

DEER BRANCH OF THE NEW ZEALAND VETERINARY ASSOCIATION.

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THE DEER INDUSTRY : PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS

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INTRODUCTION

It is indeed a pleasure and privilege to be invited to be the first speaker at this conference, being the first anniversary of the formation of the Deer Branch of the New Zealand Veterinary Association. Last year at Palmerston North I attended your inaugural meeting and enjoyed the hospitality extended by members of the Deer Branch and the opportunity to discuss matters of mutual concern to our respective Associations.

PROGRESS

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the formation of the New Zealand Deer Farmers Association and at our Annual Conference held in June, we were as an industry able to review a decade of progress. The first licence to farm deer was issued in 1970. Since that time we have been through a number of distinct phases in the development and expansion of the industry.

(i) Capture

During the early 1970's, those that had formerly been venison hunters or deer cullers, realised the potential for the live capture of deer. Using typical New Zealand ingenuity, various methods of capture were developed. We have seen capture pens in the bush, tranquiliser darts, tranquiliser darts with radio locator beacons, electronic stun guns and finally, netting from helicopters. This last method has proved to be the most acceptable and practical method of capturing deer from the wild with minimum losses and stress to the animal. It is from New Zealand's "natural" feral herd that the nucleus of the breeding herd for the New Zealand deer farming industry, was established. The early pioneers of the industry secured these animals and contained them on farms behind suitable deer proof fencing.

(ii) Farming

From the mid to late 70's, we entered a phase of learning to farm these magnificent animals on an efficient basis. The early days of the Association's activities such as conferences and field days, placed particular emphasis on fencing, yard designs and other deer farming and handling methods. During this period the industry worked very closely with its scientists and veterinary

advisers to develop a full range of farming techniques for the better management and control of the farmed deer. Particular acknowledgement should be made of our scientists and researchers during this period for their research that helped produce such beneficial results. I think we can all agree that on looking back we have found that the deer has adapted remarkably well to its new environment and is capable of being farmed efficiently with a low labour input and produces a wide variety of products, and returns that are often the envy of those farming more traditional livestock.

(iii) Processing

The deer industry, or more particularly, the venison industry, was originally founded by members of the Game Industry Association (GIA) over twenty years ago based on the export of shot feral venison. Members of the GIA established game packing houses (GPH's) which handled the processing of feral venison. It was the prospect of increasing exports of venison that was one of the major factors in establishing the deer farming industry. During the late 70's and early 1980's, we saw the move to establish separate deer slaughter premises (DSP's) for the slaughter and/or processing of farm venison. The deer industry was particularly concerned to ensure that we continue to farm a "game" animal and this is one of the main reasons why separate DSP's were established to handle farm venison. After slaughter at a DSP, the venison was then further processed at a GPH prior to export. The highest possible standards of facilities and of quality control for the product have, and will continue to be, maintained, as the industry expands and product volumes increase significantly.

(iv) Export Marketing

Over the last few years, as product volumes have increased, it has become necessary to focus our attention on the marketing of the products of the industry. The Association recognised the need for a marketing body as early as 1980, and this culminated in the formation of the Game Industry Board (GIB) in early 1984. The Board has been working very hard over the last eighteen months in formulating its medium to long term marketing plans and the benefit of this work will become apparent to the industry over the next few years. The GIB will be responsible for overall positioning and direction of the export of products from the deer industry, and to ensure that our products will be able to be sold at acceptable prices as the volumes increase over the next ten years.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

In my opening remarks I paid tribute to the contribution of our scientists and researchers. The Association supports continuing work in these fields, particularly where they are of benefit to the deer industry. Over the last few years we have convened an annual meeting of representatives of our various research establishments so that the

Council of the N.Z.D.F.A. can review those matters currently the subject of research and development. At this year's meeting your Association was represented by more than one member, and as the list of topics under consideration is very extensive, I do not propose to review these in detail. However, I would extend the invitation for the Deer Branch to put forward any suggestions that may be suitable topics for future research and development. It became apparent at this year's Research Review Seminar that most of our R & D work to this point in time, was related to our production capability, the improving of our animals and therefore products. Mr. Trevor Walton, the Editor of "The Deer Farmer" in giving a commentary at the conclusion of that seminar pointed out quite strongly, that the time had come when our R & D must place greater emphasis on meeting the needs of the markets for our products.

COMMUNICATION

I personally strongly believe that good communications go a very long way to resolving issues before they become problems. Our Association therefore, is delighted that the New Zealand Veterinary Association has supported the formation of this Deer Branch. Previously, our Association had endeavoured to involve members of the Veterinary Association wherever possible on matters of animal welfare, and animal health. Members of your Association have belonged to various sub-committees of the Deer Farmers Association considering matters such as TB in farm deer and other professional matters. We welcome the opportunity to maintain this close relationship with your Association so that the benefits of improved communications will accrue to both Associations.

