young and a bit weird and determined to take the venison industry forward,” Nissen explains.

Changing that mindset to elevate wild UK venison to a desirable, natural protein resource was the thinking behind his overall strategy.

“I knew that quality was the first thing I had to deliver on, because I knew that if I improved the quality of the product supplied, I could up-sell it.”

Highland Game's quality management system – which since July last year includes the use of lead-free bullets – is British Retail Consortium accredited, a globally accepted food safety standard.

Getting the standards developed and in place was a mammoth job, and implementation caused fall out with some wild venison suppliers who refused to adopt the prescribed practices. That led

to a shortfall in supplied animals and meant Nissen had to look further afield – to New Zealand and SFF – to fill demand.

The UK appetite for venison is growing, Nissen says, and his goal is to move from seasonal to year-round availability.

“In the future, I foresee a growth in the sales of British product over the October to March period.”

He looks back with satisfaction on the rise of the business from a 10,000–15,000 carcass business to the 80,000 of today. This happened through repositioning UK wild venison with the help of quality standards and also adding value, introducing consumers to convenient cuts and smallgoods products.

Highland Game venison is well placed in the meat space as it’s regarded as a healthy protein and is backed with globally recognised standards. The venison also ticked environmental boxes; it was grown in a low carbon environment, and its harvesting helped in the protection and conservation of natural habitats.

There’s potential to grow Highland Game in line with increasing UK demand, but Nissen’s limiting factor is capacity. He’s maxed out space-wise at the Dundee processing plant.

“The question is do we continue doing what we do well, or are we looking at growth? If we are looking at growth, then we need to be value adding and that means more space.”

That will mean extending and growing supply with extra locally sourced animals and New Zealand venison – price permitting.

Stags in Quilts

Deer Industry News visited Highland Game ten days before Christmas. It was a manic and busy time, with staff working all hours to dispatch 30,000 ten-pack ‘Stags in Quilts’, – small venison, pork and cranberry sausages wrapped in bacon. Produced for Aldi, they’re the venison equivalent of ‘pigs in blankets’ a traditional and popular side dish to Christmas roast turkey. The product was created as a publicity stunt three years ago.

“There’s absolutely no money in them, given the time they take to make, but they are a very important part of our offering,” Nissen says.

Other value-added products – such as burgers, sausages, meatballs, kebabs and steaks – had also been important in growing demand and awareness of venison. ■

“Highland Game is the number one retail packer in the country for venison,” Silver Fern Farms UK general manager John Whitlam says.

SFF can supply product year-round, but the main supply period is April until September.

The most popular cuts and products are leg steaks, diced venison, sausages, meat balls, grill steaks and burgers.

NUMBER ONE: Most of the venison supplied by Silver Fern Farms to the UK is for Highland Game.



XMAS HIT: Stags in Quilts



QUALITY BACKED: Highland Game products are British Retail Consortium accredited, a globally accepted food safety standard.

Q2 in the books for NARA project

The North America Retail Accelerator (NARA) programme, supported by the Ministry for Primary Industries’ Sustainable Food and Fibre Futures fund, continues to gain momentum, with promising signs that our shared industry goals are well on track.

“It’s been a strong start, and while there’s still plenty of work ahead, the commitment from farmers, exporters, and industry partners is clear,” DINZ CEO Rhys Griffiths says.

“With steady progress on market expansion, product innovation, and premium positioning, we’re well on track to achieve our long-term goals and drive strong commercial outcomes for New Zealand’s farmed deer sector.”

For the year until December 2024, New Zealand venison exports to North America were worth just over \$79 million, up almost 15 percent from around \$69 million in 2023, though 2023 figures are for the US alone while 2024 figures include exports to the nascent Canadian market.

The increase in exports to North America – into both the food service and retail markets – has shifted the makeup of New Zealand’s main venison markets, with North America now making up 43% of total venison exports, up from 39% to the US only in 2023.

New Zealand venison exporters have been busy setting themselves up for success, with several in-market initiatives and areas of focus with the programme now halfway through its first year.

“Retail training programmes have been successfully completed, and influencer marketing campaigns are underway,” says Virginia Connell, DINZ markets specialist. “This all helps to increase consumer awareness of New Zealand venison and encourage trial of products.”

Other initiatives include preparing for new product launches, with prominent New Zealand branding and packaging formats more tailored to big-box retailers. Ready-to-eat products have also formed a part of some market strategies, while another focus is on sustainability and good farming practices as companies look to

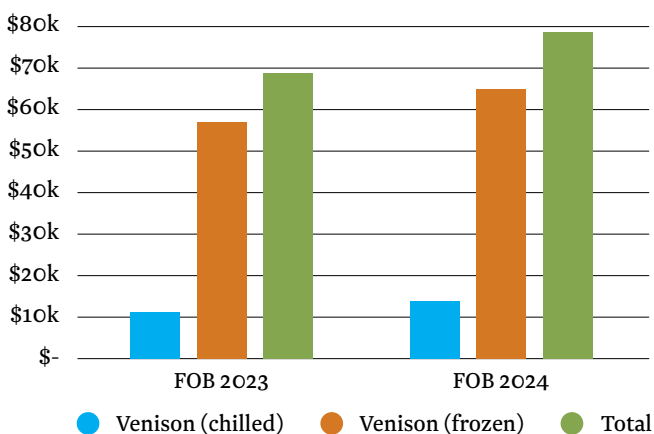
strengthen regenerative farming claims and position the quality work that goes into producing their venison.

DINZ will be working with NZ venison exporters and local US distributors at two upcoming tradeshows: the National Restaurant Association (NRA) Show in Chicago in May and the Summer Fancy Food Show in New York in the middle of the year. While it will be the deer industry’s second year of promotion at the NRA Show, it will be the first time at the Summer Fancy Food Show.

These high-profile events will provide “an excellent opportunity to engage directly with leading retailers, helping to sustain momentum and expand the footprint of premium farmed New Zealand venison in North America,” says Connell.

The North American Retail Accelerator project was set up between Deer Industry New Zealand, the five venison exporters, and MPI to jointly work toward our key objectives of boosting export revenue for the New Zealand farmed deer sector; increasing the volume and value of venison cuts sold into North American retail; and building year-round demand to reduce reliance on the seasonal European game market. ■

NZ venison exports to North America



DINZ chef Shannon Campbell at the National Restaurant Association tradeshow in 2024.

Cervidae Oral

Beat the worms this autumn by choosing Cervidae Oral, a drench made here in New Zealand especially for deer.

In the past, off-label drench products were used at higher dosage rates to control deer parasites. However, these combination products had variable degrees of effectiveness and required a 91-day default meat withholding period.

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As with all drenches, management is essential to ensure long-term efficacy. It is always recommended a sample of the mob for drenching is weighed and the dosage amount calibrated for the heaviest animal. The calibrating of drench guns and a reliable measuring cylinder are also important.

Any drench programme must have a minimum of 28 days between drenches to help slow the progression of resistance.

Alongside a drench plan, grazing and pasture management are essential to reducing the parasite burden in young stock. Where possible, use cross-species grazing, high pasture residuals, and forage crops to minimise the need for drenching.

