



Deer Industry News

HEADS TOGETHER

AT CONFERENCE 2026

THRIVE TO 35 AND BEYOND

The future in focus at
Conference 2026

YOUR FARM, YOUR POWER

Southland farmers eye up solar
and EVs

ENVIRONMENTAL WINS

A community approach yields
big returns

2026 NEXT GENERATION PROGRAMME

6–7 August

The NZDFA Next Generation programme is in its 14th year of running, and this year it's the North Island's turn to host our young farmers and industry professionals. Waikato and Bay of Plenty DFA branches will be jointly hosting the two-day programme that combines farm visits with exposure to the deer industry beyond the farm gate.

Programme*

Thu 6 August

Tour of Gallagher (Hamilton)
Raroa Red Deer Stud
Oraka Wapiti
Dinner and accommodation in Rotorua

Fri 7 August

Venison processor
NZ Supreme Deer
Workshop session – finishing mid-afternoon to allow flying out of Rotorua airport



*Programme subject to change depending on availability and capacity of venues.

Remember to have a talk with your local branch to see if they're able to support you to attend and get behind this initiative.

Scan the QR code to visit the DeerNZ website for more information and to register or follow this link:
deernz.org/home/events/next-generation-programme-2026



Deer Industry News

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

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Story glory

I was blindsided on receiving the Deer Industry Award at this year's conference.

Telling the stories of our farmed deer industry and what makes it tick has been a rewarding and addictive gig for me on so many levels.

I've met people across the supply chain — farmers, stock agents, scientists, marketers, processors — all with opinions and lived experiences that deserve coverage.

My role as a journalist, at the most basic level, is to ask what, when, who, where, why, and how questions. Pulling together the answers and other information into a story is the business end of my job, and it's never an exact science. There's always more that could be said but for the constraint of deadlines and space. My hope is that what is published is authentic, informative and thought-provoking.

Stepping into the role of *Deer Industry News* editor three years ago was an exciting, but daunting, step for me. There were high expectations due to the excellent track record of my predecessor, Phil Stewart. However, Phil was a great support during the handover and has continued to be an occasional sounding board on issues.

The magazine is one of the few hard-copy print publications produced by an industry-good organisation. It endures due to levy and advertising income, and a highly talented in-house production team of one – thank you, Rebecca Norling.

Other go-to support people are DINZ Communications Manager Cam Frecklington and Trevor Walton, the longtime editor of *The Deer Farmer*, the go-to publication for deer farmers from the late 1970s to the mid-2000s. An almost-complete library of these magazines, which somehow ended up with me, was an important information source for *In Hindsight, 50 Years of Deer Farming in New Zealand*, a book I completed in 2021.

The compilation and writing of the book was a self-initiated and, at times, tortuous project that pieced together the key people, milestones and happenings over the 50 years since the first deer farming licence was issued in March 1970. The book honours those pioneers who, through grit and determination, helped evolve the farming of deer, and gives some insight into the regulations, standards and culture that have shaped our industry. It also covers some of the successes (beating back John's, the launch of Cervena long before branded meat products produced to strict specifications were popular), setbacks (Tb), and at times hard-fought industry discussions, such as the NZDFA–NZVA process to establish an agreed velvet removal programme.

Importantly, the book bridges the past and the future, and by looking back on what has happened, gives clues to the way forward, which is the essence of the Māori proverb *Ka mua, ka muri*.

The way forward rests on the same visionary thinking and innovation that shaped the industry over the first 50 years. But what that will look like in practice — and how it unfolds — will be different from the first 50 years due to changing societal expectations, values, and views of food production, farming and land use.

As BNZ's Peter Savage, a guest speaker at this year's conference, said, we need to keep validating and proving our social licence to operate: our unwritten contract with customers and the communities where we farm that we care for our animals, protect our environment, and produce velvet and venison ethically and responsibly.

Storytelling, backed by research, evidence and informed opinion, will be essential in earning and maintaining that respect and trust. It's my job to source and write those stories, but it's the job of everyone in the industry to make sure that the content generated is authentic, credible and worth telling.

We need to engage openly with the challenges ahead, remembering that the stories we tell today will shape how we are understood and perceived tomorrow. ■

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

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Cutting edge skills

Danielle Jones is one of two women knife-wielding professionals in Venison Meat Packers boning room. At the deer industry conference field day, the crowd was spellbound as Danielle, along with a co-worker, made quick work of breaking down a venison carcass into a range of cuts. In a chat with *Deer Industry News* following the demo, Danielle said it wasn't easy to get a foot in the door of the male-dominated boning room, but she's earned her place and loves her work. Find out more on page 17.



Danielle Jones

Tie hard

A *Deer Industry News* request for a photo of the incoming NZDFA Executive Committee at this year's conference led to a hasty decision for the wardrobe inclusion of the official NZDFA necktie for incumbents Tom Macfarlane, Richard Greer, Grant Hasse, and Evan Potter. Assumption that the lineup would utilise the classic Windsor knot for the tying of the tie proved wrong with a couple of (unnamed) members clearly befuddled. Tom Macfarlane came to the rescue, tying the ties on himself and passing them on to the less dextrous. Admittedly, the wearing of neckties has declined with today's more relaxed dress codes, but they're still an expected accessory at some formal occasions, such as weddings and funerals. In the interests of maintaining formal dress standards and to avoid awkward wardrobe mishaps, check out the *YouTube* tutorials "How to tie a tie just got 10x easier", and "How to tie a tie in 12 seconds."



Tom Macfarlane with on-hand assistance from Ed Noonan

Love for Liz

Bay of Plenty Branch Chair Liz Love was the deserving recipient of this year's Matuschka Award. Nominators noted her heart and soul dedication to branch activities over many years. In addition to organising events, Liz has mentored newcomers, asked the hard questions, and looked at ways of navigating the future of deer farming. "Without her involvement, I am almost certain that the branch would have gone into recess. Liz has never sought



Last year's Matuschka Award winner Laura Billings (left) with this year's winner Liz Love.

any accolades, but has worked tirelessly for the branch, often with little support," said one nominator. We salute you, Liz, and thank you for your grassroots contribution to the industry.

Attitude is everything

Tawera Nikau was the perfect post-dinner speaker at this year's conference, with his life story and achievements in spite of considerable adversity proving that attitude and action are everything. Tawera's transformation from life in smalltown Huntly to international rugby league star was inspirational, but more so was his resilience following the amputation of his right leg following a catastrophic motorbike accident in 2004.



Conference dinner keynote speaker Tawera Nikau

Faced with the choice of a one-year to 18-months stay in hospital that may or may not have saved his leg or amputation, he opted for the latter, deciding it was best to get out and get on with life. These days, Tawera divides time between management of his whānau's farms and speaking engagements, and is the Ambassador of the Achilles Foundation, dedicated to empowering disabled people to run, walk and wheel in mainstream athletics. In recognition of his impact both on and off the sports field, he was appointed a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to rugby league and the community and named an Emerging Leader by the Sir Peter Blake Trust in 2011. A positive attitude and following through in spite of setbacks were important qualities, he said, and were equally applicable in a business and workplace.

Electrifying



Tony Roberts (left) and Cam Nelson test drive a Hisun EV UTV.

New Zealand can build a future where billions of dollars of fossil fuels no longer need to be imported if we generate our own electricity, which flows through to electric vehicles and machines. That's the view of Rewiring Aotearoa, an independent, non-profit registered charity that has the goal of electrifying millions of fossil fuel machines by 2030. Rewiring Aotearoa Chair Rob Hewett says there's great potential for farmers to reduce their costs and emissions while also playing an important role in the country's energy system. Backing his view were Becks Smith and Alex de Boer, presenters at the Southland Environmental Advance Party's 'Your Farm/Your Power' information afternoon, which highlighted EV vehicles and on-farm solar generation options. Find out more on page 30.

Doggone treats

Pet owners in the United States spend up big on premium pet food. It's a recession-resilient category that last year generated sales of \$76 billion, First Light's Matt Gibson said at this year's conference. All indications are that the category will grow as doting owners trade up for premium pet food and treats to nourish their four-legged best friends. First Light has made inroads to the premium dog food market with a deer organ-based freeze- and air-dried range. Find out more on page 19.



One of the six single-ingredient deer premium dog treats launched by First Light in North America.

Kiwi country

The Mōtū River catchment, in the rugged eastern North Island hill country near Gisborne, is home to one of the few healthy populations of Eastern Brown Kiwi. They're a critically endangered kiwi species, which



the Mōtū Matawai Catchment Communities group is doing its best to nurture and grow through riparian plantings along the Mōtū River to create a "kiwi corridor." The plantings include land on Matawai Deer Park, owned by Charles and Jane Rau, the winners of the 'vision and innovation in a demanding environment' category of the 2025 Deer Industry Environmental Awards. Find out more about their successful community-backed and inter-generational approach to environmental management on page 26.

Double whammy wins

GenomNZ, a Premium sponsor of this year's conference, recently won both the Beef + Lamb NZ Livestock Technology Award and the premiere Science New Zealand Award. B+LNZ judges said GenomNZ, owned by BSI, was a global leader with a proven history that had delivered world-leading research and technology development with a vast number of applications and benefits. Science New Zealand judges noted that GenomNZ had played a significant role in advancing productivity of the NZ sheep flock. GenomNZ has also played an important role in the deer industry, DNA testing many thousands of deer across the country. ■



Aleece Andrews, GenomNZ, at this year's conference

Deer Industry News

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If you have a stag sale, product or event you would like to promote, get in touch with the Deer Industry News team.

Contact deerindustrynews@deernz.org to request the 2026 rates sheet

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Young & keen

Mason Jones is one of the newest and youngest recruits to the Silver Fern Farms Livestock Representative team. The 28-year-old was appointed Eastern and Western North Island Deer Manager in April, and since then has been learning the ropes and sitting around kitchen tables with farmers talking all things deer. From city-raised beginnings, Mason says he discovered farming first, then deer. "They're awesome animals, and I can't stay away from them." He's looking forward to the buzz and pressure of the buying and selling season, which will ramp up from spring.



You're from a city and urban background; how did you get into agriculture and farming?

I went to Mount Albert Grammar in Auckland, which had a small farming block. I studied agriculture there, and that's how it all started. On leaving school, I headed to Telford (South Otago) and completed a Certificate in Agriculture, followed by a Diploma in Agriculture. As part of the course, I went out on placements to get practical experience on farm. During that time, I worked on a few Pāmu farms, and when I finished at Telford, I got a job as a shepherd at Pāmu's Riverslea Farm, running sheep and beef.

When and how did you get involved with farmed deer?

I asked my boss if I could get some practical experience working with deer, which led to me helping out with deer scanning at Eweburn Station. I also got to see the ET [embryo transfer] programme in full swing at the Deer Improvement farm at Riversdale.

What deer farming jobs have you had?

Emma (my fiancé) and I were keen to move back to the North Island to be closer to family, and I got a job at Rangitaiki Station, where they ran 7000 hinds. I was a senior shepherd, so got a lot of deer experience across the breeding and finishing operation. I also worked at Wairākei Deer Unit, where I helped setup Pāmu's North Island deer milking operation. After returning from overseas, I was looking after a deer farm while we got settled back in, and while I was there, I heard about the job going at Silver Fern Farms, and decided to apply for it.

Are there particular aspects of deer farming you enjoy?

I really enjoy fattening weaners and seeing how good pasture management leads to exceptional growth rates.

Who has been helping you settle into your new role?

There's been a few people, but Malcolm Gourlie (Regional Livestock Manager) and Paul Harris (Upper North Island Deer Manager) have been really helpful.

You attended this year's deer industry conference. How did that go for you?

It was a great chance to meet lots of people and listen to what the venison processors had to say. The industry is sounding positive. It's an exciting time for me to be starting out.

Where do you live and with whom, and what are your after-hours interests?

I live with Emma and our two daughters Aria (4) and Sophia (2) at Tikokino in Central Hawke's Bay, which is a great location for the territory I cover.

When I'm not working, I spend time with the family. I also try to get in a game of squash once a week and also enjoy a bit of mountain biking.

Driving hundreds of kilometres around the roads south of Taupo must leave a bit of downtime for listening to podcasts. Are there any you'd recommend?