Before moving on to more specific areas currently under consideration, I would ask that the Deer Branch consider the following two matters under this general heading of improved communications. These two matter are :

(i) Education

I believe that the Deer Branch could take a positive lead by way of education programmes in the field of animal health and welfare and other professionally related matters. This I envisage would be initiated from within your own Deer Branch and in the early stages would be an "in-house" process to bring your members up to date with the recommended procedures for dealing with particular matters of deer health. This Course in itself is invaluable for this purpose. The second stage would be by way of conveying the results of these deliberations to the practical deer farmer. This could be by way of publications or educational seminars etc., but I would ask the Deer Branch to consider what steps, if any, it may consider appropriate to improve deer farmers' education in practical animal health matters.

(ii) Veterinary Client Liaison

For similar reasons as stated above, I believe that individual veterinary practitioners, the larger veterinary practices, and the vet. clubs, active in the deer farming industry, could also assist by way of better communications and improved educational opportunities with their deer farming clients. The veterinary profession is a service profession and provided your existing high standards of service to clients are maintained, I

believe that potential problems or differences will be absolutely minimised.

ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE

I would now like to discuss in some detail, two specific matters of more present interest to both our Associations, the first being the Tuberculosis Control Scheme, and the second being Antler Velvetting Practises and Procedures.

(i) TB Control Scheme

Approximately four years ago, the NZDFA, in conjunction with the Minsitry of Agriculture and Fisheries, promoted a scheme for the control of TB in farm deer. This initially involved MAF in assisting with TB testing and monitoring of deer herds placed under movement control (DCP's). For many reasons it became apparent that this initial scheme was not achieving the principal aims and objectives of controlling the spread of TB in farm deer. It appears that the test itself may have been subject to suspicion and coupled with the high price of deer, there was a significant disincentive for farmers to whole herd test and run the risk of having to slaughter "false" reactors and be placed under movement control.

Last year the Association established an Animal Health Sub-Committee with particular emphasis on reviewing the TB control procedures. We invited members of your Deer Branch to join us on this Committee, together with representatives of MAF. We are delighted that in this area of mutual concern we have had total co-operation from all parties involved towards devising a new and improved control programme that we believe will be more readily acceptable by farmers and veterinary practitioners alike. The details of the proposed new scheme were circulated to deer farmers prior to the Annual Conference held in Queenstown in June. We have been seeking constructive comments from farmers, veterinary practitioners and any others with an interest in this field of animal health with a view to further improving the draft Scheme

A separate session at this Conference will discuss the new TB scheme in detail but I would set out herein the following key points :-

Aims

- To reduce the incidence of bovine tuberculosis in individual herds of farmed deer.
- To minimise the spread of infection from known infected deer herds

Options

No control, voluntary control of compulsory control Council is of the opinion that voluntary control offers the best alternative at the present time

Whole Herd Testing

To achieve the aims set out above, Council believes that steps must be taken to encourage whole herd testing.

Quarantine

Infected herds will need to be placed under a closely monitored quarantine and re-testing programme to minimise the spread of the disease.

Resources

Farmers, veterinary profession, MAF. It is anticipated that farmers will continue to be responsible for their own on-farm testing programmes at their own expense. It is envisaged that we will seek closer co-operation and involvement with the veterinary profession in the implementation and maintenance of the scheme.

Accreditation Scheme

It is envisaged that the new scheme will involve herd accreditation. The scheme will be open to all deer farmers on a voluntary basis provided farmers agree on entering the scheme to comply with the terms of the scheme, the main conditions being as follows - whole herd testing, slaughter of all identified reactors, movement control, re-testing programme if reactors found. Intended benefits are accreditation of clear tested herds, long periods between tests, payment of compensation for reactors at present ex gratia rates, and possible disaster insurance cover.

Endemic Areas

These areas are regarded by MAF as likely to continue to contain residual TB infection spread by opossums. They will therefore be regarded as special areas and may be subject to special conditions for entry to the scheme. Council wholeheartedly supports greater efforts being undertaken for the control of opossums in these areas.

Comparative Test

Evaluation work on a comparative test is nearing completion. This secondary test should prove invaluable in cases where there is no evidence of bovine TB and should greatly improve the situation where there are herds with possible false reaction or avian TB reaction. Unfortunately the test is not effective where cases of bovine TB are also suspected.

Industry Fund

Council is considering the possibility of establishing an industry fund which could be used as a disaster insurance fund to assist members of the scheme that are subject to significant losses under the proposed new TB control scheme. This fund could be raised from an animal health levy on all deer or possibly by way of an "insurance premium" payable by members of the scheme based on the number of deer entered into the scheme.

We believe it is imperative to involve both the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the New Zealand Veterinary Association to ensure the successful operation of the scheme. I would summarise the involvement of the respective parties as follows:

Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries

The role of MAF has been in formulating the outlines of the proposed scheme, using their experience from similar TB control schemes in the cattle and dairy herds. MAF have also developed the inoculin supplied for use in the TB test and have carried out research on various aspects of this particular disease. They will further be involved in monitoring DCP's and the movement of deer from such properties. We believe it is

essential to have an independent Government Agency involved for the successful implementation of the scheme.

Veterinary Profession

The Veterinary Profession will be responsible for carrying out the testing procedures on a farmer/client basis. When whole herd testing becomes the norm, it will create a significant amount of work for your profession, and we would ask that you look to your manpower and other resources to be able to adequately service what will effectively be an additional work involvement.