Healthy deer tend to develop good immunity to parasites within their first year of life. Therefore, well-fed, well-conditioned adult deer should have little to no requirement for drenching. Exceptions may include wapiti sires post-rut, and a selection of poor condition or maiden hinds pre-rut or fawning.

For more tips on managing parasites and the benefits of Cervidae Oral, visit your local vet or rural retail store today, and check out the *Deer Parasite Management* booklet on DeerHub via the DeerNZ website.

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NZDFA Executive Committee: Chair Mark McCoard, Justin Stevens, Karen Middelberg, Evan Potter

The rap from the regions

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

As an industry, we need to get more hinds behind fences and rebuild the venison herd. That is the message from several branches of the New Zealand Deer Farmers Association (NZDFA), relayed to *Deer Industry News* by branch chairs when questioned about their branch hopes and aspirations for the coming year.

“We need to encourage farmers back to the industry and fence their hill country for hinds,” Hawke’s Bay chair Miles Hellberg says.

Like other branch members, he’s concerned about the decline in venison breeding due to land use changes, as well as velvet prices over recent years that have prompted farmers to swap hinds for velvet stags. Hellberg, a venison trader, says the shrinking hind herd is affecting his own business.

“My weaner supplier of seven years has sold out to trees. There are very few breeders left, and that’s a real concern.”

He says there’s good money to be made from breeding if it’s done well.

“When I started out, finishers got 60 to 65 percent of the pie. Now, that’s about 50 percent or less, and it’s what the breeder deserves. Our mission, and the deer industry’s mission, is to encourage those breeders.”

Central Regions branch chair, Mike Humphrey, says he’s reliably informed that the national hind kill is still over 50%, with the national 12-month rolling average at around 233,000. The downsizing of the industry, especially the venison side, is reflected locally. Over the last year, four branch member farms went on the market; one went out of deer and two were sold by one branch member to another where the deer stayed, but the emphasis shifted to velvet. Humphrey hopes that the devaluation in the NZ dollar will lift the schedule price over \$11/kg and encourage farmers back to venison production.



LIFT NEEDED: Central Regions chair Mike Humphrey hopes a lift in schedule price will entice farmers back to venison production.

“Hopefully that will grow the hind base because the industry is crying out for venison, especially hybrids.”

Another issue and concern of the Central Regions branch is the rise of feral deer. Southland branch chair Tony Roberts has the same concerns.

Feral deer numbers are increasing throughout Otago and Southland due to the increased planting of forestry plantations. He was aware that some farmers saw the free-ranging deer as a revenue opportunity.

“We need to educate farmers about the regulations and obligations of supplying deer and making them aware of how it could affect our industry.”

One of the topics of talk among South Canterbury branch members (beyond 2024’s velvet access issues) was the progress of velvet trial work.

“We’re interested to know where we are with the velvet research,” chair Mark Tapley says.

“Velvet is our golden ticket, so we really need to protect the industry.”

“We understand that the broader environmental issues are now DINZ-led, but we would like to see good communication with DFA branches, so we have a better understanding and a united voice.”

Farmer sentiment

How happy or otherwise are DFA branch members?



FERAL CONCERNS: Tony Roberts says the Southland DFA, along with other branches, are concerned about the rising population of feral deer.

On a scale of 1-10, both Hellberg and Roberts think farmer sentiment is somewhere between a six and seven.

“It’s above average. Venison prices are good, but the velvet [market access situation and resultant market conditions] has dragged down sentiment, which will take a while to settle,” Hellberg says.

Mark Tapley rates sentiment at seven.

“Members are happy and confident in the leadership of Rhys and Paddy.

“Venison is heading in the right direction; confidence is returning, and anecdotally we’re hearing of farmers getting back into deer.”

Dragging down confidence levels is the unsold velvet sitting in freezers around the country, which Tapley says is “the elephant in the room.”

“The situation is out of the hands of DINZ, but it’s still concerning.”

Farmer sentiment in the Bay of Plenty is variable, somewhere between a five and seven.

“It all depends on who you talk to,” acting BOP chair Liz Love says.

“The velvet market has been a real concern, and the dry is starting to kick in.”

Canterbury-West Coast interim chair Grant Hasse is more conservative, settling for a somewhere around a five or six.

“The word is that there is still a reasonable number of hinds being sent for slaughter. There’s also velvet stags going the same way, so the question is why? Is it simply farmers tidying up herds or something else?”

But despite the ifs and buts, farmers seem reasonably happy to keep farming deer.

“They’re committed to the industry and feel confident to invest.”

Looking ahead

Special events and projects are on the drawing board for most branches.

Southland is keen to lodge a science funding application under the new DINZ project assessment and funding framework.

“We want to see from a farmer perspective how the process works,” Roberts says.

A likely topic is the use of electronic collars beyond virtual fencing, looking at the potential of the technology to monitor behaviour and physiological changes.



VELVET UPDATE: The South Canterbury DFA would like a progress report on the velvet trials and research, chair Mark Tapley says.

Also, the branch is planning to familiarise graduate vets with deer farming.

“We have good local vet contacts who will be able to help us. It could be that we arrange a farm they could visit to learn about deer handling and management. We see it as a good way of giving back to the industry and for young vets to meet deer farmers,” Roberts says.

Also giving back and inspiring possible new blood is the Bay of Plenty branch and its members, who are hosting three to four groups from Tauranga Boys College in March, giving them a taste of deer farming. The branch-college relationship started three years ago, Love explains.

“They have a college tutor who is very keen to get the boys engaged in agriculture, and he approached us to see how we could help.”

Members have fostered the relationship with on-farm visits and an annual award to the top agriculture student, jointly funded by the branch and DINZ.

Beyond the college initiative, Love said branch members had indicated interest in visiting an indoor wintering deer facility.

South Canterbury had a full-on 2024, culminating in the inaugural and hugely successful Young Deer Farmer competition. It was both an educational and social event, says Mark Tapley, and will be run biennially.

Another branch to run with a new and successful event was the Hawke’s Bay branch’s Deer to Succeed day. It will be held again this year with a new topic format, Hellberg says.

Membership and succession

NZDFA membership has decreased by 203 over the past five years to 986 (2023/24). Retaining members and encouraging succession onto branch committees is a concern for many of the branch chairs spoken to.

Miles Hellberg is one of the newest chairs, taking on the role six months ago after incumbent Evan Potter moved to the NZDFA executive committee. Hellberg has chaired local Red Meat Profit Partnership (RMPP) and Advance Party groups so is comfortable in the chair role.

“I felt it was time to give back. I’ll try to keep things positive and help the industry keep kicking on,” he says.

But some are stepping back, such as South Canterbury’s Mark Tapley and Bay of Plenty’s Liz Love.

Tapley has led the branch for almost four years and will resign from the chair role at the April AGM. Liz Love has led the branch for a number of years and will call it quits at the next AGM but is happy to keep supporting the branch.

Canterbury-West Coast chair Lorna Humm stepped out of the chair’s role late last year, and Grant Hasse is now the interim chair. It will be a strictly limited term, he says, until a new committee with a plan for the future can be put in place. ■

Weaning recap-plus at Canterbury field day

Lynda Gray *Deer Industry News* editor

Blue-headed weaners were all part of the talk at a weaning and mating management field day run by the Canterbury-West Coast DFA branch in late January.

