

Southland Branch of Deer Farmers Association response to DINZ clarification of AgResearch relationship.

A response to the DINZ clarification requires an outline in time of the sequence of events. This means actions are in their correct context.

In April 2020 the DINZ Science and Policy manager (Catharine Sayer) introduced a new industry model aiming to facilitate greater engagement by deer farmers into research and consider uptake and adoption early when recommending research programs. This model was based on creating four Science and Innovation Groups (SIG): Breeding & Genetics, On Farm, Post Farm and Environment. Each group was co-led by a DINZ representative and an AgResearch representative and had farmer representatives. This was a very much a “bottom-up” approach to prioritising research and ensuring it was relevant

These SIG groups were called to a meeting in Christchurch 19th September 2023. They were informed there that all SIG groups were disbanded and were no longer required with immediate effect. This was a bolt out of the blue announcement to members and AgResearch alike

It appears the DINZ Board did not grasp the reason why the Innovation Science groups were set up in the first place. At that time the DFA was concerned at the lack of input from farmers into what science was relevant. These groups were established to address the lack of farmer input into shaping research priorities. The Begbie report was commissioned to review the SIG function. The report did not suggest that it was bad idea but actually endorsed the concept. It just recommended improvements in their organisation and management.

The response uses some quotes from the 3rd July 2024 Otago Daily Times article. These have been cherry picked and one of the most revealing ones left out. Megan Skiffington describes the boards communication of moving from an embedded relationship with AgResearch to having to compete with all other science providers. Megan says ‘but a change in the way the deer industry had chosen to buy research could have been communicated better’. A diplomatic way of saying they were blindsided.

At the September 2023 meeting when the SIGs were disbanded a new Research programme was outlined This was to aligned with the new strategy and was a very much a “top-down” approach to prioritising research and ensuring it was relevant

On behalf of deer farmers the NZDFA executive sent a request to the DINZ Board in October 2023 re the severed AgResearch relationship but did not receive a response

The response “Background” outlines the meetings between DINZ and AgResearch (November 2023 and April 2024), insuring a continued positive relationship. This has been essential due to the manner in which the board abruptly changed that relationship, by ending the close deal we had.

While we do understand the changes in AgResearch policy and funding since the general election, this badly handled decision happened months before this, with the result that the deer industry had to do a lot of work to restore the relationship in the time since.

We are pleased to hear from Mark McCoard the NZDFA Executive Chair, that DINZ is wanting to use the DFA to renew the grass roots farmer input which has been totally absent since the science group's demise. The DFA involvement is essential but how that works needs to be well thought through. Many DFA members were part of the innovative science groups and had a lot of skills and capability to offer in understanding industry science needs. When the groups were abruptly ended that was lost and needs to be reinstated in some form through the planned DFA involvement in research needs.

The new structure has been very slow in getting going, with research projects seeming to be approved in a very haphazard manner over the last year. Where does research fit into the new DINZ strategy as it isn't clearly stated? Changes in research programme were put down to the new DINZ strategy. We would have thought it would have been more clearly defined.

The new Research Advisory Panel does not initiate research it just does due diligence on projects that the board science committee passes on to it. So it has been reliant on the board initiating research itself or from other sources. This needs tightened up with a more structured approach with the board overseeing in its governance role and not "hands on". Otherwise the squeaky wheel becomes a project instead of the correct science for the industry at the time.

Megan Skiffington was quoted as saying 'Deer Industry New Zealand has committed to funding the spectacular well characterised genomic deer herd at Invermay'

What is this level of commitment?

Does this mean that AgResearch is pulling back on the funding of the herd and its continued existence will be reliant on the deer industry?

While we are pleased to see DINZ working on improving the relationship with AgResearch and understanding its importance to our industry, many questions remain unanswered on the direction and implementation of our industries research and science programme.

When sweeping changes are made it always pays to have a well thought out Plan B right in behind.

Regards Tony Roberts

Chair Southland Branch NZDFA

For and behalf of the branch.