I usually have a few on the go that I listen to when I'm not making phone calls. The one I'm listening to now is 'Keep the Change', which is about helping improve your financial literacy.

A taste for venison is a compulsory requirement for any deer rep. What's your favourite way to cook and serve venison?

I keep it simple. I like a sprinkling of Coat 'n Cook seasoning on a backstrap or tenderloin (Silver Fern Farms, of course), then sizzled not too long on a hot BBQ. ■

Silver Fern Farms was the Platinum sponsor of this year's deer industry conference.



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Brookfields, Nelson

Winners of the 2025 Deer Industry Environmental Awards – Landcare Trust Award for 'excellence in sustainable deer farming through actions on the ground'.

Having moved to Brookfields in 2007, Kim and Judith Rowe, along with family Abigail, Jack and Charlie, took over a farm that had been well farmed. One of their aims was to build a profitable velvetting operation with good genetics, using both AI and natural mating. They built a commercial herd that produced traditional-style velvet and achieved great weights. They also run a bull beef operation, a few sheep, and have had both dairy grazers and Wagyu cattle on the farm. The farm lends itself well to finishing, with its free-draining soils, pasture renovation, lucerne growing ability, fertiliser history, good subdivision, and past oversowing of sub clover on the hills.

Native beech-podocarp forest running alongside the Stanley Brook Stream is an attractive feature on the property. Protected through a QEII Covenant, it is considered to be one of the largest areas of this habitat type in the upper South Island. The Rowes have been successful in getting a range of funding to support management of this and other native areas over several years, focusing on managing weed and animal pests. Native plantings, poplar poles and exotic plantings all make this an attractive farm, and this autumn, the colours have been amazing.

What impressed the judges:

- Deep commitment to environmental progress by passionate farmers

who have done well at budgeting for environmental work over decades, with considerable success in gaining external support.

- Excellent farm planning that reinforces knowledge and management of the farm with appropriate land use to land class evident.
- Excellent management of risk areas, with retirement of at-risk areas, constructed wetlands, and plantings to protect soil and water.
- Extensive willow management, along 6 km of riparian areas, with effective tree guards to protect newly planted trees from deer.
- Social responsibility was also a standout on this farm, with many people in the community given an opportunity to learn about deer farming and how to protect and enhance the significant ecological areas.

It's time for a change, with Abigail farming in the North Island and the boys with successful careers, the family is hoping someone will come along and take on this beautiful property and all it has to offer.

This property is being marketed for sale by PGG Wrightson Real Estate and is run in conjunction with a 63 ha adjacent property, also being offered for sale. ■

Editorial supplied by PGG Wrightson.

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NELSON 200 Upper Stanley Brook Road, Stanley Brook

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This large-scale 400 hectare Tasman property is currently focused on velvet production, with superior deer genetics delivering strong yields and returns. A good balance of productive flats and 100 hectares of easy-to-medium hills lends itself to finishing stock, or even dairy grazing, with fertility and pasture quality to support alternate land use. Farmed with strong environmental principles and encompassing a significant 27 hectare QEII covenant block, this is an instantly appealing farm in an established farming region. Two dwellings and good farming improvements are key features, with an adjoining 63 hectare property also available to purchase (NEL43013).

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Helping grow the country



DEER INDUSTRY CONFERENCE

Future focused



The future in focus

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The tone was upbeat and the crowd engaged at this year’s conference. The theme, ‘Future focused’ was covered well by the pool of speakers, many drawing on the past to explain how the industry had got to where it was, and how that would likely impact on positioning for the future.

Trade Minister Todd McClay’s opening address covered in brief the backstory that had driven the export success of the farmed deer industry, and he thanked those who had made it happen. Looking to the future, he talked about work by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) to facilitate registration of venison processors for the Chinese market, a new programme to manage the impacts and risks of wild deer, and the ongoing Resource Management Act reforms, all of which would support industry growth.

In welcoming conference delegates, DINZ Board Chair Paddy Boyd said it was the first time in his farming career that most pastoral farmers were getting good prices for protein and other pastoral-based products at the same time.

The improved and sustained venison price was the perfect opportunity to keep promoting and proving to sheep and beef farmers that adding deer to their system could stack up economically and environmentally, he said.

The future challenge was to pitch venison at a slightly higher premium than beef and lamb due to its eating qualities and health benefits.

“We all know that venison has unique qualities over and above other proteins, but it’s our job to quantify that with solid science and robust health claims.”

Turning to OSPRI and the rebuilding of NAIT, he said that the industry had invested many hours in contributing to discussions about the new system and will keep pushing to ensure that the NAIT upgrade is fit-for-purpose.

The niggling issue of increased wild deer processing was mentioned, with Paddy assuring the crowd that DINZ was working to ensure that wild venison did not put at risk the premium NZ farmed venison market.

“Your industry body has invested large amounts of your levies, often partnered with government investments, to build, grow and promote our farmed venison to the world. We hope that MPI will now help us to protect those investments through some form of regulatory control.”



VENISON OPPORTUNITY: *The much-improved and consistent venison prices bring an ideal opportunity to prove to younger farmers that integrating deer in a sheep and beef system was a good fit for business sustainability, DINZ Chair Paddy Boyd said.*

An area of focus for him was to continue working with the NZDFA to demonstrate to younger farmers that having deer in the farming mix was a good fit for business sustainability.

“There are plenty of examples out there of mixed farming systems that, when other parts of the business are having it tough, the deer side has kept the dollars rolling in.”

The velvet market was still struggling, but he emphasised it was not broken.

“We need to keep telling the story of diversification – both in the markets and on farm; venison, velvet, and the range of value we can create from the whole animal.”

Rhys Griffiths

“It is, however, going through a realignment, driven by the upsurge in velvetting stag numbers and velvet head weights over the last few years. We were simply oversupplying the market last season.”

Here and now

In his State of the Industry presentation, DINZ CEO Rhys Griffiths said the industry had downsized from 1.9 million to just over 700,00 deer over the last 25 years. It was grim reading, but the positives were that productivity had held and modelling was starting to indicate slow and steady growth in the herd of 1–3 percent (since validated by Stats NZ’s finalised agricultural production numbers for 2025, which show overall herd growth of 0.5 percent but an increase in hinds mated of 3 percent).

Although optimistic about the outlook for venison, Rhys said competition from other proteins was strong.

“Price and positioning need to stay firm. And we need to keep telling the story of diversification — both in the markets (food service and retail) and on farm; venison, velvet, and the range of value we can create from the whole animal.”

Turning back to operational developments, he said that since last conference, new QA Manager Merryn Pugh had “hit the ground running”, concentrating on getting back to the QA basics with a renewed focus on the NVSB, the Venison Processing Technical Committee, and transport accreditation.



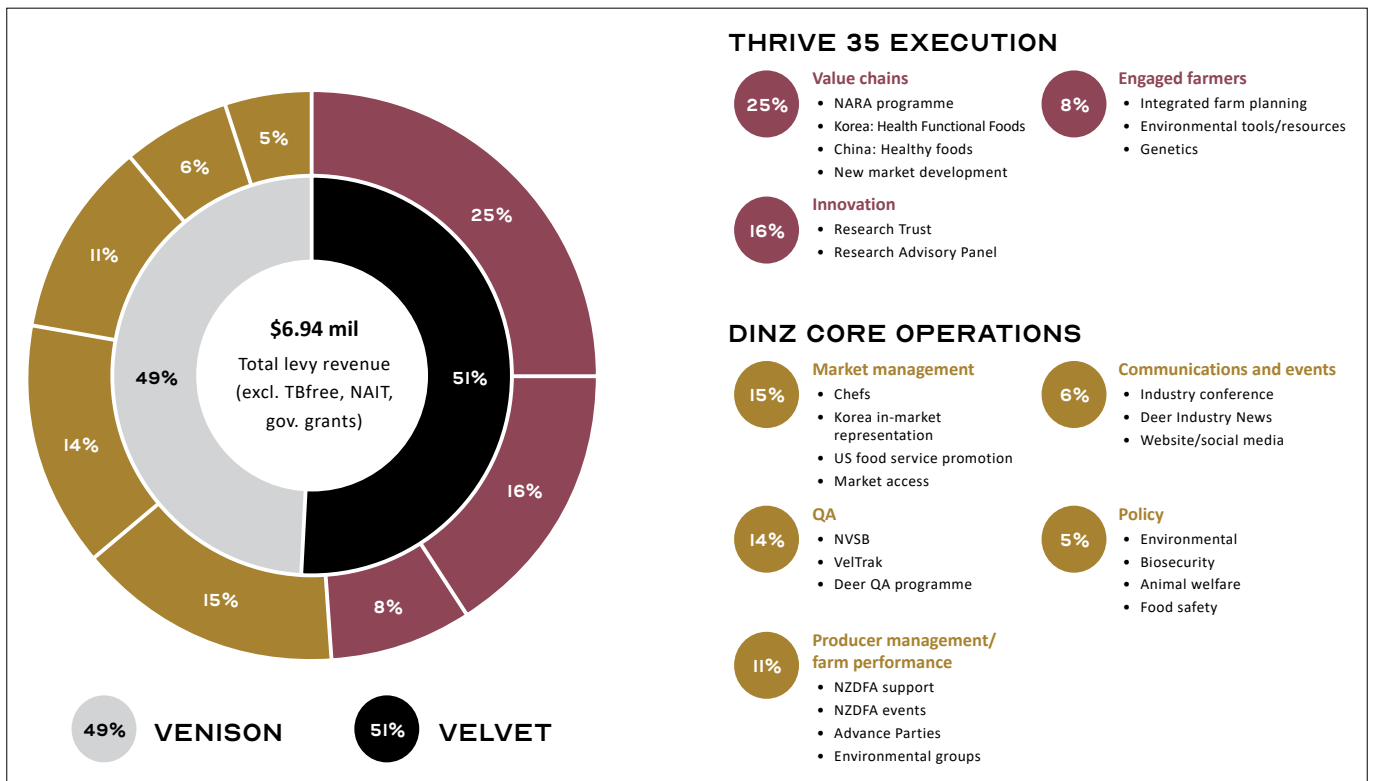
SMALLER HERD, BIG AMBITIONS: The industry has challenges ahead, but there are real opportunities for our venison and velvet, DINZ CEO Rhys Griffiths said.

Thrive to 35

Turning to the future, Rhys talked about the industry’s guiding strategy “Thrive to 35” and the goal of doubling the export value of farmed deer products from \$330 million to \$660 million. That goal would be approached through three levers: maximising market access, growing product categories, and science-driven market solutions.

“Market access is not a sexy area, but we estimate we can deliver one-third of our export growth from this,” he said.

Turning to product developments and initiatives, Rhys used the examples of the NARA (North American Retail Accelerator) programme for venison, and for velvet, the development of healthy food channels in China and health functional foods in



South Korea, most recently HENKIV—a next generation immune-enhancing product based on 100% NZ velvet extract. Yuhan Care, the company behind the product, has invested tens of millions of dollars into human clinical studies.

“The claim—enhanced natural killer cells for immune function—has been approved by Korea’s Ministry of Food and Drug Safety. This is a next generation product, and it speaks directly to the value of NZ velvet.”

He emphasised the need for market-led, science-driven solutions across all product groups.

“It’s a health-based ‘venison as medicine’ approach, and for velvet,

it’s about moving beyond the exporting of frozen whole sticks and creating higher value here in NZ. For co-products and the fifth quarter, it’s about developing nutraceutical applications.”

There were plenty of projects and workstreams to pursue, but the estimated \$600,000 drop in levy income over the next year or two due to the drop in velvet stag numbers would restrict the timing and implementation of some projects.

“Yes, there are challenges, but we have a lot of opportunities, and we have to work together to achieve them.” ■

MAHA and more

Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) was a big opportunity and a new ‘shop window’ for the NZ deer industry, DINZ Markets Manager Terry Meikle said in his presentation.



HEALTHY POSITIONING: *The reputation and story of our venison and velvet resonates well with consumers in many global markets, DINZ Markets Manager Terry Meikle says.*

MAHA is a major US political and public health movement focused on reversing chronic disease and obesity by placing an emphasis on real food and healthy eating.