The relationship between colourful weaners and improved calf growth sounds tenuous, but it made perfect sense when explained by field day host, Stu Stokes. He was looking for a way to identify poor performing hinds by matching them with their progeny. DNA matching was considered, but Stokes had concerns about the cost and the accuracy given the line breeding nature of his operation.

Instead, he came up with a hands-on identification approach, painting a mix of blue food dye and a 'Milkeze'-type product onto the heads of the lighter-weight "pot licker" calves drafted from each weaning mob. The highlighted calves, when released from the yards, searched out mum for a comfort drink, leaving her with a blue flank – a tell-tale mark of a poor milker. Over the next couple of days, the mobs with the blue hinds and calves are brought back in, drafted off, and put with the weaner mobs. The hinds become nannies to the newly weaned animals before their one-way trip to the works.

Stokes added that the identification process has proven that poor milking hinds come in all shapes and sizes.

"The more information I gather makes me wonder if mastitis and udder issues that limit milk production are more prevalent than we realise. I think it's something the industry could research further."

"For me, the day highlighted that everyone's system is unique, and as a farmer you have to cherry pick what will work for you in your particular environment."

Danette McKeown

The innovative, easy and slightly left-field management hack works for Stokes and has helped lift the performance of his hind herd. His willingness to share this tip, explaining what he did and why, encapsulated the essence of the afternoon. It was an informative yet informal forum that gave attendees the opportunity to exchange ideas and revisit the basics of weaning and mating, field day facilitator Danette McKeown said.

"For me, the day highlighted that everyone's system is unique, and as a farmer you have to cherry pick what will work for you in your particular environment."



SMALL STEPS: Small changes and successes with weaning and mating are like compounding interest and returns – the work you put in now starts working for you in the future, field day facilitator Danette McKeown said.

In a catch-up conversation with *Deer Industry News* after the event, Stokes explained how weaning and mating rolled at Riverslea Farm, a velvet-focused system at Russell's Flat in the Selwyn district of Canterbury. His tips and advice were aimed at reducing stress and looking after the poorest performing hinds and calves.

"Regardless of stock class – breeding hinds, weaners or velvet stags – it's the easy way to lift your average. I'm always focused on the bottom ten percent because they're the ones that cost you money. The top ten percent look after themselves," Stokes said.

Planning in advance for weaning, completed around 25 February, was essential. At Riverslea, the process starts on 1 January when available feed and hind condition is gauged to assess if supplementary grain feeding is needed to maintain hind lactation and calf growth.

From mid-January, Stokes' focus turns specifically to the hinds.

"I want to make sure the hinds will get back in calf, rather than worrying about how big the calf is."

He visually assesses hind condition and if concerned or in doubt supplementary feeds.

The actual weaning process is kept as short as possible.

"Minimising the time in the yards is nothing new, but I think it's worth emphasising," he said.

Mobs of about 200 hinds with calves are brought into the yards. Once separated from mum, the calves are put on a trailer for



TOP TURNOUT: More than 80 people attended the Canterbury-West Coast DFA event.

For Stu Stokes, particularly satisfying was the number of young farmers who attended.

"We wanted to get the message across that we are approachable, and to encourage them to actively go after the information they need. It's cheaper to ask than making a mistake."

The organisers of the event achieved that goal judging by the many phone calls he's had since the field day.

a 20-minute drive to the home block. They get an industry-approved drench with magnesium added. Stokes described magnesium as a game changer in his own system because of its five-day calming effect on newly weaned animals.

Another innovative and simple example of Stokes' stressless management is the paddock training of weaners. A week or so after separation, he spends time driving slowly around the young animals, teaching them to mob up and move.

"It takes them about 20 to 30 minutes for them to get the idea," he said.

"If you do it a few times, it takes the stress out of shifting them or running them into the yards for the first time."

As well as successful management, Stokes was happy to share unsuccessful experiences.

"For a couple of years, I used dry hinds as nannies, and it was a disaster because they weren't interested in being around the weaners."

"I'm always focused on the bottom ten percent because they're the ones that cost you money. The top ten percent look after themselves."

Stu Stokes

He came to the conclusion that their stand-off behaviour was because they hadn't raised a calf that season and had quickly forgotten their mothering skills.

Stokes says he's a great believer in tweaking systems and management.

"If you tweak things, you own what you do. I'm always looking for small changes I can make and where I can do better. My biggest fear from working alone is getting tunnel vision."

What resonated with him at the field day was the discussion about the snowball effect of tweaks and small steps toward continuous improvement.

"It's true that the little changes and adjustments you make can snowball into big benefits."

At Riverslea, the blue head treatment was an example of a small change that had helped his hind herd. Other tweaks made over time were bringing forward weaning to February (a rarity a decade ago) and a zero tolerance toward aggressive animals

"We have a yellow tag system where anything that acts up gets a tag. The odds are it will misbehave again, so this gives me the confidence to cull it."

Weaning in drought

Last year was the toughest in Scott Hassall's farming career. Hellishly dry conditions on the Waikari Valley dryland farm had him supplementary feeding from 15 January until November.

It was an "ugly" year, although Hassall says that weaning went remarkably well. He stuck with the usual timeline, weaning in the first week of March.

Post-weaning feeding and management went as well as expected

in the ultra-dry conditions. The hinds got their usual rations, with supplements including silage and grain. The weaners grazed what was left of the lucerne stands and any brassica crops that hadn't folded up and disappeared. They were topped up with silage and grain fed from Advantage feeders.

Weaning and mating management tips

compiled by Canterbury-West Coast DFA field day contributors



Photo: Nic Bishop

- Small step changes over time add up
 - » a small lift in calving means more animals to sell and fewer dry hinds
 - » improvements in weaning potentially means faster growth rates, better feed utilisation, and earlier and/or higher conception rates
- Plan well
 - » get and maintain good facilities
 - » cull aggressive deer
- Make sure yards are dry and clean
 - » avoids foot and injection site infections
 - » avoids lung issues and infections
- Minimise stress at weaning
 - » minimise the time in yards
 - » tag before or after weaning
 - » drench only, with addition of magnesium
- Identify poor producing hinds
- If weaning onto a truck
 - » tag weaners at least a week beforehand
 - » have accurate numbers/ratios for trucking
- Post-weaning
 - » spend time in the paddock with weaners, teaching them to move as a mob
- In dry and drought risk areas
 - » Consider earlier weaning
 - » Don't delay weaning due to the dry, as it usually leads to lower in-calf rates.
 - » Weaning can reduce hind feed requirements by 20%.

Everything appeared to be going well – until it wasn't. The bombshell was the 20% dip in in-calf hinds, which Hassall thinks was due in part to the timing of weaning.

"I think it was one of the contributing factors, and it's something I will change for the future," he said.

"I took the risk, and I paid for it. I should have taken the calves off sooner. I put the weaners wellbeing ahead of the hinds."

It was a bitter learning experience, although the fallout and follow-up action led to a better (though downsized) hind herd, Hassall explained.

"We culled our hind herd heavily, taking out anything we didn't like the look of, and it's left us with the best hinds."

Almost 35 percent of the herd (300) was offloaded, reducing the herd to 550. The hind herd will be slowly rebuilt though maybe not back to pre-drought levels.

"We might look at carrying a few more velvet stags instead because they can get by on very little during summer and autumn, whereas hinds are working their hardest and it's when we normally have the least feed for them."

His advice to others facing the prospect of drought is to wean sooner.

"Holding off sucks the life blood out of the hinds, and it will affect your in-calf rates."



JUST DO IT: *If you're faced with drought, don't hold off weaning; wean sooner rather than later, Scott Hassall said.*

Stress-free

A stress-free weaning day boils down to doing as little as possible, Hassall said.

"It's something I've learnt over the years. Minimise the handling, start early, and get the job done before it gets too hot, but don't rush things. You have to have the right mindset and that makes a big difference over time.

He weans hinds and calves in social groups. They're formed post-Xmas after hinds and calves leave the fawning block and are gradually boxed up into what will become their weaning mobs.

"I've tried different mob scenarios over the years, separating big from small, and males from females, but I think the social groups work best."

At weaning, a mob is brought into the yards, and the hinds drafted off until 60 calves are separated as that's the number of weaners the trailer holds.

"We back the trailer in and drench them as they walk on to the trailer, then take them across the road to their paddock. The process, from when they come into the yards on mum and finish in their new paddock, takes about an hour for each mob."

Each weaner paddock has a few yearlings – the tail end of last year's weaners – to help settle the new weaners.

For more see: Deer Facts: Best practice weaning management, Drought feeding and management, and Best practice mating management, which can be found on the DINZ website. ■



CALMS THE FARM: *Stu Stokes (right, with mic) is a long-time advocate of magnesium at weaning. It has about a five-day calming effect on newly weaned deer.*

Rolling in the Wild West

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

The Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger famously described Invercargill as “the arsehole of the world,” following a performance in the city back in 1965. There’s no detail on what fuelled his outburst about the southernmost city, although it’s likely the Antarctic southerly squalls were a contributing factor. Southerly squalls are a regular happening at Lillburn Station, about 100 kilometres west of Invercargill, but the chill factor and the 1200 ml rainfall don’t dampen the spirits of the deer and the King family who farm them.



FAMILY-RUN: Darryl moved to Lillburn with his parents in the mid-1970's. He married Nicky in 1984, and they had two children, Jamie and Kate. The King family - Darryl (left) and Nicky, Jamie and Nicole, and Kate and husband Scott, are shareholders of Lillburn Station Limited, which rents the land off the King Family Trust. Jamie and Nicole oversee the cattle and deer; Kate and Scott the sheep; while Darryl is the “chief truck and digger driver, grand-kid supervisor and general handyman.”

Lillburn Station

Sheep, cattle, deer breeding and finishing, and a Hereford stud on 2200ha (1650ha effective) of rolling and hill country, ranging from 100 – 300 masl in Lillburn Valley, Western Southland. Deer are farmed on 307ha across three blocks: Hindley (166ha), Wairoto (100ha) and Woolshed (28ha). Sheep contribute 40% of farm income, cattle 35% and deer 25%.

Stock

Deer (red)			
MA hinds	450	R2 replacement hinds	80
MA stags	140	R2 stags	50
weaners	380		
Sheep (crossbred)			
ewes & 2T	5150	hoggets	1560
rams	70		
Cattle (Hereford)			
R1 bulls	160	R1 & R2 heifers	250
R1 & R2 steers	240	MA cows (breeding and stud)	400
sire bulls	25		

Jamie King says he likes farming in “the Wild West,” and the deer love the climate and country.

But long, wet winters are a problem, with the predominantly clay-based soils of the hind wintering block quickly becoming waterlogged. How to minimise mud and keep the hinds happy over winter was a dilemma that King solved step-by-step over five years. He describes the end result – a concrete and wire mesh fenced 24m x 40 metre rectangular area with a 36-metre feeding face – as a “centralised feeding space” rather than a feed pad.

Up until 2018, the Kings carted and fed baleage every third day to the hinds that graze the Hindley block. It was a time-consuming exercise that made a lot of mud and “killed tractors.” On top of that was the wastage; about 400 bales of baleage was fed, but King reckons about 30% was trampled into the mud. There had to be a better way.

“Deer farming can be as complicated as you choose to make it. We choose to keep it simple.”

King started asking around for other winter feeding options and decided to try a gated fine-chopped silage bunker feeding system. An area was levelled off, and a bunker scraped out from the hilltop of a 30ha subdivided block with a gully and sheltered areas, as well as good tractor access.

For winter in 2019, the bunker was filled with around 700 tonnes of fine-chop silage for the feeding of 380 hinds. King assumed that with the barriers in place the deer would respect the feeding face boundary as they ate their way through winter, but he was wrong.

“They were up and over and under the gates because the face wasn’t big enough, and there was huge wastage,” he says.

The first attempt at centralised winter feeding wasn’t a huge success, but King could see the advantages and persevered.

Over the next three winters, several changes were made. The pad area was lined with gravel to reduce the mud and feed wastage, while the silage – expensive to produce – was replaced with baleage. In addition, the original barrier gates were replaced with specially made concrete and welded mesh barriers.

Over the same time, the number of hinds was altered. In 2020, about 420 hinds were wintered successfully, which encouraged King to up the numbers in 2021 to 480 and include first fawners. It was the wrong move.

“It was a disaster. There were too many and a lot of bullying.”

He realised that the ideal capacity was somewhere between 420 to 480, and for the last couple of seasons has wintered 450 hinds.

Last winter – the driest three months of the year – almost 450 hinds were wintered from late May until the second week of October. It was a brilliant run, King says, and has encouraged him to extend the feeding face to 48 metres to accommodate 520 hinds this winter. Instead of a single mob, the hinds will be split into three age groups to minimise any social hierarchy problems. The 30-hectare run-off running from the centralised feed area will be subdivided into three, giving each mob access to a section of the feeding face.

“That will give about one metre per ten hinds to the feeding face, which I know is about right.”

Feeding management

From late April, the hinds and fawns are supplemented with baleage to accustom the hinds to the winter rations. This also adds about five to six kilograms of liveweight to the fawns.

Around 180 to 240 rounds of baleage are fed throughout the winter. The baleage is made on-farm so that quality can be monitored.

“I can’t stress enough how important quality is. I’ve tried lucerne, red clover, and oats and have found that good clean grass and red clover is best.”

His top feeding tip is to feed out any older baleage first.

“Once you start feeding out the new stuff, there’s no way you’ll get them to eat the older stuff.”

King is confident he has the winter feeding of hinds sorted, but he’s still struggling with weaner feeding, especially over the spring period.

“It’s Lillburn Valley, so we have late and cold springs, which can be hard on the weaners. There’s no green grass, the brassicas are spent, so it’s about finding something to fill that feed gap.”

He’s tried supplementing the young deer with barley with little success and is looking for a high performing green annual crop.

Last year, 14 hectares of ryecorn were grown and well received by



OPEN DOOR POLICY: Hinds fawn on this 92ha oversown tussock block from early October until early January. The gates are left open to give the hinds plenty of space for uninterrupted fawning.

yearling cattle, and so this year will be trialled with the weaners. Although it lacked a high protein content, it was an affordable and good feed gap-filling crop.