An indication of the policy shift’s growing influence was a MAHA advertisement during this year’s Super Bowl. The stark, black-and-white 30-second clip featured former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson talking about his own battle with obesity and the dangers of ultra-processed food, which was followed by the slogan “Processed Food Kills. Eat Real Food”.

“Something like this would have been unheard of during the Super Bowl ten years ago, and it shows the influence of movements and policies such as Make America Healthy Again,” Terry noted.

Over the next year, a DINZ priority is to build on the momentum created by NARA, drawing on science-backed research to support the nutritional benefits of New Zealand farmed venison in areas such as its digestibility, as well as its suitability for ageing people and those on GLP-1 weight reduction drugs.

Other workstreams included building high-value velvet partnerships in China to reduce dependence on traders and exploring opportunities for new health functional foods in Korea off the back of the successful launch of HENKIV IMMUNE.

In the role for seven months, Terry said one of his biggest takeaways to date has been the high esteem and reverence with which deer products are held in markets around the world.

“This industry is blessed with a truly awesome story.”

Trading stories

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Keynote speakers Trade Minister Todd McClay and The Hon. Tim Groser gave an insightful perspective of past and present trade agreements and policy, and their likely future impact.

In his remarks that kicked off the conference, Trade Minister McClay said it was important that targets and measurable goals underpinned trade policy.

“I’m a really firm believer in setting targets. If you set a target in politics, in your own life, on your farm and your business, you’re more likely to achieve it,” he said.

He praised the deer industry’s *Thrive 2035* strategy, which aligned well with the Government’s export strategy, both targeting export revenue growth.

The Government has set the ambitious target of doubling the value of food and fibre exports to \$106 billion by 2034, while the deer industry is targeting revenue growth from \$330 million to \$660 million-plus over the period 2024 to 2034.

Highlighting the recent successes in trade negotiations, he said free trade agreements (FTAs) now covered over 70 percent of New Zealand’s global trade and included agreements with the United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, the European Union and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. In addition, the Gulf Cooperation Council agreement was due for sign-off soon.

The NZ-India FTA, giving us preferential access for a range of primary products, was a huge achievement.

“The remarkable thing is that very large countries that don’t have one [an FTA with India] are calling us to ask us how we did it.”

The Hon. Tim Groser, a former politician and diplomat with wide-



ON TARGET: *Setting targets, even if not met, kept individuals, businesses, and governments on track to achieve, Todd McClay said.*

ranging and longtime experience in international trade policy and negotiations, reiterated the importance of FTAs given the current geopolitical climate.

“There’s no question, we are heading south. We are entering into stormy weather here. And I don’t just have the current crisis in the Gulf in mind when I say that.”

But in his perceptive and entertaining talk, he said New Zealand was in a good space because of our trade alternatives developed over almost 50 years based on “rules-based” partnerships.

The current United States administration had imposed heavy-handed tariffs and chosen to walk away from multiple rules-based agreements and organisations in a bid to protect American sovereignty. Although concerning given the US economy generates 25 percent of world GDP, he was “quite optimistic,” because no other major country – including South Korea, China, Australia, Japan, Canada, the European Union - wanted to follow the United States’ lead.

“They all want, like we do, a rules-based system.”

New Zealand had spent decades “paying insurance,” with successive governments supporting the development of open trade policy, the benefits of which would now play out.

“If we hadn’t got out there ahead of the rest of the world to negotiate these agreements, we would be in a much more problematic situation today.

“Now is the time we cash in our insurance policy, [through] our network of free trade agreements.” ■



MODESTLY OPTIMISTIC: “I’m not trying to sugarcoat this, but I’m actually quite optimistic about where we stand now,” Tim Groser said.

Changemaker

Former NZDFA chair John Scurr was awarded NZDFA Life Membership at the conference evening dinner.

In presenting the award, David Stevens, another former NZDFA chair, said John had demonstrated exceptional leadership during the rocky transition in the early 2000s as the Game Industry Board reformed to the new organisational structure of Deer Industry New Zealand. The change-making process had been tough due to polarised opinions that had fractured relationships, John said, but he looked back with



satisfaction on what was achieved. His own experience highlighted the 80:20 rule where typically 80 percent understand the reasons for change, while the dissenting 20 percent never do. The deer industry had faced many change-making issues in the past and would continue to do so in the future, he said. ■

Special award



Paddy Boyd (left) and Ian Walker (right) with Ian Scott.

Waikato vet and deer farmer Ian Scott received a special award for his contribution to the National Velveting Standards Body (NVSB), a group he drove establishment of in 1992.

The NVSB is responsible for overseeing the code of standards for the welfare of deer during velvet antler removal.

In presenting the award, Ian Walker and Paddy Boyd said Ian Scott, aka Scottie, had dedicated his life to deer and had devoted countless hours to the NVSB. Getting agreement between vets and farmers on the standards and system for velvet removal had been difficult, but the industry should be proud of an end result that had stood the test of time, Ian said on accepting the award.

“Ours is an excellent example of how you can establish a system that empowers farmers but has veterinary backing to prove integrity and that the necessary animal health and welfare boxes are ticked...we must protect that right going forward.” ■



The Gallagher team at conference.

Westview expands deer diversification

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The KISS – Keep It Simple, Stupid – mindset is not one the Westview Farming Partnership sticks to, Matt Carroll told the conference field day.



TEAM APPROACH: Key players in the Westview Farming Partnership (l to r) Matt Carroll and parents Shane Carroll and Nicola Shadbolt. Team ownership, through an equity partnership, and a strong on-farm management team are keys to the success of the integrated farming business.

The addition of 265 velvet stags to the Pohangina Valley farm in Manawatu is a case in point. The bought-in velvet genetics will be supplemented with home-bred replacements; and management of the breeding programme along with the velvetting has added a new layer of complexity, Matt said.

Although the velvet market is down on previous years, velvet would stack up over the long-term and offered another avenue to grow income diversity — a key strategy for the partnership.

“There are challenges, but everything is cyclical,” he said.

The diversification required the construction of a new shed, but this season’s velvet sales covered about 90 percent of the build cost.

Westview had explored diversification into velvet for five years before taking the plunge during the restructuring of the equity partnership, first established in 1987. The ownership transition brought in new shareholders and enabled deer fencing across an additional 130 ha, creating scope to revisit velvet and breeding management.

Matt outlined Westview’s transformation from a moderately sized sheep and beef store stock operation into a larger, integrated red meat and dairy enterprise with income from timber forestry and carbon credits. He paid tribute to his parents and managing directors, Shane Carroll and Nicola Shadbolt, who had always been open to investing in an opportunity if it made sense operationally and financially.

The partnership’s day-to-day success relied heavily on a strong staff team — mostly female, he said.

At a stop-off enroute to lunch at the woolshed, Shane overviewed stock and pasture management and pointed out tree plantings, including poplar poles for hill stabilisation. Westview was exploring further infrastructure developments, including an on-farm hydro scheme, he said.

“There’s potential, but we need to investigate the investment needed and what to do with the energy generated.” ■

For more on Westview Farming, see page 30, Deer Industry News, December 2025.



Matt Carroll leading a talk at the post-conference on-farm field day.



Millie Wilson, Anna Ireland and Yunene Dawson from FMG

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Editorial supplied.

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Under pressure but not broken

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Underlying consumer demand for NZ velvet in its core retail markets remains firm. The market isn't broken. What we have to fix is getting it to the market.

That was the message from DINZ CEO Rhys Griffiths at this year's conference.

Reflecting on the velvet market over the past two decades, he said supply and demand had largely remained in sync, with volumes growing steadily from 2009 to 2023.

"Then in 2024, we hit market access issues, followed by misinformation, and that flowed straight through into poor prices. Those unacceptable prices then spilled into this past season," Rhys said.

He stressed weak prices were not a sign of soft retail demand, but rather disruption in the wholesale market, particularly among some commodity traders claiming an oversupply of larger, Korean-grade velvet. The result was low early-season price offers that rattled confidence and fuelled uncertainty.

The disappointing prices led farmers to cull more than 20,000 older, heavier stags, a move expected to reduce velvet production by around 200 tonnes this season.

He addressed criticism over the release of the updated grading guidelines on the eve of the new velvet season, conceding the timing "was unhelpful" and may have added to uncertainty.

But he said that exporters had been unanimous that demand was shifting toward smaller sticks, with larger Korean grades effectively maxed out.

"We had to communicate that trend to farmers, because prices would have been poor, with or without an addendum."

The root cause to the market situation was not simply grading nor volume, but instead poor supply chain discipline, he said.

"In South Korea, consumers largely paid similar prices, and consumption held up. So, somewhere between the farm gate and the consumer, too much of our hard-earned value is being trapped, and we have to fix that."

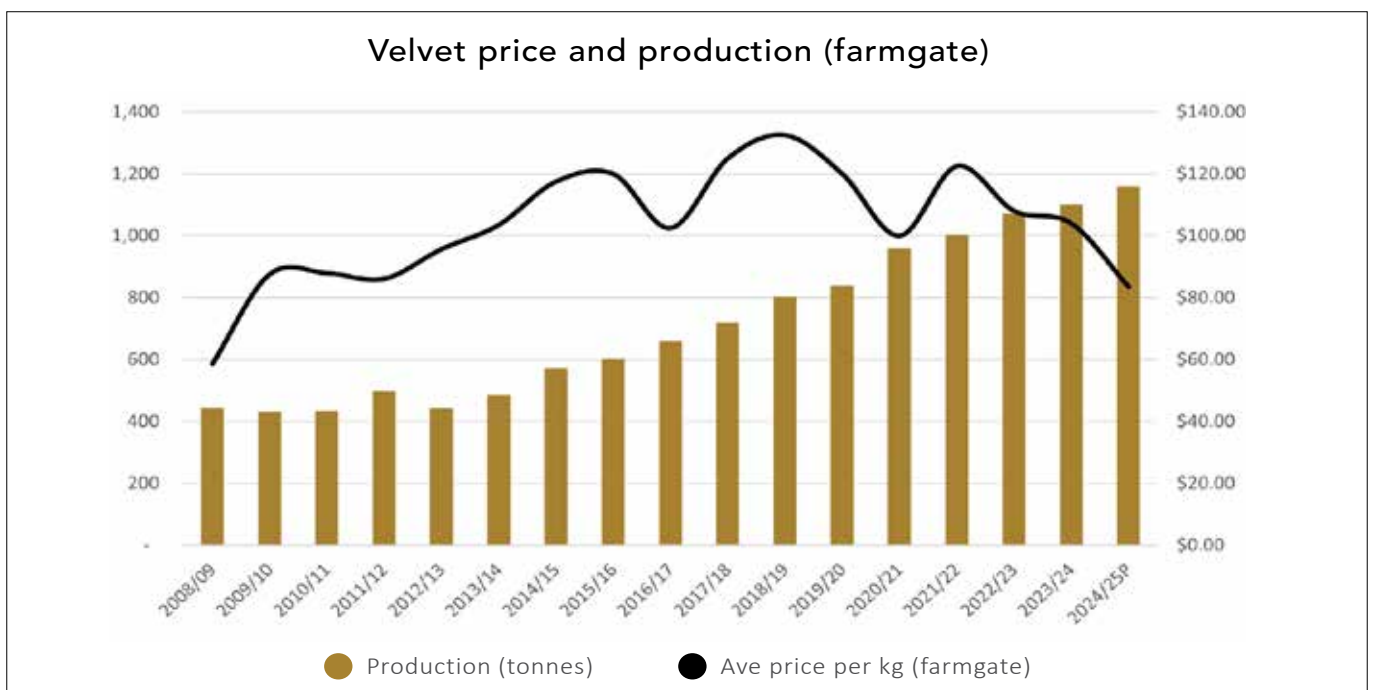
Resetting the market

The long-term fix to improving supply chain discipline was the exploration and development of a licensing-type format that would deliver better returns over time, project advisor Damon Paling said.

"...somewhere between the farm gate and the consumer, too much of our hard-earned value is being trapped, and we have to fix that."

Rhys Griffiths

Work has progressed on short-term practical solutions, and there has been engagement with the Ministry for Primary Industries and government officials about shaping regulations that would strengthen supply chain discipline. However, any potential regulatory reform was a "slow burn," Damon said, and was further impacted by the election year.