“We’ll give it a go and might supplement it with barley.”

Good fit

Lillburn Valley and the King’s farm have a long deer farming history. One of the first releases of deer happened along the road at Davis Flat in 1919, Darryl says. The Hindley block on Lillburn Station was owned back in the 1970s by legendary deer farming pioneer Rob Brookes.

Darryl was keen on deer and, spurred on by the pioneering farmers in the region, started live-trapping Fiordland hinds on the farm boundary, releasing them into a 40-hectare (100-acre) deer fenced area. From feral beginnings, the family progressively increased the deer fenced area and herd.

Up until this year, the deer were farmed on three separate blocks: Hindley in the north-west corner of the farm is the domain of the breeding hinds; Wairoto in the north-east corner is the home base for the velvet stags, as well as where Jamie and Nicole live; and the centrally located Cattle Yard block is home to the stud hinds used for breeding velvet replacements.



HAPPY DEER: Lillburn deer are run in a simple, low labour input system, and are always happy. Photo: Nicole Wallace



NEW BUILD: The old deer shed will be replaced by a new one on the Hindley block, Jamie says.

Jamie and Darryl like deer and how they fit with the feed growth curve and other farming activities. Darryl says they're "hugely significant" to the overall Lillburn system.

"They're almost important as the cattle."

Jamie says they're great to work with because "they don't run you over like an angry cow or sulk like a sheep."

Management-wise, deer can be either complicated or easy, so the Kings make sure that their extensive system is kept simple and fuss-free.

"They're low labour input. They come into the yards twice a year, and they're always happy,"

The next step in the Lillburn deer farming journey is consolidation of the deer system to the Hindley block to make management easier. Although late-spring country, it's ideal hind and grazing country. The other motivation for the consolidation is the limited grazing potential at Wairoto, highlighted last year by disappointing soil test results. Since then, 46ha of the hill area has been planted in *Pinus radiata* and entered into the Emissions Trading Scheme. It's a diversification and cashflow generating move for Jamie and Nicole.

"We estimate we can generate about \$1600 a hectare over 40 years without jeopardising the existing operation, and it will help with succession," he says.

Most of the remaining area at Wairoto will be used for growing cereal barley. The velvet stags at Wairoto will be relocated, with the dismantled deer fences set for reinstatement at Hindley.

The move to Hindley has been in the making for the last couple of years, during which the average paddock size has been subdivided from about 18 hectares down to eight. The smaller paddocks will make pasture management easier and improve quality, especially during spring. So far about two kilometres have been subdivided. There's another three-and-a-half kilometres to go, as well as the building of a new deer shed and associated infrastructure.

There's lots to do, but King is taking it step-by-step.

"I'm sixty percent along the journey of where I want to be with the deer. The nuts and bolts are in place, the rest is about fine-tuning." ■



EXPANSION: In the lead-up to this winter, the 36-metre feeding face will be extended to 48 metres.



STEB-BY-STEP: Consolidation of the deer farming system is being staged around the wider farming operation.



BEAUT BALEAGE: During winter, the Lillburn hinds chomp their way through 180 – 240 rounds of high-quality baleage.
Photo: Nicole Wallace

Rangitikei family affair ticks the box

Tony Leggett, *Deer Industry News* writer

Deer farming was always going to be a family affair for Alex and Angela McIntyre.



DEER-CENTRIC: Velvet, venison and stag sales contribute two-thirds of total farm income for Rangitikei deer farmers Angela and Alex McIntyre.

Their son Chris already works on their 486ha (445ha grazeable) property at Ohingaiti, overlooking the Rangitikei River, in between venison shooting and recovery sorties in a Robinson 44 helicopter around farms and stations, mostly along the eastern North Island.

Daughters Laura, Emily and Faith have grown up working among deer, too. All three are off the farm at present, but the strong bond developed in their early years at home means they will always feel connected to it.

Alex was a reluctant sheep and beef farmer when he took over managing his family's original 120ha property from his father in 1988, just as deer farming had settled into becoming a viable, mainstream farming venture in New Zealand.

He'd spent his school holidays hunting deer, often under the watchful eye of his older brother, who worked as a culler for the New Zealand Forest Service. So, farming them seemed like a natural progression.

An early mentor was near neighbour, Owen Maher, who had fenced off an area for deer years earlier and built up his numbers, initially from captured stock.

Alex started to think seriously about what might be possible on his own block and took the plunge a year later in 1989, when the "bubble had burst," and deer were more attractively priced.

Initially, he started with a small area and fenced more land each year to finish bought-in weaner deer for slaughter.

"Every time we sent a truck load away, Owen (Maher) always used to say, 'You're killing good velvet stags there, you know?'" McIntyre says.

His words stuck, and the McIntyres started keeping some for velvet production. After a few years, they realised that buying in deer each

year wasn't producing the gain in velvet quality and weight they knew was possible, so they started breeding their own instead.

Expanding the boundary was also on their minds, so they started searching for blocks to lease or buy.

He and Angela married in 1992, and they started leasing an adjoining 120ha block that belonged to Angela's godmother, giving them 240ha in total.

Five years later, when the lease of Angela's godmother's property ran out, they took on leasing a 320ha sheep and beef farm next door, giving them 440ha in total.

When the lease term expired on that block nine years later, they managed to buy it in partnership with an equity partner in 2007 before buying them out five years later.

"By then, we had fenced up most of the 120ha home block ourselves, and we started topping up fences or putting in new deer fences on the larger block using contract fencers, so now it's pretty much all deer fenced."

The McIntyres recently completed a project involving some realignment of a road to allow access to new country for their expanding deer herds. Contractors also installed another six kilometres of new fencing last autumn.

Velvet, venison and stag sales contribute two thirds of their total farm income, but their 500 ewes and 250 cattle, mostly bulls, are a useful diversification and management tool for the deer operation.

Two blocks have been established to match the natural terrain and soil types to the feed requirements and management of hinds and stags within their deer operation.

Their 700 velvet stags spend almost all their time on the free-draining flats nearer the river, while the 400 hinds and weaners



THE BIG BOYS: Mixed-age stags shortly after their regrowth was cut. Velvet production is about 5.5 tonnes per year for the McIntyres.

are run on the other, more extensively farmed, hill country. Both blocks have well-sited lanes and their own deer handling facilities.

The layered terraces of flat to rolling country that rise from the Rangitikei River below are highly productive soils, but they tend to dry out by Christmas. Alex says that suits the feed demands of their velvet stags.

“Our velvetters winter well on the flats, and by Christmas, when everyone else is still trying to push lambs along, we’re all done and dusted with the velvet stags,” he says.

Crops of chicory and clover sown together usually perform well on the flats, also creating ideal feed for their own lambs to be finished on after velvetting is over. The chicory usually follows winter crops of kale or swedes, drilled in the spring after a quick seedbed preparation.

A total of about 20ha of kale and, for the past two years, swedes, are grown annually to feed velvet stags and weaner deer over the winter. The McIntyres have found their weaners winter well on the swedes, and so the option will be continued in the future.

They also supplement their deer on crop with baleage, palm kernel and maize.

Alex and Angela’s goal is to create an opportunity for their children to farm the land.

“The big boys are block-fed for a week at a time on the kale. We’re not too technical on calculating feed available. We just break the paddocks down into blocks using hot wires, and they run on and off the crop into a run-off paddock, depending on the weather.

“If it’s wet, we’ll open the gates into the run-off paddock next to the crop. We find the utilisation is better, and there is minimal damage to soil as well.”

They like to mix in a few bulls with the deer over winter. The bulls are happy cleaning up the baleage and rougher feed the deer are less inclined to eat, Alex says.

“The sooner the bale feeders are cleaned up, the quicker the baleage is replaced with fresh stuff, so it’s better for the deer with a few bulls running in the same blocks with them.”

They are also big advocates for “heli-cropping,” which they have used extensively to establish new pasture on some of their hill country, Chris says.

“We love it. Anyone who think it’s a fizzer doesn’t understand how to use it. We don’t run big cattle on it, but it does suit lighter cattle and deer. Deer pug shallow, unlike heavy cattle. Over time, the deer might cause a bit of erosion, but over a 100-day winter, that’s negligible.”

They also sow turnips on their flats for extra winter feed, drilling them in the autumn using their own gear or contractors, depending on workload at the time, Alex says.

“We set up those paddocks with hot wires to create blocks that will last the deer for a week. For weaners, it might be longer, and for some blocks, we might only be able to break them in half, so the deer are in there for 2-3 weeks.”

Topping feeders up with baleage every day over the winter months creates a lot of work, but the performance of the velvet stags and



CROWNING GLORY: Chris McIntyre with a typical head cut from one of the family’s mixed-age stags. Chris works for his parents in between running a feral venison shooting and recovery business, based out of the nearby Pohangina Valley.

young deer reflects their feeding.

Velvet performance and culling is based on each stag’s velvet weight, shape and tyne placement, individually scored and diligently recorded each year at both first cut and regrowth time.

Total velvet production is around 5.5 tonnes each year, including regrowth, from the 700-head velvet mob. Some stags are cutting up to 16kg each year, including regrowth.

Older velvet stags are culled on velvet weight and age. It’s rare for a velvet stag to remain in the herd after reaching 10 years of age, but there are always exceptional performers that seem to hang on regardless of their time in the mob.

All the low-mouth stags are identified “before they get grumpy ahead of the roar” and spend their last winter on the farm in their own mob. The rest of the velvet stag mob, of around 400 head and their 200 rising two-year-old stags, are run as two mobs over winter.

The deer receive minimal animal health investment, Alex says.

“The rising two-year-olds get their last drench when they drop their spiker buttons, and they start to grow their first heads.

“Hinds of the same age group get a drench just before their first fawning, and that is last they see.”

Young stags are selected on their two-year-old heads, which are scored for weight, shape and tyne placement, just like the older stags.

Culls are mostly sold off to other deer farmers, including a nephew who farms deer at Matawai near Gisborne and who has been successful in local velvet competitions with some of the McIntyre’s surplus stags.

The two-year-old cut-off point for weight is 3kg, unless Alex and Chris like the shape and placement of the tynes on a stag cutting less weight.

Since 2016, they’ve made extensive use of artificial insemination to access elite stags they could not afford to buy themselves. They also use homebred sires from artificial insemination.

Their entire hind and stag herds are DNA profiled, an expensive exercise in the first year when they started in 2018, but revolutionary for their breeding operation since because of the accuracy when

assigning parentage to offspring and time saved, Alex says.

“We bit the bullet in the first year, but once you get past that expense, the following years are not too bad, and the Zee Tags tagger make the job easy. We can comfortably do 100 or more a day with the Zee Tags, compared with struggling to match up 30-50 fawns to their mothers in the paddock using binoculars in the heat for hours every day.”

There’s occasionally one that doesn’t match, but there are plenty to select from so anything unmatched goes down the road, he says.

They have been buying stags from Tasman deer breeder, Alf Kinzett, for several years and currently have shares in two top performing stags, Howard and Ollie.

“We’ve also just bought another flash stag off Alf this season, which won the Top of the South velvet competition, and we also bought another stag this year at the Ramsay stud annual sale too.”

Angela says they select on velvet style, weight, and tyne placement, looking for a nice round shape to them.

“Of course, it has to be something we can afford,” she adds.

Regrowth is also important to the overall velvet performance, so they like to know that weight as well.

Their success with artificial insemination ranges from 60-70% conception rate, and they always split straws to make it more cost effective.

Alex says they take straws in the two stags they own in partnership with Alf Kinzett at no charge, but they have paid up to \$1000 per straw for elite genetics in the past.

“Most are usually around the \$500 mark so when you split that straw, the cost is halved.”

“We AI around 120 hinds each year, and the ones AI’d to homebred sires are costing us about \$30/live fawn.”

Angela says inseminating that number of hinds takes good organisation to synchronise ovulation, often requiring early starts and wearing headlamps to work on the deer.

The McIntyres also sell a small number of sire stags each year, mostly through word of mouth. Their cull two-year-olds usually go to three regular buyers.

In the meantime, there’s further work to do on their farm’s water reticulation system to reduce their reliance on natural water and dams in some of their breeding country.

Looking ahead, Alex and Angela are content with progressing toward their goal of creating the opportunity for their children to farm the land themselves in the future.

Angela says they’ll never leave.

“This was always for the next generation. We’re caretakers, kaitiaki [guardians] of the land to look after it while we are here.”

They still have a desire to either buy or lease more land nearby to expand their deer numbers further but also to grow their sheep and beef operation to balance the risk a little better. ■



DEER MAN: Alex spent his school holidays hunting deer and has been farming them since 1989.



TOP VIEW: Looking into the hind block on the McIntyre's 480ha property near Ohingaiti in the Rangitikei region. They've been expanding their deer operation since they began farming deer in 1988, and now almost all the property is fenced up.

Weaning strategies for better hind and fawn performance

Chantee McCloy

Weaning is a critical event in the deer production calendar, but it doesn't have to be done the same way every year. Pre-rut and post-rut weaning strategies both have their place, and the effectiveness of each depends on three key factors: hind body condition score (BCS), feed availability, and farm infrastructure. Understanding each, and adapting weaning strategies accordingly, can have significant benefits for both reproductive performance and overall herd efficiency.

The case for pre-rut weaning

Pre-rut weaning, which typically occurs before mating in early March, can be an effective tool for improving hind condition and conception rates. Hinds in poorer condition can have delayed conception by up to 10 days, impacting fawning dates and reducing overall productivity. By weaning early, hinds are relieved of the energy demands of lactation, allowing them to regain condition before mating. Research has shown that hinds in good BCS (>3) conceive earlier, leading to a tighter fawning pattern and higher overall reproductive efficiency.

Another advantage of pre-rut weaning is its role in managing feed resources. Lactating hinds require up to 20% more energy than dry hinds, so weaning can significantly reduce the overall energy demand of the herd. In times of feed shortages, early weaning allows farmers to allocate feed more efficiently, ensuring that both hinds and fawns receive the nutrition they need for optimal growth and fertility.

One of the most important considerations for successful weaning is how to minimise stress in both hinds and fawns.