While regulatory reform will not be possible ahead of the 2026/27 season, that does not mean it is simply business as usual for the upcoming season. As Quality Assurance Manager Merryn Pugh said at conference, there are several levers to pull in the short-term that will help improve supply chain integrity, which are currently being worked on with priority. One of these levers includes further targeted refinements to the updated VelTrak Terms of Use and the VelTrak verification programme, both of which were introduced last year.



OPTIONS: There are several levers to pull in the short-term that will help improve supply chain integrity, DINZ QA Manager Merryn Pugh said at conference.

The verification programme involves checks of Accredited Account Owners, including exporters and agents. It is a tool to ensure that exporters are operating in a manner that supports the integrity of the velvet produced — a process to reinforce confidence in the system and reward those who do the right thing, Rhys said.

Velvet probe voted down

The fallout from last season's disappointing velvet prices led to a remit being raised at the NZDFA AGM by the Canterbury/West Coast (CWC) branch, which called for an independent investigation into the velvet supply chain, including value capture and market dynamics. Speaking to the remit, the CWC chair said members had been clear the review needed to be independent, saying it would be a circuit breaker to help "shut the door on the noise" that erupted across the sector last velvet season.

Support for the proposal from the floor stated it could help lift velvet returns and support the industry's Thrive 35 export-doubling ambitions, while opposing views questioned the likely cost of an independent investigation and report that may simply confirm what was already known.

After rigorous debate, it was decided that an independent investigation was not necessary. DINZ agreed that the questions in the remit were fair, and that as the industry good organisation, it has an obligation to provide these answers transparently. All efforts will be made to work through the questions in the remit so that the findings can be presented at Branch Chairs in September, says DINZ Markets Manager Terry Meikle. ■



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NEW ZEALAND DEER VELVET SPECIALISTS

Special birthday bash

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

John Smith used the occasion of his 83rd birthday to give, rather than receive gifts. The founder of Tasman Velvet presented a special totara carving of a Māori paddle to Mr Xue, from Min He Deer, to signify the long-standing relationship between the two companies.

Mr Xue, who travelled from China for the birthday celebration, said he was honoured and humbled by the gift, and reciprocated by presenting John with a very special bottle of whisky.

The celebration in January was a good opportunity to reflect on John's dedication to Tasman Velvet, which he had developed and built over 44 years, Tasman Velvet Managing Director Morning Guo said.

"During his lengthy involvement, John has earned deep respect from business associates and employees, and we wanted to acknowledge that," Morning says.

Tasman Velvet has endured the velvet sector's swings and roundabouts and is now one of the four remaining velvet processing facilities in Christchurch.

"We're the only New Zealand-owned and operated business drying velvet in the traditional Chinese way," she says.

Morning credits the ongoing success of the business to John's dedication and efforts at building and maintaining long-term relationships, using her own velvet career development as an example. John employed Morning part-time while she was studying at Canterbury University for a commerce degree, and from factory floor beginnings, she progressed to a management role.

"I'm very lucky, because I knew nothing about velvet and deer when I started out. John taught me everything about the business, and now, twenty-three years later, I'm still here.

"He is a true pioneer of the New Zealand velvet processing industry."

John's pathway to velvet were rabbit and possum skins, which he sourced throughout New Zealand and sold into Europe, Hong Kong and South Korea during the 1960s and 1970s.

In the mid-1970s, he added velvet to the sales mix, selling velvet from hunters and farmers who were starting to farm deer. The New Zealand product was well received by Hong Kong and South Korean clients for use in traditional medicine preparations, and when demand slumped for rabbit and possum skins, John decided to focus solely on velvet.

In 1982, he bought premises in the Christchurch suburb of Waltham, expanding and developing processing facilities for frozen and dried deer products. The Waltham area used to be a hotspot for velvet processing, with nearly 30 factories operating in the 1990s. It was known as "Korean Alley," Morning says.

Nowadays, the Tasman range includes frozen and freeze-dried



whole deer antler, sliced antler, deer velvet capsules, and pet food, sold locally and overseas.

Although the New Zealand velvet processing industry had downsized due to changing regulations, Morning is positive about the future for New Zealand velvet and Tasman.

"We work hard to maintain close working relationships with our clients, such as Mr Xue, and will continue do so in the future." ■



CRAFTED GIFT: John Smith, Mr Xue, and Morning Guo with the totara carving acknowledging the long-standing relationship between Tasman Velvet and Min He Deer. The eye-catching carving was crafted from totara wood gifted by Gisborne deer farmers Malcolm and Caroline Rau.

Making the cut

A chainmail glove is an important workday wardrobe accessory for Danielle Jones, Head Boner at Venison Packers at Feilding. Although her knife-handling skills are top-notch, a slight misjudgement could lead to a blade nick or worse, hence the protective lower armwear.

Luckily there have been very few knife-wielding injuries for Danielle (23), who has worked in the boning room for almost three years. She loves her role but says it took persuasion to convince management that she and colleague Ashleigh Helena were up to the challenge.



ARMOURY: Danielle's chainmail glove is a non-negotiable health and safety accessory.

Their foot in the boning room door opened to them during a staff shortage, since which she has honed her butchery skills in multiple roles in her progression to boss of the boning room.

"No other woman has achieved that role at Venison Packers. It's been hard work and a real achievement," she says.

Although management took convincing initially, they were now very supportive and encouraging.

In addition to a chainmail glove, a knife, sharpened to her own requirements, and a steel used frequently during a workday are her essential tools of the trade.

The post-conference field day crowd witnessed Danielle's speedy breakdown of a deer carcass at a pre-lunch demo. She estimates that the complete boning out process can take as little as eight minutes.

The fast-paced and repetitive nature of the tasks caused Danielle a bit of wrist pain when she started out.

"But we're supported to keep healthy and strong, and I'm not bothered by pain or fatigue."

Work in a venison boning room mightn't be an obvious career for a woman, but it's one Danielle is keen to promote.

"It's a great job, and I'd encourage women to consider it and give it a go." ■



Danielle Jones and a colleague from Venison Packers.



Simon Wishnowsky, General Manager of Venison Packers Feilding, speaking at the field day.

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Protein boom fuels US venison demand and retail growth

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The mood around NZ farmed venison at conference was positive, fueled by increased protein demand globally and growing consumer familiarity in North America.



VENISON THREE WAYS: Silver Fern Farms premium venison meat box, available on Costco.com, contains nine packs, three each of fast-fry stew, medallions, and ground venison.

A protein boom in the USA, expanding retail channels, a food policy shift toward Make America Healthy Again, dotting pet owners, and further diversification of products and multi-channel sales platforms are all pushing the price and demand for NZ farmed venison.

Despite tariff turmoil, global inflation, the Middle East war and subsequent fuel price hikes and freight bottlenecks, venison companies were generally positive about prospects in the short-to medium-term.

“The world has turned. Protein is no longer the villain; instead, it’s become the saviour,” Alliance Marketing Manager John Rabbitt said.

Recently returned to Alliance after a decade away from the meat business, he was surprised and disappointed at the drop in farmed deer numbers but confident the increasing appetite for venison would stem a further slide.

“Lean quality protein has become a vital positional tool with millennials, rising in status from ‘just a meal component’ to essential nutritional input.

“It’s not a fad. It’s a trend,” he said.



THE WORLD HAS TURNED: Protein is no longer the food villain, and in a growing number of markets, has become the saviour, Alliance Group’s John Rabbitt said.

Alliance was developing relationships in the North American retail market, which was closing the gap between the supplier and consumer and improving margins.

“It’s a huge consumer powerhouse, and I don’t think we’ve scratched the surface with our lamb, beef and venison.”

Alliance venison and NZ elk had made inroads to the US retail market on the back of lamb and beef. Retail demand for venison is growing, with a 133 percent year-on-year increase in the volume of ground (minced) venison packs sold. Alliance is looking to grow the retail range with the development of high-value leg cuts.

China is a developing market, John said, while Europe remains a trusted and long-established retail market for Alliance.

Europe remains an important market for Duncan New Zealand also. Demand has been solid, and prices have lifted in recent years due to the shrinking venison supply, Duncan NZ’s Marketing Manager Chris Duncan said. Europe was a good market for mixed-age stag meat because customers, familiar with the preparation and cooking of locally sourced wild venison, were comfortable with marinating and slow cooking cuts such as osso bucco, shanks, and shoulder muscle cuts to maximise the eating experience.



SOLID AND STABLE: Europe remains an important market for Duncan New Zealand. Demand was strong for mixed-age stag meat because European customers were familiar and confident on how to prepare and cook it, Marketing Manager Chris Duncan said.

Europe is a mainstay for Silver Fern Farms although volumes had almost halved over the 2024–2025 year, and for the year-to-date, were a third down on the comparable period last year.

The drop off was an intentional move by SFF, due to the seasonality of the market, and had led to further diversification toward the United States, and, on a smaller scale, into China, Silver Fern Farms Global Sales Operations Manager Glen McLennan said.

The US is a growth market for SFF, and the North American Retail Accelerator (NARA) programme has provided the opportunity to further grow a presence in the market through the development of a multi-channel retail strategy. That

approach includes the addition of SFF venison to the Costco e-commerce platform (Costco.com). SFF has extended the venison range from the cornerstone one-pound premium ground (mince) venison brick to include medallion steaks and stew cuts. SFF was also in the midst of introducing functional and eye-catching vacuum skin packaging (VSP) across some retail outlets.

The SFF total venison category (NZ elk and venison) retail price had increased by over 20 percent to around \$US10.80/lb (\$US23.75/kg) from mid-2024 until the end of April 2026, while retail volumes have increased by 75 percent to 231,000 pounds (105 tonnes) over the same period.

“Volumes continue to grow, and prices increase,” Glen said.

“Consumers are becoming familiar with our brand story, which is building a trust for the quality and consistency of our venison. Not only is [New Zealand farmed] venison being purchased more regularly, it’s also reaching new households.”

Future value project

Mountain River Venison’s strategy is to pursue quality rather than mass volume venison production. This focus led to the 2025 launch of the Future Value Project, which MRV’s John Sadler talked about in his conference presentation. The three-fold goals of the project — a partnership with Lincoln University — were to add tangible values to farm-raised venison, strengthen the value chain, and boost long-term profitability.

One strand of the project is a regenerative farming programme, involving 20 farmer suppliers who are learning and working towards an internationally accredited regenerative farming standard. Motivation for the regenerative move came from Force of Nature, an American client whose key point of difference is the supply of healthy meat products from regeneratively managed farm systems.

Participating farmers were learning a lot along the way and have completed a baseline monitoring survey of several biological and soil indicators, John said.

A second strand of the project is the Deer Healthscape Farming Framework, a four-year project for PhD Lincoln University student Emilia Lopez Seco, who is investigating feeding systems and management that could enhance the nutritional value of venison.

“It’s early days, but there is a lot of potential for productivity gain and value-add in this future-focused project.” ■



QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY: The over-arching goal of Mountain River’s Future Value Project is to produce quality venison products in a financially sustainable and an ecologically verified system, John Sadler said.



Gone to the dogs

Premium venison and NZ elk cuts for human consumption are the bread and butter for both First Light Farms and Duncan New Zealand, but both were eyeing the pet food market as a way to fully utilise the whole animal and add value to the fifth quarter and co-products.

A guiding First Light philosophy was whole animal utilisation, because it makes sense economically, environmentally and ethically, First Light General Manager Matt Gibson explained. Diversification into the US premium petfood retail, with support from the NARA programme, was helping achieve that goal, he said.

The US premium pet food market was estimated at NZ\$76 billion in 2025, with the dog category making up about 60 percent of spending.

First Light have released freeze- and air-dried NZ elk and red deer single-ingredient heart, liver and lung premium dog treats, now selling at West Coast supermarkets, specialist pet retailers and available online.

Quantifying premium, Matt said that the three ounce treat packs, which sold for US\$14.99, worked out at about NZ\$76/kg.

“It’s not your typical working dog diet,” he quipped.

Online channels were being used to promote and market the range and included firstlight.dogs on Instagram.

In summary he said the premium pet food was a “fascinating, exciting and slightly mad market.”



POSH PET TREATS: Harriet Virtue (left) and Kate Goodeve (right) with First Light’s raw freeze-dried and air-dried treats.