When post-rut weaning is more practical

While pre-rut weaning has clear benefits, it is not always the best option. For smaller farms, separating hinds and fawns early can be challenging due to limited space. If fawns are not being trucked off the property immediately, post-rut weaning may be a better choice, as it aligns more closely with natural weaning patterns and allows for a smoother transition.

Another key factor to consider is farm labour and infrastructure. Weaning requires well-managed facilities to reduce stress on both hinds and fawns. If a farm is short on staff or lacks appropriate handling systems, post-rut weaning may be easier to manage. Additionally, fawns left on hinds longer often experience less weaning stress, leading to better post-weaning growth rates in certain systems.

The importance of minimising weaning stress

Regardless of the timing, a stress-free weaning process is crucial to maintaining herd health and performance. High-stress weaning events can negatively impact fawn growth rates, hinder immune function, and lead to greater susceptibility to disease. Hinds also experience stress, which can result in weight loss and delayed conception if not managed properly.

Several practical strategies can help reduce stress at weaning:

- **Minimise yarding time:** Prolonged time in yards increases stress and injury risk. Efficient handling systems, quiet stockmanship and limited health treatments at the time of weaning help reduce stress.
- **Support with strategic nutrition:** Providing high quality feed before and after weaning ensures fawns transition smoothly onto the diet, reducing the shock of separation.
- **Supplement with magnesium:** Magnesium has a calming effect and can help reduce stress responses. Giving fawns a magnesium drench (10ml Moremag) at weaning can improve overall well-being and minimise negative behaviour.

Key takeaways

- **Pre-rut vs. post-rut weaning** should be determined based on hind BCS, feed availability, and farm infrastructure.
- **Hinds in poor condition** may experience delayed conception by up to 10 days, making pre-rut weaning a useful strategy for improving mating outcomes.
- **Weaning can reduce hind feed requirements** by up to 20%, making it a valuable tool in managing feed shortages.
- **Minimising stress is essential** – efficient, quiet handling, and nutritional support improve fawn and hind welfare.
- **Magnesium supplementation** is an effective tool to reduce stress and support a smooth weaning transition.
- **Flexibility is key** – adapting weaning practices based on yearly conditions will lead to better long-term results. ■

Chantee McCloy is a Canterbury vet.

Deer Select 2 - new and improved

By the time *Deer Industry News* reaches most mailboxes, Deer Select 2 (DS2), the updated version of the industry-managed database for storing pedigree records and trait data, will be up and running.

The launch is a milestone, and a proud moment for Deer Select Manager Sharon McIntyre. She's proud of the end result, which she credits to "a lot of hard work by many people."



MILESTONE: *Deer Select 2 is a significant achievement made possible by the work of many people, Deer Select manager Sharon McIntyre says.*

"That includes the farmers that hosted the Deer Progeny Test (DPT) herds, the people who collected the data, and the scientists who crunched the numbers and produced updated New Zealand-specific deer modules. What we've ended up with is better, it's more accurate, and there are more breed values developed and endorsed by AgResearch and AbacusBio," McIntyre says.

She makes special mention of the huge amount of work done by AgResearch scientist Ken Dodds and AbacusBio's Neville Jopson in the development of the new evaluation, indexes and economic weightings, as well as Beef +Lamb Genetics for the nProve developments.

"What we've ended up with is better, it's more accurate, and there are more breed values developed and endorsed by AgResearch and AbacusBio."

One of the big features of the upgraded database is a new platform called nProve, making it possible for breeders to directly export and access their own data. Previously breeders relied on bureaus to generate paper reports or Excel spreadsheets; that option is still available, but the DIY option gives breeders instant access to their own breed data whenever they want.

"Breeders can log into nProve and either use report formats provided by their bureau or design their own, requesting which animals and what data they want to see," she says.

"They can download the data - pedigree, recorded measurements, breeding values or indexes - immediately."

Deer Select Version 1 (DS1) had played a crucial role in helping advance genetic gain across the industry. It had been enhanced over time but got to the point where it made more sense to significantly upgrade the platform, by updating and adding new breed values and indices.

The updates include separate evaluations for red and wapiti.

McIntyre explains that the idea of across breed evaluations was

abandoned because it was technically too difficult and expensive, requiring ongoing data collection from half bred animals.

An example was the development of the across breed mature weight breed values in DS1. It was technically difficult because there were no wapiti-cross females retained after 11 months-old for comparison with red female data.

"If we wanted to correct this, it would have required retaining adult wapiti-cross females for regular weighing, which is neither financially nor practically viable."

There are two new reproduction breeding values: two-year-old fertility (FERT2) and mixed-age fertility (FERTMA) based on pregnancy scan records. Expressed as a percentage, a higher breeding value (BV) means a greater proportion of a sire's daughter are likely to conceive as two-year-olds and as mixed-age hinds.

The addition of these breeding value means buyers of Deer Select animals can balance fertility and growth BVs and make their selection accordingly.

"We know that a high selection emphasis on production traits such as growth can reduce fertility and survival. Having both production and fertility values expressed gives breeders and buyers the opportunity to select for increased production while maintaining a deer's natural fertility."

Beefed-up venison and velvet measures

DS2 includes a new NZ deer-specific meat module based on carcass data collected from the DPT, ultrasound, and where available, CT scanning data. It's a big step up from the original DS1, where meat parameters were based on best estimate and expert opinion, McIntyre explains.

"In short, it's telling buyers if a particular stag is likely to produce meatier or less meaty progeny relative to its size."

"We've ended up with more accurate breeding values for carcass traits, which will give deer farmers potential for greater genetic progress in terms of venison production."

The heritability of velvet was re-estimated using all available velvet records, comprising 40,000-plus individual animals and more than 1000 sires. The analysis produced a heritability of 50% rather than the anecdotal 75% often talked about, McIntyre says.

"It won't alter the ranking of animals, but the heritability values will be slightly lower," she says.

New and updated economic indices

The Red Maternal (RedMATN), Red Terminal (RedTERM), Wapiti Terminal (WapTERM) are all new indexes underpinned by updated sub-indices. The RedMATN replaces the Replacement-Early Kill (R-EK) index.

Each index is expressed in \$/fawn or calf and quantifies the value a fawn from a particular stag will generate to a standardised venison production system.

“So a sire with a value \$25 higher than another sire is likely to return about \$12.50 more per fawn born than the other sire,” she says, adding that the \$12.50 reflects the 50 percent genetic contribution from the sire.

McIntyre emphasises that the red and wapiti terminal indexes are not directly comparable because the underlying figures are from different evaluations with different herds and datasets.

There are also sub-indexes for growth, meat, hind weight, reproduction and CARLA, which can be added together.

Now that the 2024/25 selling season is over, McIntyre recommends that breeders select young animals or new sires that will be retained for breeding or sale using DS2.

However, she acknowledges that while DS2 is a familiar system, there is quite a bit of change.

“Not everyone likes change. We’re mindful of that, so there will be plenty of support offered to breeders and buyers so that they are comfortable with the updated version.”

- Deer Select breeders can stay up to date with DS2 by subscribing to the Deer Select newsletter.
- Deer Select breeders and buyers who have questions about DS2 can contact Sharon McIntyre at sharon.mcintyre@deernz.org. ■



MEATIER: The new meat module in DS2 provides buyers more accurate breeding values for carcass traits and greater genetic potential for improved venison production.