NZDFA Executive Committee: Chair Evan Potter, Tom Macfarlane, Richard Greer and Grant Hasse

Farewell to a deer farming original

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The large turnout from across the deer industry to celebrate the life of Bob Swann, a NZDFA founding member and Life Member, reflects the high esteem in which he was held.



NZDFA ORIGINAL: Bob was a founding member of the NZDFA.

The large turnout from across the deer industry to celebrate the life of Bob Swann, a NZDFA founding member and Life Member, reflects the high esteem in which he was held.

Bob, who passed away on 28 May, aged 93, was a pioneer of deer farming, highly respected for his grassroots knowledge and generous sharing of information.

Like many of the pioneers, Bob was a deer-hunting farmer who took on the challenge of farming deer to prove a point.

“I was one of those types who, if told something wasn’t possible, I’d go out of my way to prove it was,” he said in *In Hindsight, 50 years of deer farming in New Zealand*.

“I was pigheaded and decided I was going to buck the system and go deer farming anyway.”

He deer-fenced 30 ha of cold southerly-facing hill country in 1973 on the family farm Leslie Downs, near Fairlie, stocking it with helicopter-recovered deer.

“They changed forever the dynamics of the farm,” Bob’s son Peter said at the funeral.

Bob was generous in sharing his knowledge with farmers new to,

or keen on, deer farming. He opened the gates at Leslie Downs to a huge crowd for one of the first NZDFA field days in May 1976, an occasion celebrated at a post-field day debrief and a special bottle of whisky.

“Dad bought a bottle with a stag’s head on it, called Glenfiddich, which translates to ‘valley of the deer’, and that’s what he decided to name the deer farm,” Peter said.

Bob’s enthusiasm for deer and his involvement in the NZDFA led to travel, with wife Frances, throughout the country to attend meetings, field days, and conferences. He also went on several overseas trips to Europe and the UK with deer agent Ron Schroeder to buy deer for clients.

Like many of the pioneering generation, Bob was thirsty for knowledge, and his willingness to experiment, measure, and record led to his interest and involvement in R&D at Invermay’s Deer Research Group.

He was among the first to invest in the artificial breeding of deer, collecting stag semen for AI, and, in the late 80s–early 90s, using embryo transfer technology to upgrade his deer genetics.

Beyond farming, Bob was an intrepid hunter who enjoyed annual excursions to Tekapo, Fiordland and up the Arahata River in pursuit of tahr, chamois and deer. He also went overseas, including to Alaska, where he hunted moose, caribou, grizzly bear, and black bear. A few of those mounted heads were displayed on the walls of his man shed at the property he and Frances retired to near Geraldine.

Even in retirement, Bob’s interest in deer farming never waned. He attended the 40th National Velvet Competition in 2022, and in 2024 he travelled to Napier to see good friend



BOB & BIG DAD: Bob farmed hundreds of deer throughout his life, but Big Dad, a helicopter-recovered stag, held a special place in his heart. Big Dad won the National Velvet Competition three consecutive years.

Murray Matuschka receive NZDFA Life Membership. Bob was also at last year's milestone 50th conference, which would be one of his final opportunities to catch up with deer farming friends and colleagues.

The great outdoors was where Bob was happiest, and a drive two weeks before his passing to Haldon Station was a final and memorable excursion, Peter said.

"We stopped up a hill for lunch and looked out over the Mackenzie Basin, shrouded in fog, and toward Mt Cook in the far distance.

"Dad had a stubbie of Speights, a slab of fruitcake, a chunk of cheese and some chocolate...it was a perfect day and his happy place." ■

Thank you, Bob, for being pigheaded all those years ago, and for pursuing, proving and promoting deer farming in New Zealand.

Mark signs off

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Outgoing NZDFA Executive Committee Chair Mark McCoard reflects on wins, misses and the road ahead for deer farming.

Stepping into the leadership role in 2024, his number one priority was to get more venison breeding hinds behind fences. That didn't happen, but he's pleased that the hind herd has stabilised.

"It's a good sign, and it's good to see that those who have kept faith in breeding and finishing are being rewarded with strong prices. My hope is that those prices will hold at premiums above sheep and beef and create the net returns that farmers need," he says.

On the McCoard family farm at Mangaweka, east of Taihape, more deer fencing has been added, along with a few more deer.

"I'm practicing what I preach. Increasing the deer-fenced area is giving us more scope for the deer farming side."

Stepping aside from the NZDA Executive after seven years, two in the top job, has given him the chance to look back on what was achieved, what wasn't, and what remains unfinished business.

Hind herd rebuilding is a work in progress, along with another aligned goal, namely attracting sheep and beef farmers with existing and unused deer infrastructure back to deer. The opportunity was ripe two years ago, with the sheep industry languishing at the time, but Mark says the industry didn't act fast enough. Informative field days were held extolling the virtues of adding deer to a sheep and beef systems, but they came too late, he says.

"We would have made better headway if they'd been held a year earlier."

Another focus, encouraging the uptake of leadership development of younger DFA branch members, was ongoing.



JOB DONE: The increase in schedule payment lobbied for by the NZDFA was a pleasing achievement for outgoing Chair Mark McCoard. "It's eased reliance on the spring schedule, improving options and profitability for venison farmers on later country. Now the hope is all venison companies follow suit."

"We've had feedback that branches didn't know there was funding and opportunities available for members to upskill in governance and the running of meetings, so it's something the NZDFA will continue to promote."

One of the wins during his watch was the increase in schedule prices by some of the venison companies for heavier (85-plus kg) carcass animals.

"It's reduced the reliance on the spring schedule and is a real shot in the arm for venison farmers on later country, giving them optionality and improved profitability.

It's a good result, and my hope is that all the venison companies will follow suit."

Over the last year, the Executive Committee's workload was dominated by the renewal and revision of the NZDFA's foundational documents. The process was initiated by the renewal of the constitution to meet the updated requirements of the Incorporated Societies Act 2022. It was a big job, with the documents and service delivery agreement last reviewed 20 years ago.

"It created a workload over and above normal expectations, but it's left us in a good space for the next 15+ years, with the incoming Executive now able to focus on industry issues."

The past two years have been turbulent at times, particularly around velvet market access, grading and pricing. Mark is confident, however, that the market is realigning and adjusting, albeit more slowly than hoped. While acknowledging the important role DFA branches played in informing farmers and buyers about changes to velvet grading guidelines, he hopes the importance of earlier, industry-wide conversations is remembered.

He is grateful of the team effort of Executive members, making special mention of Karen Middelberg, also stepping down after six years of service, whose behind-the-scenes work ensured a smooth-running operation.

"It's a cliché, I know, but being part of the NZDFA has always been about the people. Not everyone agrees all the time, and there are always challenges, but I think we are in a good space," he said. ■

Optimising performance in summer-dry country

Sandra Taylor, *Deer Industry News* writer

Quality feeding to express genetic potential is the formula for success on the Forrester family's farm.



QUALITY DRIVEN: Mark, Gill and son Hamish Forrester have a reputation for producing quality stock. They prioritise the growing and feeding at key times, such as the lead up to weaning and immediately post-weaning.

At a glance

Mark, Gill and Hamish Forrester, Waipara Gorge, North Canterbury.

Sheep, beef and deer breeding/finishing plus velvet production on two farms.

Claremont (662 ha lease block) used for finishing young stock. Forrester Downs (357 ha) running:

Sheep

Longdown mixed-age ewes	1600
Ewe replacements	560

Cows

Breeding cows	150
---------------	-----

Deer

Hinds (including R2s)	850
Velvet stags	300

For nearly 20 years, the Forrester family have ridden the highs and lows of the deer industry, buffered to varying degrees by their sheep and cattle enterprises, as well as their mix of velvet and fast-finishing weaners.

Mark, Gill and their son Hamish farm deer on two neighbouring properties in North Canterbury and hosted a Canterbury-West Coast DFA field day in April, where the focus was on maximising productivity.

The Forresters have a reputation for producing quality stock due to their focus on feeding and giving animals the opportunity to realise their genetic potential against the backdrop of North Canterbury's notoriously dry summers.

They invest in pastures and winter and summer forage crops, which enables them to finish weaners quickly, the first spikers being processed from September at 58 kgCW with an average kill date of mid-October.

They also have a philosophy of making decisions early, acting as soon as they begin to see the first signs of drought to protect the reproductive performance of their capital stock.

"We go early and don't look back," Mark said.

Hamish looks after the livestock side of the business and said the levers they pull include selling weaner deer on the store market and buying in supplementary feed.

It's standard practice to sell deer and beef progeny at weaning, excluding replacement heifer calves. Lambs, apart from replacement ewes, are sold at an annual on-farm sale in November.

The Forresters make decisions early, acting promptly at the first signs of drought to protect the reproductive performance of their capital stock.

Although only a few kilometres apart, the two properties they farm are complementary. The stock do well on the Claremont lease block, with its high fertility soils and its warmer aspect, particularly in winter. It does dry out earlier in summer, however, making the colder and higher altitude Forrest Downs an important adjunct and backstop.

Hamish describes Claremont as the "engine room" because it's where stock is finished, whereas Forrest Downs is the breeding base. Velvet stags are run across both farms.

Focus on feeding

Mark and Gill began deer farming when they took over the long-term lease of Claremont in 2008. The property was deer fenced, so the couple took the opportunity to dip their toes into an industry they knew little about.

They enjoyed their deer so much, they began deer fencing part of Forrest Downs to work in with the Claremont deer operation. They gradually increased hind numbers on Forrest Downs by retaining more replacements from Claremont.

Replacement breeding hinds are selected from the progeny of 150 hinds mated to a Peel Forest Forrester high-performing stag. The replacement hinds must have the credentials to carry condition through hot, dry summers and into winter, Hamish said.

Replacement velvet stags are selected from the 100 velvet hinds mated to Peel Forest velvet stags.

Older velvet hinds are mated to high growth-rate red terminal sires. The hinds graze forage crops such as Raphano and rape to

help maximise pre-weaning growth rates in the fawns and protect hind condition in the lead-up to mating.

The Forresters pre-rut wean, and after a drench, tagging and an oral magnesium, the weaners are run onto summer kale crops and lucerne to maximise autumn growth rates. There is a focus on keeping weaners growing over the critical autumn period. During dry years, fodder beet is lifted and fed to keep weaners on an upward growth trajectory.

In winter, the weaners are drafted into single-sex mobs and fed on kale or fodder beet crops, supplemented with lucerne baleage.

In spring, the spikers are priority fed as they are the first out the gate and on the truck to the processors.

Once processing starts, they send yearlings regularly, avoiding the temptation to try and put extra weight on them. This also means they don't cut a lot of spiker velvet.

Cropping rotations

One of the strengths of the Forresters' operation is their cropping rotation, which plays a big part in building resilience in their summer-dry environment.

Three paddocks of fodder beet are grown every year, along with rape and kale crops and short-rotation grasses, which are more productive, particularly in dry years.

The Forresters invest in pastures and winter and summer forage crops for the fast finishing of weaners.

Crops also play a role in the management of internal parasites, with different stock classes grazing in behind young stock to help maintain pasture quality and mop up internal parasite larvae.

Hamish said they feel they have struck a good balance of different stock production classes (velvet, venison, beef and lamb) so that when one market is down, another is in an upward cycle, as has been the case over the past two years.

Speaking at the field day, farm consultant Wayne Allan pointed out that the family clearly demonstrated the characteristics idiosyncratic of the most profitable deer farmers.



ENGINE ROOM: Claremont's warmer aspect and high fertility soils grow high-quality crops and pasture for the finishing of weaners and feeding of velvet stags.

They do the basics very well, particularly around feeding and genetics. They match demand and feed supply and pull levers early when soil moisture levels drop.

They are well-informed about climatic and market outlooks and act early in response to these.

Farmers have three buffers in their farm systems: soil moisture, pasture covers and stock condition. Top-performing farmers, such as the Forresters, protect all three of these as much as they can, Wayne said.



DROUGHT PRONE: The Forresters farm in a typically summer-dry environment and have levers in their system to protect the reproductive performance of their capital stock. The levers include selling weaner deer on the store market and buying in supplementary feed.

Feed quality is the key

A key driver in any livestock system is the quality of the feed on offer.