VELVET MEASURES: The heritability of velvet has been updated using data from more than 40,000 animals.



Melior Genetics' Tom MacFarlane, with wife Samantha, says he is still getting to grips with Deer Select 2 but from his high-level viewing, he believes it has picked up well from Deer Select 1.

“We’ve done a quick comparison of the two versions using the same animals and have found that the results align well. There are some differences, but that’s expected given the updates.”

For Melior’s sire breeding operation, meat production traits are particularly important, and MacFarlane is pleased to see the updated Red Terminal (RTM) index incorporating carcass weight yield (CWY).

“We used to select on 12-month live weight (W12), but now we have a greater emphasis on carcass weight (CWY) because that’s what our clients are paid on.”

He also liked the RedTERM and RedMATN indexes as it helps clients quantify the potential economic value a stag could bring to their system.

Melior has a good history of genetic progress logged with Deer Select.

“We bought the business from LIC in 2017, who had a good track record of recording, and we’ve built on that.”

“Deer-livering” us from the evils of ageing?

By Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* writer

If you're getting on in years and are no longer so active, you might be familiar with sarcopenia. Not heard of it? It's just the scientific name for the muscle shrinkage that comes with ageing, when your formerly buff-looking body can start looking a little...stringy. Sarcopenia can eventually lead to the falls, fractures and disabilities that afflict the elderly – a big cost on the health system, not to mention quality of life.

Plenty of biological processes combine to cause sarcopenia. The promising news, however, is that an effective nutraceutical to combat a couple of these mechanisms (inflammation and 'oxidative stress' caused by free radicals) could be residing in the livers of our deer. Getting the right stuff into your body, however, is more involved than just adding a side of deer liver on your morning fry-up.

An AgResearch team, led by Stephen Haines, has produced a report for the Bioresource Processing Alliance (see box), which starts to map out a process for teasing the useful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory material from deer liver into a bioavailable form that could have some real human health benefits.

Haines, a chemist, is based at Lincoln and researches bioactive components in deer velvet and food. He says the initial work aimed to identify useful – and this is where the long words start – enzyme hydrolysates, or the broken-down proteins that are products of digesting deer liver.

The idea was to find antioxidant products that could dampen the effects of the free radicals that cause so much damage at cellular level, including to DNA.

Earlier reports on products from chicken and pig livers had sparked the researchers' interest in livers from deer.

The researchers set up digestion of deer liver using six different enzymes or enzyme combinations. The initial signs were promising, with the hydrolysates falling in the same molecular weight range as known bioactives.

A standardised in vitro simulated gastrointestinal digestion system was then used to model the effects of oral consumption on the liver products.

Moving from computer modelling to in vitro testing on immature muscle fibres, the researchers tested the antioxidant potential of the various enzymes they had identified. When compared with a known antioxidant used as a control (for the record, N-acetylcysteine or NAC), several of the products derived from deer liver showed good promise.

Incidentally, they found that the products worked in two ways – first as a straight antioxidant as expected, but also by down-regulating the animal cells' production of those unstable molecules ('reactive oxygen species') that damage DNA and cause muscles to shrivel up during ageing.

And just to be sure, the researchers used microscopy to confirm that the enzyme hydrolysates they'd derived from deer livers did indeed help to prevent the developing muscle fibres from atrophying (shrivelling) when exposed to free radicals.

The initial trial has opened up a promising line of research that could eventually lead to a human nutraceutical product to stave off the effects of ageing. What's required next, of course, is more research, to refine ways of measuring and assessing the effects of treatments on muscle cells.

Haines says that with considerably more supporting data, the mixture produced could potentially be patented, provided a strong biological effect was proven. Given that the mixture is extremely complex, with many biologically active peptides involved, it would not be feasible to synthesise.

He says scaling up production of a nutraceutical based on deer liver could be done quite easily.

“The use of commercial enzymes is standard practice in the meat and other industries, and the equipment required is not especially complex.”

In the meantime, the next stage could be an in vivo study either using an animal model or actual elderly humans, to see if a natural product derived from deer livers could indeed help people keep in better shape well into their golden years. ■



WALKING ON: A nutraceutical derived from deer liver could lead to a smoother path into the golden years. Photo: Pixabay

Bioresource Processing Alliance

The Bioresource Processing Alliance (BPA) is an MBIE-funded R&D programme that works with the primary sector to turn low-value biological waste into high-value exports. Given deer livers currently have little use other than perhaps petfood, the potential to add significant value through development of a nutraceutical product made it an ideal candidate for this research. Research organisations Callaghan Innovation, AgResearch, Plant and Food, Scion and universities are all part of the BPA programme.

Grilled venison flat iron steak with summer salsa

Graham Brown, DINZ executive chef

Flat iron is a shoulder cut. If unavailable, use venison medallions or cutlets.



Ingredients

Steak

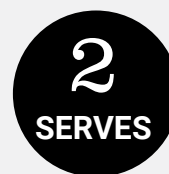
400 gm flat iron from the shoulder
80 ml of olive oil
3 cloves of crushed garlic

1 tbsp each of fresh chopped sage, thyme, parsley, tarragon
1 tbsp cracked black pepper

Summer salsa

1 red onion
4 plum tomatoes, deseeded
1 cucumber, peeled and seeds removed
½ red pepper
½ green pepper
3 tbsp capers, chopped

3 tbsp gherkins or cornichons, chopped
1 tbsp each of fresh tarragon and parsley, chopped
100ml of good olive oil
50 ml of tarragon or red wine vinegar
2 tbsp Dijon mustard
Salt and pepper to taste



Method

Preparation

1. Lay the flat iron steak on a chopping board and, with a long knife, cut the top half off the silverskin, just like filleting a fish.
2. Turn over and repeat the process.
3. Mix the herbs with the oil, garlic and pepper. Place and press in to the two pieces of steak. Leave for a couple of hours before cooking.
4. For the salsa, dice the red onion and cook in the vinegar briefly and cool.
5. Dice all the remaining vegetables into very small pieces and combine all the ingredients together for at least one hour before use.

Cooking and serving

6. Get the BBQ hot and sear the meat on the grill for 2½ minutes on each side. Use the open bars of the grill to create a nice crisscross pattern.
7. Remove steak to a clean dish and rest for five minutes before serving.
8. Slice the meat across the grain on the bias (at a 45 degree angle to your chopping board), approx. ½ cm thick. Lay out as a whole piece and spread it out to highlight the pink meat colour.
9. Serve the summer salsa down the middle and garnish with some baby capers (stems on). Accompany with kūmara fries topped with grated Parmesan cheese. ■



MAY 13TH – WELCOME DINNER

TSS Earnslaw boat ride out to Walter Peak where guests will enjoy a gourmet buffet dinner



 **Deer Industry**
New Zealand

MAY 15TH – FIELD DAY
Fairlight Station



MAY 14TH – CONFERENCE

Featuring adventurer Kevin Biggar as the keynote speaker

INDUSTRY AWARDS DINNER

Deer Industry Award
NZDFA Matuschka Award
Biannual Environmental Awards
MSD/Allflex Deer Industry Photo Competition



DEER INDUSTRY CONFERENCE

50 years of NZDFA

Millennium Hotel, Queenstown

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