"Don't underestimate the power of high-quality feed to increase growth rates and use feed more efficiently," Wayne Allan said.

Genetics are a permanent and cumulative gain in productive potential, but stock need to be given the opportunity to express this potential through feeding.

Pasture renewal programmes, soil fertility, targeted nitrogen applications, high-quality supplements and forage crops, and the integration of different livestock classes are all tools to help ensure high-quality feed is available at critical times of the year.

"You need to get the feed quality and the timing of the feed right to get the benefits, particularly if using terminal sires. If you don't have the feed, there is no point in using the genetics."

It's also important to ensure animal health issues are not limiting production, Wayne said.

"You want to be prioritising those issues that smash production, such as worms and Johnes."



FEEDING & BREEDING: Quality feed is needed to express the genetic gain, Wayne Allan said.



FAST-FINISHING FOCUS: Weaners on kale in early autumn. The Forresters invest in pastures and forage crops to get weaners to finishing weight quickly. Weaners are processed from September at 58 kgCW, and the average kill date is mid-October.

“You want to keep them in the optimal range as long as possible. In this environment, you cannot control the soil moisture so you must protect the other two as long as possible. We can manage one dropping out of the optimal range, two gets uncomfortable, but when we lose all three, the farm is in crisis, and we want to avoid a crisis as much as possible.”

Profitability of deer enterprises

Deer will outperform other stock classes in eight out of every 10 years, Wayne said.

All three deer enterprises are holding their own against other stock classes, but as with all finishing systems, fast finishing is the most critical factor driving profitability.

Breeding hinds

Looking at the profitability of different deer enterprises and the factors that influence them, he noted that the breeding hinds typically spend most of their time on the poorer part of the farm. They consumed the least amount of drymatter per stock unit equivalent, so can be unfairly disadvantaged when assessing profitability on a stock unit basis, Wayne said.

A breeding hind generated a gross margin of 18c-22c/kg DM consumed, compared to breeding ewes on similar country lambing 125 percent, which earn a gross margin of 20-22c/kg DM, and breeding cows at 19-20c/kg DM.

Finishing

Young stock are finished on improved pastures, sometimes with irrigation. Comparing weaner finishing with winter lambs, beef finishing and dairy heifer grazing, the deer continue to remain competitive. Deer generate a gross margin of 30-35c/kg DM consumed, compared to winter lambs at 30-38 c/kg DM, beef cattle at 23-25c/kg DM, dairy beef bulls at 30c/kg DM, and dairy heifers at 36c-40c/kg DM.

While beef prices are at record highs, deer finishing continues to hold its own, although lighter weaners can be penalised in a finishing system, Wayne said.

Velvet

The gross margins of a velvet enterprise are dependent on the velvet price and yield per head.

Genetics are a critical factor in determining the profitability of velvet stags, underpinned by feeding to realise an animal’s genetic potential.

At a 5 kg yield average and a price of \$75/kg, velvet stags are generating a gross margin of 17 cents for every kilogram of drymatter consumed. When prices were higher, velvet stags were earning as much as 30c-40c/kg DM.

At \$75/kg, each additional kilogram of velvet grown increases the gross margin (GM) by 3.2 cents per kilogram of drymatter (kgDM) consumed. A \$10/kg lift in the price of velvet would add another 2 cents/kgDM consumed to the GM, Wayne said.

“Velvet has dropped from consistently being the most profitable dry stock enterprise to currently being amongst the lowest. For a 7 kg average yield, if the price lifted above \$100/kg, it would recapture the top spot.”

Despite recent subdued prices for velvet, Hamish said they were optimistic about the industry’s future. The velvet stags suit Forrest Down’s pasture curve better than any other stock class, including breeding hinds. Velvet is cut reasonably early, and there is good regrowth, which surprises the family given the typically summer-dry conditions.

They sell 2.8 tonnes of velvet every year, which equates to 6 kg per stag from their first cut.

Factors driving profitability

Profitability isn’t always the key driver in a farming business, Wayne said. For some farmers, a better work-life balance, community involvement, environmental stewardship, and farm succession are equally important drivers.

But for those motivated to maximise profits, there are drivers within each enterprise that will influence the bottom line.

In a breeding system, these are reproductive rates, the number of fawns weaned, and weaning weights.

In a finishing operation, liveweight gains and stocking rates are the main drivers of profitability, and these can be undermined by wastage and production-limiting diseases such as Yersinia and Johnes.

In a velvet operation, velvet weights, the opportunity cost of replacements (particularly where AI and embryo transfer are used to speed genetic gain), and the salvage value of culls will all impact on profitability.

Feeding at critical times is a driver of productivity and profitability.

“For a breeding hind, a critical time is the period leading up to weaning and then again immediately post-weaning,” Wayne said.

“This period affects two years of production, boosting the weaning weights of fawns and ensuring hinds get back in fawn.”

For finishing deer, the autumn period weight gains are often left on the table. Good feeding at this time can really boost liveweight gains, so every effort must be made to not constrain their productive potential at what can be a tight time of year feed-wise, he said.

For velvet stags, the 80 days between button drop and velvetting is the most important to maximise production. ■

Ticked off

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The Big Tick Day Out, organised by the Waikato DFA, was the perfect forum and think tank for the big topic of ticks in, or on, deer.



WINNER: Ian Bristow won five litres of Bayticol, donated by Elanco, for guessing the number of ticks on a stick of velvet. On the left is Waikato DFA Chair Vanessa Crowley, and on the right, Colin McKay from Elanco.

Rising tick numbers in parts of New Zealand are becoming an increasing concern for farmers, particularly as changing weather patterns and warmer conditions create a more favourable environment for parasites to thrive. In response, farmers are taking a proactive approach—coming together to share experiences, compare what’s working on the ground, and explore practical solutions to manage the challenge. Events like the recent Big Tick Day Out in Waikato highlight the value of collective action, bringing farmers, veterinarians, and industry experts into the same conversation.

The event provided a space not just to discuss the growing tick burden, but to look ahead—what tools, management practices, and research are needed to stay ahead of the issue. Just as importantly, it reinforced a strong sense of collaboration across the sector, with farmers keen to learn from one another and adapt quickly as conditions evolve. With tick pressure unlikely to ease in the



BIG TURNOUT: A crowd of about 70 people from across the North Island attended the Big Tick Day Out.

near term, initiatives like this play an important role in building resilience and ensuring the industry is well positioned to respond.

“I think a few farmers came along wanting a silver bullet to the issue,” said BTDO facilitator Ginny Dodunski, “but we all probably all left with more questions than answers, which highlights the fact that we do need a lot more research into the problem of ticks.”

Ticks are on the research radar, DINZ Research Advisory Panel member and vet Richard Hilson said.

“There are big gaps in our knowledge, and we need a wider look at the issues,” he said in his presentation.

There was a long list of questions that needed answers to form a better understanding of the tick problem: where are they in NZ, and where are the hotspots; at what times of the year, and where on the deer do they typically attach themselves; how do seasonal conditions, climate, pasture cover, and livestock systems and management impact tick infestations and residual populations; what sets ‘bad’ farms apart from ‘good’ farms, and why are some animals prone to tick attack?

Ticks cannot and will not be eradicated, and Richard voiced his concern that the default management and control—reaching for chemicals—was a recipe for resistance.

Instead, Richard advocated a combination of management tools: integrated grazing, mowing, pasture sprays, and specialist pastures. Chemicals are still required in the mix, but improved understanding on how treatments worked in different host species, as well as how to test for chemical resistance, was needed to inform and develop effective control options.

He believed a pan-industry approach for controlling ticks in sheep, cattle and deer was the best approach for tackling the tick problem. ■

Ticking time bomb

The BTDO attracted a crowd of 70 farmers and other deer industry stakeholders from across the North Island, many with firsthand experience of dealing with ticks.

“From feedback, the tick pressure is increasing,” Ginny said.

“It’s especially bad in the north of the North Island, and there are also reports of ticks spreading in the north of the South Island.”

Climate change models suggest the tick challenge will increase over time.

The discussions led to many questions, and it’s likely there were many more. The NZDFA said interest from the day had been strong, and another day was planned for Marlborough in August.

In the meantime, email any questions about ticks to: NZDFA@deernz.org.

Also, ‘Tick Talk’, (page 25, *Deer Industry News* September 2024) summarises a tick management presentation by Richard Hilson.

A community collective approach for environmental gains

Lynda Gray Deer Industry News Editor

It is better to take a collective, rather than individual, approach to the funding and planning of environmental restoration and management is the big message from Charles Rau.



PROUD MOMENT: Charles Rau (centre) with parents Liz (left) and Laurence (right). Environmental award category sponsor Vanessa Crowley, Duncan NZ, is far left, while DINZ Environmental Stewardship Manager Luka Jansen is far right.

It is better to take a collective, rather than individual, approach to the funding and planning of environmental restoration and management is the big message from Charles Rau.

“It’s really hard to make progress on your own...we couldn’t have achieved what we have without a robust catchment group,” he says.

His comment to *Deer Industry News* follows the April deer industry field day at Matawai Deer Park (MDP), owned by Charles and wife Jane, winners of the ‘vision and innovation in a demanding environment’ category of the 2025 Deer Industry Environmental Awards.

Over the past five years, more than 10,000 native trees have been planted at MDP, with a further 2,000 going in this winter. This is on top of 6 ha of QEII reserves. The plantings cover riparian and wetland areas, as well as erosion-prone blocks where poplars and willows are underplanted with natives.

All the tree planting, spraying and fencing costs were covered by a grant to the Mōtū Catchment Group. The Raus helped incorporate the group of 19 families in the Mōtū River catchment. Crucial in securing that money was the contract employment of Allegrow, a local rural environment specialist, to prepare the grant, which included a catchment-wide erosion control plan, tree planting and fencing plan, and ecological assessment. The specialist help, along with Advance Party funding, helped the Raus develop a farm environment plan in 2019.

Recently, the catchment group has been superseded by the Mōtū

Matawai Catchment Communities, which includes multiple catchments in the region. The next generation group has attracted 30 members, and Charles expects that number to grow as news of the new format spreads.

Charles, a chartered accountant at BDO in Gisborne, has an in-built financial lens, and says a community-scale approach, rather than a single catchment scale, is a cost-efficient way to leverage more funding across a greater area.

The membership fees are based on the former group formula, calculated to cover the costs of employing a professional to apply for a minimum number of grants.

“Sometimes you miss out on funding, but over time you become more successful, and that success attracts more members,” he says.

The groundwork of the group is volunteer-driven and includes Matawai School Enviro Schools project members, who help with plantings and at the same time learn about the care and raising of native seedlings.

As the group’s momentum has grown, so too has the Raus’ to-do list.

“You tick off one thing, then look for the next two things,” he says.

On the radar over the next year is the planting of another 2,000 native shrubs and trees, as well as ongoing weed and predator control in riparian plantings.

History

On the field day, the crowd of 30 heard about the history of Matawai Deer Park. MDP is the amalgamation of three farms: a 230 ha run-off block bought from Charles’ parents Laurence and Liz in 2007; the neighbouring 140 ha farm, called Millars, bought in 2015, as was Scarlys Way, near Gisborne. There’s also a 400 ha lease block, Kortess.

The Rau family has a long connection with deer. Laurence and Liz started farming them soon after moving to Puketia Station in Matawai in the late 1970s, where Charles’s brother Malcolm now farms. There they built a herd based on Danish genetics and locally wild-recovered deer. Those founding genetics were part of the MDP breeding base, which has evolved for velvet-focused production.

“Velvet is a passion for us, and we’re lucky that my parents invested in good clean velvet genetics,” Charles says.

He also paid credit to his parents for the 6 ha of QEII reserve established on MDP over the past 35 years.

MDP runs 8,000 stock units (sheep, cattle and deer) across 848 ha (750 ha effective). The deer herd consists of 420 mixed-age stags, 60 R3 stags, and 240 MA hinds plus replacements.

Farm tour

A farm tour gave visitors a feel for the demanding MDP environment, as well as a chance to view existing and planned planting sites. It included stops at shelter plantings, riparian areas, wetland areas, and QEII blocks. The crowd was interested in hearing about weed and pest control, which is ongoing - and grant funded - as well as how exactly the community group functioned.

MDP's approach showed how integrated planning, backed by community effort and funding, could deliver at multiple levels, DINZ Environmental Stewardship Manager Luka Jansen says.

“There are the environmental benefits from establishing shelter belts and riparian plantings, and there are also the animal welfare benefits. Having happy and healthy animals on the farm is a big part of caring for your environment. Plant a tree for the environment, but make sure that it's done with the needs of your deer in mind.”

She was impressed at how “bite-sized efforts” were steering the Raus towards their whole-farm vision. ■



NEW TRAP: Charles explains the details of a new automated predator trap.



VIEW FROM THE TOP: The field day crowd looks upon the rugged and demanding environment.



WATERWAY PLANTINGS: One of several riparian and wetland plantings, where weed and predator control is ongoing.

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Deer done well at Dipton

Gerhard Uys, *Deer Industry News* writer

Deer not only generate income, they also help manage feed and risk on the Lindsay family's Southland mixed livestock farm at Dipton.



At a glance: Wakefield Farm, Dipton

Lindsay family: John and Mary Lindsay plus daughter Georgie, son Will and wife Erin

1570 ha comprising 930 ha flat, including 135 ha under pivot irrigation, and 640 ha hill-country.

16,500 SU: 60% sheep, 25% cattle, 15% deer

Deer

Eastern red genetics for venison production

In-calf hinds	640
Weaner hinds/stags	600
Fawning performance	MA hinds 90 – 95%
	R2 hinds 80 – 90%
R1 stags killed early October @ 62 kgCW.	

At a Beef+Lamb New Zealand field day in early autumn, the Lindsays showed and explained how they successfully manage an integrated livestock system across 1570 ha of hills and flat country.

John and Mary Lindsay got into deer 40 years ago to diversify and derisk their farm business. When they started out, breeding hinds were selling at exaggerated prices of up to \$5000 per hind. The Lindsays refused to pay these prices, buying instead weaner spikers bred for the venison market. At the same time, John identified animals with velvet potential, building at minimal cost a herd of 300 stags. However, a decade ago the decision was made to sideline the velvet stags because of competing labour and time commitments due to the expansion of the wider farm business. They shifted their focus to venison breeding and finishing, using more of the hill country to run hinds for venison breeding. That shift aligned better with the rest of the system, particularly around feed demand and labour efficiency.

Today, deer are tightly integrated into the wider farm system, not only generating income but helping manage feed and risk. A good example of how deer integrate and complement the wider system is the feeding and finishing of weaners. The Lindsays target early kill dates for yearling stags, with animals typically processed in early October at around 62 kg carcass weight. That decision is not just about killing on the peak venison price; it's about creating space for other stock classes at peak spring demand.

Hinds also fit well with the farm's feed curve; their later fawning date eases pressure during a tight spring, providing flexibility when feed demand from other stock classes is peaking.

Matching stock to country

The principle underpinning the success of an integrated system is simple, Will says.



BEEFED UP: Young home-bred cattle, a mix of Hereford-Angus and Hereford-Angus-Charolais or Simmental-cross animals, are rotated around the flats, cleaning up pastures grazed by ewes and lambs, or weaner deer.



SHEEP FOCUS: Sheep comprise 60% of stock units. Lambing is spread to reduce weather risk and smooth feed demand. About 40% of ewes lamb around 20 August, with progeny untailed and the majority finished by Christmas at 19 kgCW.

“[It’s] about matching stock classes to the strengths and weaknesses of the property to reduce risk.”

That successful matchmaking starts with a good understanding of the farm’s limitations and advantages. The big strength of the Lindsays’ system is diverse feed growth across the flats and hill country throughout the summer. The biggest limiting factor is stock water and access to the hill area.

The flats carry higher-value finishing stock and grow winter and summer feed crops. A lot of thought is given to what is grown, well beyond yield, John says.

“When you rotate between crops, you need to ask yourself what you are trying to achieve and how the wider business and operational decisions will work together.”

He uses barley as an example. It can either be cut as a whole crop early, opening up the paddock for new pasture for grazing the following spring, or harvested for grain and straw, for on-farm feeding or selling to the dairy industry to fill a spring feed shortage.

Integration benefits beyond income

The benefits of an integrated mixed livestock system extend beyond feed and income. Sheep, cattle, and deer are strategically used to manage pasture quality, pests, and land development. Targeted grazing of deer and cattle helps break down rougher, less developed areas, and, in conjunction with fertiliser, encourages pasture improvement.

Stock grazing in conjunction with biological controls is also becoming increasingly important. An example is the ragwort flea beetle released on farm. Initially, the combined beetle-and-grazing approach looked promising. However, there’s been a



A GOOD FIT: John (pictured) and Mary diversified into deer around 40 years ago to spread risk. These days, deer, comprising about 15% of stock units, complement the wider farm system, generating income as well as helping manage feed and risk.

resurgence of ragwort in some areas, which the Lindsays hope to knock back with more deer fencing.

“By having a block that isn’t 100 percent stocked with deer, you can introduce sheep that will eat ragwort and manage it better,” Will says.

Management of another bugbear — internal parasites — is shifting from a traditional drench only-based system to more of a whole-farm system approach.

Crops under pivot irrigation are used to break the parasite cycle. The theory is that worm larvae cannot climb up clover and turnip stalks, and faecal egg count results are vindicating this thinking.

Good feed, particularly high-protein crops, will drive immune response and fend off the worm burden, Will says, as does growing lambs to mature weights, at which point they become resilient to worm challenge. He says more deer fencing would allow better integration of stock classes, helping to break the parasite cycle and improve overall animal health.

Setting up for success

BakerAg farm consultant Matt Carroll, a presenter at the day, said the principle underpinning an integrated system is that when one livestock market is down, another props it up to keep the overall system ticking along.

“The schedule is only one piece of the puzzle, and you cannot control it,” he said.

A resilient integrated system hinges on timely management and allocation of feed, which the Lindsays did by constantly weighing up the competing demands of sheep, cattle and deer across multiple classes and seasons.

“You need to decide what animal and class needs feed the most to set your system, and business, up for future success.” ■

Ringling the changes

Over the years, deer management has evolved to better fit the system. Developments include a shed for the wintering of yearling hinds, keeping them off paddocks during wet winter conditions. It’s also used in spring to rear lambs and in autumn for yard-weaning calves.

Another management change is fawning date, brought forward around 14 days through tighter mating. However, the weaning date has remained unchanged in mid-February, which has helped boost the average weaning weight by about seven kilograms.

Although deer and the integrated system are well established, the Lindsays have more changes in the pipeline. They’re planning more deer fencing across the hill country to increase the scale of hind grazing. Further hill subdivision will mean more feed and better utilisation through summer, potentially reducing the need for early weaning or supplementary feeding.

John says there’s also opportunity to further refine how different stock classes are used to manage weeds, parasites, and pasture across the farm.

Their ongoing focus is to build flexibility and introduce changes that will improve farm-wide performance.



WATER-FED GROWTH: A lot of crop is grown under the 135 ha of pivot irrigation. Winter and finishing crops include beet, kale, and swedes. Barley and annual/Italian ryegrass are also grown, providing further feeding flexibility.

Run on the sun

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

There was a real buzz following the Your Farm/Your Power afternoon hosted by the DINZ Southland Environmental Advance Party.



GROUP ENERGY: Presenters at the afternoon with Southland DFA Chair Tony Roberts, who hosted the day on the family's farm at Merino Downs near Gore.

The broad topic was how to reduce on-farm energy expenditure in a mixed livestock system including deer, looking specifically at solar energy and electric vehicles (EVs). Both were topics on the group's radar for quite some time, Facilitator Nicola McGrouther said, and the devastating winds that tore through parts of rural Southland in October last year were the catalyst for taking the next step. The wind event and the power disruption it caused throughout the region brought home the importance of resilient power sources such as solar. Another recent disrupter — the war in the Middle East and subsequent fuel crisis — has made EVs another on-trend topic.

Solar

The potential and practical considerations of introducing an on-farm solar power system was covered by Maniototo deer farmer and vet Becks Smith.

Her broad-ranging presentation and advice was based on first-hand experience of installing a solar system on her family's 700 ha sheep, beef and deer farm near Ranfurly for the running of K-line irrigation and home use. She also drew on experience from Solayer, a business she established to help farmers with the design and installation of solar and other on-farm energy options. The frustration's Becks experienced in getting the farm system up-and-running led to the formation of Solayer.

"We had four different people come and spend at least half a day

sitting down with us, asking a lot of questions to find out a lot of details," Becks said.

"They all came back with proposals for panels on our woolshed roof, but what we wanted was panels out in the paddock next to our irrigation pump.

"We decided to come up with the best solar option ourselves, and so we worked out how to do it. Once we got through that, I decided 'why not do it for other farmers?'"

Becks teamed up with Dave O'Sullivan, a farm manager and project manager with building experience, and Dunstan Brook-Miller, who has an environmental science, energy and electricity background, to form Solayer. The goals of the business were to build electricity resilience, create additional revenue, and most importantly, reduce farm working expenses.

"From my experience as a vet, I found that in the tough years, farmers would look at cutting their farm working expenses by reducing their spend on animal health, but that came with compromise and risk. But with solar, you're cutting a farm working expense with no compromise."

First steps

The starting point for any solar development was to know the price paid for conventionally supplied electricity, the size of the transformer, and the biggest user of power on farm. From Becks' experience, electricity supply rates ranged between 30 – 39 cents per kilowatt hour (kWh), whereas solar power was fixed at about 7 – 10 cents/kWh for 25 years.

Delving deeper into detail, she talked about the different types of transformers, the likely costs of installations, the pros and cons of different solar panel technologies, battery versus non-battery systems, and the export/selling of excess generated power.

The consent rules around solar installation were not specific, and from her experience, it was a permitted activity. The exceptions would be if installation was planned for a high wind area or over a large area.

"If you're unsure, give your local council a call. I've found the [council] teams I've worked with to be very helpful."

There was no perfect or one-size-fits-all system, and her advice to farmers interested in taking the plunge was to start small and add on.



WIN-WIN-WIN: On-farm solar generation builds electricity resilience, creates additional revenue, and most importantly, reduces farm working expenses, Becks said.

“A small solar system can be a good place to start because it’s like Lego in that you can add a battery and more panels later.”

Becks said the installation of a grid-connected low voltage system with no battery on the family farm has halved their annual electricity cost to \$14,000 (\$19,000 cost of electricity less \$5000 electricity export credit), and the cost of electricity to the farm has reduced from 28 cents/kWh to 6 cents/kWh. The total investment of \$70,000 has an estimated ROI (return on investment) of 18.5 percent and a payback period of just under five and a half years.

On-farm generated electricity can be used across the farm and at home, with any surplus production exported/sold to the grid.

The system comprises two arrays (32 metres long and 3.6 metres wide) made up of 108 ground mounted panels, allowing sheep to graze underneath. The array is a 54.4 kW coupled with a 50 kW inverter.

Plugging in to electric UTVs

With attendees energised by on-farm solar opportunities, the focus turned to the electrification of on-farm vehicles. On display and available for a test drive was a Hisun Elite UTV (side-by-side) brought along by The Electric Motor Vehicle Company (EMVC). It had a 5 kW motor and a single-battery range of around 70 km. The addition of another battery would roughly double the range, although it was terrain-dependent, EMVC Director Alex de Boer said. The Elite UTV had a low speed of about 15 kph for towing using all the motor torque. In medium gear, maximum range could be achieved at a top speed of about 25 kph, using only half of the motor torque. In high gear, it used 80 percent of motor torque to reach a speed of 45 kph.

Towing capacity on flat terrain was about one tonne, with common payloads including irrigation pods, bale feeders, feed cafeterias.

EMVC fits the Hisun UTVs with lithium iron phosphate batteries, which worked on the same chemistry as standard eV cars, Alex explained.

“Fitting the batteries means we can adapt power and range requirements according to the needs of the farmer,” he said.

“They’re long-life batteries, which we guarantee for five years but should last 10 years or more.”

EMVC, established by Alex in 2018, distributes UTVs, eV/hybrid cars, e-bikes (full-suspension, mountain and tour/trail), and scooters throughout the country. EMVC will soon introduce Atlas-E UTV models to their range, the first a two-row, six-seater crew cab model, and the second a 10 kW UTV model.



HUSH MOBILES: An electric UTV was super quiet, making them ideal for working with deer, EMVC Director Alex de Boer said.



ENERGISED: Te Anau deer farmer Megan Culling said the potential for on-farm solar energy options was explained in an easy-to-understand way and had encouraged her to investigate further a potential system generating power for farm and home use, and for export to the grid.



SOLAR MAKES SENSE: “Solar does work for deer farmers. We tend to hear about the great returns on dairy farms, but it can also work on mixed livestock farms,” Southland Environmental Advance Party Facilitator Nicola McGrouther said.

Solar top tips

- Know the size of your transformer.
- Know your biggest power draw.
- Provide the solar company a letter of authority to request your existing consumption data from your electricity provider.
- Get copies of a winter and summer power bill to find out what you’re paying for power.
- Get two or three quotes for solar installation, preferably from a SEANZ (Solar Energy Authorised NZ) member.
- Take a look at EECA’s Solar on farms webpage (www.eeca.govt.nz/co-funding-and-support/products/solar-on-farms). It’s an excellent resource and includes information about a solar helpline for the independent assessment of plans from solar suppliers and installers.
- Solar installations with no battery are about \$1700/kW. For a system incorporating a battery, add \$1000/kW hour.
- Solar panel product warranties are usually around 25 years, with a lifespan of around 30 years.

Fuel conservation and fuel insecurity had lifted demand for electric UTVs recently, but there were other advantages. They were super quiet, which would be a big advantage to deer farmers; the torque was superior in comparison to a fuel engine UTV; and there were fewer moving parts to go wrong and repair. The reduction in carbon emissions, up to 10 tonnes a year depending on use, was another plus.

UTVs were popular with farmers, orchardists, hunters, outdoor tourism-related businesses, and lifestyle block owners. ■



ASB Smart Solar Loan

The transition to lower emissions and resilient farming systems was supported by ASB Bank's Smart Solar Loan, a 0% up to \$150,000 loan for solar installations in agricultural businesses. The loan was for a five-year term, with expectations that farmers would repay it through energy savings made, ASB's Senior Manager, Rural Sustainability Rural Banking Tim Lissaman said during an afternoon presentation.

“We want to remove that barrier of finance, or reduce that, that financial cost, which might be preventing farmers from getting on and adopting a technology that we believe will be very beneficial for the businesses.”

Payback time could be less than four years, and the vast majority were less than 10-year paybacks, he said.

“There are environmental and resilience advantages of reducing energy dependence on the network, but actually it makes really good financial sense to be looking at it [solar].”

DEER FACTS ARE BACK



If you subscribe to **Deer Facts**, you will find two **Deer Facts** sheets enclosed in this issue of **Deer Industry News**.

- ‘Creating a farm environment plan that works for you’
- ‘Tuberculosis control – a hard-fought battle’

These are updated versions of *Deer Facts* published in 2018 and 2021.

The *Deer Facts* series is being updated, thanks to co-funding from MPI and positive feedback from deer farmers. The updated *Deer Facts* have been redesigned to match the standard DINZ publication format.

Read them now: Once you have read these *Deer Facts*, please insert them in the Environment and Deer Health sections of your black *Deer Facts* ring binder. Discard the old versions they replace.

If you don't have a black *Deer Facts* ring binder and/or want to get on the *Deer Facts* mailing list, please phone: 04 473 4500 or email: info@deernz.org



Deer Facts are produced by DINZ in association with the Ministry for Primary Industries to help deer farmers run profitable farm management systems that are recognised for their high standards of animal welfare and environmental performance.

Top Deck triumphs

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

The havoc-causing winds of October last year almost scuppered the Roberts family's entry for this year's Southland Ballance Environmental Awards.



FAMILY TEAM EFFORT: Southland Ballance Environment Awards Regional Supreme Winners from left to right: Tony and Michelle Roberts, Mark Lieshout with Beauden, and Kate Roberts with Lucy.

Like many in the region, their 269 ha (240 ha effective) farm Top Deck Trading at Merino Downs near Gore was affected by the winds, which tipped up a number of big trees and flattened several deer fences. Tony Roberts says they felt it would be too difficult to rectify the damage before judging, but reassurance from Southland competition coordinator Pip Standish and a pushing out of the judging date persuaded the family to keep calm and carry on with their entry. It was clearly the right decision, with Tony and wife Michelle, along with daughter Kate Roberts and partner Mark Lieshout, winning the Southland Regional Supreme Award.

This is the consecutive year Southland deer farmers have claimed the title. Last year, Cam Nelson and Christina Vaughan were the Supreme Winners, and Tony acknowledges their support in preparing for the competition. Another deer farmer mentor was Evan Potter, a former East Coast Regional Supreme Winner and National Ambassador for Sustainable Farming.

Competition judges were impressed with the Roberts' success in transforming two neighbouring farms, bought in 2017, into a specialised dual-system operation. One half operates as a high-performing deer unit, focused on velvet production and trophy fallow bucks, while the other supports intensive dairy heifer grazing alongside a smaller beef operation.

Judges also praised the Roberts for their strategic thinking and attention to detail across all aspects of the business.

Commenting on the deer operation, special mention was made of the conversion of a woolshed into a modern deer facility, complemented by a dedicated deer wintering barn, both designed to improve animal welfare and ease of management. The judges also noted the key role genetics played in the deer system, with a strong focus on producing high-quality animals.

The depth of long-term thinking within the business, particularly around succession to the next generation of Kate and Mark, was noted. The couple are actively involved in the business and

working toward future ownership. Tony says it was special to have them involved in the competition.

“We feel lucky to have them come onboard and involved in the judging process, which was a real learning journey.”

At an open afternoon in early May to celebrate the win, visitors viewed riparian and wetland plantings, and heard more about the deer operation. They were especially interested to hear more about the purpose-built deer wintering barn, Tony said.

“It was a good chance to get the word out about deer and share our knowledge.”

Going through the judging process was both daunting and exciting, and one Tony would recommend to others.

“We had three rounds of judging, which involved on-farm visits and a thorough dissection of our business and what we do. It was challenging at times but rewarding, and it really made us think about what we do and why. It also made us look back with pride at what we have achieved.”

The Roberts will compete for the Gordon Stephenson Trophy and National Ambassador for Sustainable Farming and Growing title, along with the other ten Regional Supreme Winners at the National Sustainability Showcase on 2 July. The judging includes on-farm assessments alongside a panel interview, with finalists evaluated on the strength of their farming operation across financial, social, and environmental performance, as well as their ability to articulate informed perspectives on sector-wide issues.

In 2024, Hamish and Simon Guild of High Peak Station in Canterbury, a diversified Canterbury family farming business that includes a sizeable deer operation, were named overall winners and National Ambassadors. ■



LOOKING & LEARNING: Visitors at the open afternoon in early May were interested in learning about the deer system and the wintering sheds.

Climate change strategy

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

A reoccurring theme at this year’s deer industry conference was the need to formalise and prove the deer industry’s commitment to sustainable and low environmental impact production. BNZ’s Head of Customer and Industry Insights Peter Savage summed it up nicely in his presentation (sponsored by FMG), noting the changed expectations of customers buying high-quality protein such as NZ farmed venison.

“They’re not just buying protein; they’re buying origin, authenticity, sustainability, and trust. That’s provenance, and provenance only works if it’s clear, consistent and credible,” he said.

“Banks, processors and global customers are asking you to be more legible, more measurable, more consistent and more provable, not because they love admin but because when markets get nervous, they look to [industries and companies] they can defend publicly.”



CLIMATE CREDIBILITY: Climate credentials have moved from a nice-to-have to a must-have, BNZ’s Peter Savage said at this year’s conference.

To further emphasise the global perspective, he presented a table showing that 80 percent of New Zealand’s export destinations had climate-related disclosures in place, adding that climate was no longer about compliance.

“It’s about access. It’s about access to capital, access to markets, and access to long-term opportunities,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter whether or not you believe in climate change or that on-farm emissions are significant. Those international markets have to account for emissions associated with products that come into their market.”

The good news is that the deer industry has a climate change strategy that reinforces commitment to the protection of land, air, lakes, and waterways. Finalised earlier this year, the strategy meets those expectations alongside government environmental standards.

Although the tone of the document is formal, it is practical, farmer-driven and reflects recent shifts in government policy toward grass-root solutions rather than on-farm emissions pricing, DINZ Environmental Stewardship Manager Luka Jansen says.

“The strategy focuses on what matters most — supporting farmers on the ground while positioning the industry for long-term success.”

The strategy is a living document, meaning that as science, technology, and markets evolve, so will the approach.

“Farmer feedback is encouraged, because this is a strategy shaped by those on the ground,” Luka says. ■

DINZ Climate Change Strategy

The strategy is built around four themes:

- Building resilience to climate and regulatory challenges by:
 - » monitoring government policy and research;
 - » focusing research where it matters; and
 - » preparing for extreme weather by understanding the impacts of drought, heat, and floods on deer health and wellbeing, including pests and diseases.
- Collaborating to build and share knowledge across the industry by:
 - » engaging with the Ministry for Primary Industries on climate and environmental policy;
 - » advocating to ensure emissions policy is fair, evidence-based, and economically sustainable for farmers; and
 - » promoting practical tools and sharing practical information on climate issues and mitigation strategies.
- Empowering farmers to lead practical, climate-smart solutions by:
 - » understanding emissions by ensuring the deer industry accurately measures its emissions profile using the correct methods;
 - » acknowledging farmers’ efforts by advocating for greater recognition of existing on-farm climate mitigations; and
 - » increasing the range of farmer-focused training to build confidence in meeting regulatory requirements.
- Championing environmental stewardship as a potential market advantage by:
 - » promoting sustainability credentials to central government agencies (MPI and MfE), local communities, and customers to show that New Zealand deer farmers are among the most efficient venison and velvet producers globally, with low emissions intensity compared to international competitors;
 - » running certification and assurance programmes to support farmers in meeting certification standards (e.g. environmental assurance programmes) that reinforce market confidence; and
 - » conducting market research to monitor consumer trends and expectations around sustainability to ensure messaging remains relevant and compelling.

Osso buco

By Graham Brown

Hearty and comforting fare for those cold winter nights.

Prep time: 20 mins

Cook time: 15 mins



Ingredients

Osso buco

6 small or four large venison osso buco cuts (usually shanks)

1 carrot, chopped

2 celery ribs, chopped

1 small red onion, chopped

1 leek

1/2 bottle red wine

1/2 cup tomato puree

1 Tbsp rosemary, chopped

1 Tbsp garlic, chopped

300 ml venison or meat glaze

Risotto

1 cup arborio rice

1/2 onion, diced finely

2 cups of sliced mushrooms or peas and corn

1 Tbsp olive oil

1/4 cup white wine

1 l chicken stock

2 Tbsp parmesan

2 Tbsp butter

1 Tbsp parsley, heaped, chopped

1 tsp truffle oil (optional)

salt and pepper



Method

Osso buco

Season osso buco with salt and pepper, lightly flour. Heat a large saucepan on medium, add olive oil, and sear the venison on both sides to give good rich colour before removing from pan.

Add the chopped mirepoix (carrots, onion, celery) and lightly caramelize. Deglaze the pan with red wine, reduce by half, then add the tomato, herbs, garlic and venison stock.

Put the osso buco back in pan and bring to the first boil.

Cover with lid and braise in a 120°C degree oven until meat is tender and pulling away from the bone, approximately 1 hour.

Remove the venison from the pan, keep covered. Puree the sauce with all the vegetables and pass through a sieve, pressing to extract all juices.

Place osso buco back into strained sauce and keep warm.

Risotto

Heat casserole to medium heat, add olive oil, onions and sauté, approximately 3 to 4 minutes.

Add the rice and cook for 3 minutes, deglaze with white wine, reduce.

Add the hot chicken stock in thirds; when rice is cooked and the liquid is absorbed, remove from stove, then add the blanched peas or sauteed mushrooms, corn, cheese, butter, seasonings and truffle oil.

To serve

Place a mound of the risotto in a deep bowl plate and place the osso buco on top. Pour around the sauce and serve. ■

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