Farmer

It will be the farmer's responsibility to work closely with his veterinary adviser on all matters of animal health. It will be necessary for the farmer to provide adequate facilities for TB testing and these would include yards of adequate design, a restraining device, light source in the yards and if possible, electric power for the operation of approved clippers for site preparation.

On the basis that the three organisations involved in the administration of this scheme are in general agreement on its operational requirements, then I believe that its ultimate success will depend on public relations and education. I would therefore seek the assistance of the Deer Branch in supporting this scheme. The work already undertaken by your Branch in producing an educational video movie showing TB testing techniques and procedures is to be applauded. This is an excellent step in the beginning of the educational process. We would further ask Deer Veterinarians to work closely with their clients to explain the benefits of whole herd testing (or the risks of not whole herd testing), to their clients. The NZDFA will likewise be carrying out an extensive promotional campaign in an endeavour to ensure that the maximum number of deer farmers become members of this voluntary scheme.

(ii) Velveting

The harvesting of velvet antler is seen by the deer farmer as a major by-product to his deer breeding and venison production capacity. The number of herds being maintained for just commercial velveting purposes is diminishing as the number of breeding stags increases with the growth of the industry. Over recent years a divergence of opinion between our respective Associations appears to have arisen on what is stated to be professional or ethical grounds. I personally am disappointed that such a division has occurred, as I believe the policy of NZDFA is substantially supportive of all the main elements considered significant in this issue. I would summarise our position as follows :

Animal Welfare

We totally support the position that deer farmers must comply with legislation regulating the procedures for the removal of velvet antler. By this I mean they must use approved analgesics for the removal of the antler. We in no way condone a situation that would cause any undue pain or suffering to the animals that we farm.

Procedures

We believe that proper procedures should be followed in the velveting process. The animals should be adequately restrained. The sedative and/or local anesthetic should be properly administered before the removal of the antler and tourniquets applied where undue loss of blood may occur.

Veterinary Supervision

We believe that in all matters of animal health and welfare a farmer should seek the advice and guidance of his veterinary practitioner. We likewise agree that the removal of antler should be generally under the "supervision and control" of a farmer's veterinarian. We see that the removal of antler is very similar to the treatment of a distressed or sick animal and despite its commercial potential, should be accorded similar high priorities for the animal's welfare. It is therefore our Association's policy to recommend that a farmer maintains a very close relationship with his veterinarian on all aspects of the velveting process.

Drugs for velveting

It is under this heading that we appear to have some difficulty on professional interpretation of the rules and regulations covering the availability and use of drugs for velveting. We totally support the situation that these drugs should be under the supervision and control of the veterinary practitioners. We do not, and never have, supported a case for the free availability of such drugs on an "over the counter" basis. We do however, believe that there are a number of occasions when, as with animal health, it is appropriate for the veterinarian to exercise a discretion and issue by prescription a quantity of drugs for use by a farmer in velveting stags. We do not support a situation where any farmer could demand "as of right" access to the drugs from any veterinary practitioner.

We would suggest that your Association further consider the possibility of drawing up practice guidelines to assist your members in deciding when they could, or should, exercise their discretion for the prescription of drugs. We would be happy as an Association to work with you in evaluating appropriate guidelines, so that your professional and ethical standards can be maintained. As an indication of our support for your standards, we would readily agree that the following would be important pre-requisites for the exercise of any discretion:

- An existing professional relationship between the veterinarian and his client.
- An on-going involvement of that veterinary practitioner in the animal health and welfare needs of that farmer's animals.
- The veterinarian having confidence in the experience and ability of such a farmer client to properly administer drugs as directed by him under his supervision and control.

or as an alternative a suitable training programme be established in velveting techniques and procedures leading to certification of a farmer as an authorised user of drugs used for removal of velvet antler.

- That only limited quantities of drugs be made available at any given time, sufficient for an expressed requirement, as we do not support a situation where a farmer could uplift large quantities of drugs at any one time.

We believe such a policy would in fact realistically accord with the existing working relationship between most veterinarians and their clients whereby a large majority of farmers request their vet to carry out the bulk of their velveting. There are however, occasions, for example when there are one or two animals that need to be velveted separate to a larger mob, and where the simple economics, particularly for remotely located farmers are such that the costs involved would far exceed any value received. We would therefore seriously ask your Association to reconsider its policy in this area. As we believe that what may be seen to be a restrictive procedural interpretation could lead to velveting without the use of drugs which would of course, be contrary to legislation and animal welfare policies. This in turn could have most unfortunate consequences which undoubtedly would not be to the benefit of members of either of our Associations.

PROSPECTS

In each of the last five years I have asked myself the question "Will the demand from new deer farmers reach its peak this year?" The results are well known in that not only has the demand continued but it appears to have increased. There are more and more farmers and investors purchasing deer livestock for farming. It is probable that the outlook for traditional livestock is one of the main factors causing farmers to diversify and unless a farmer has a horticulture potential, deer is one of his better livestock alternatives. I therefore have come to the conclusion that the deer industry will continue to expand at the maximum rate permitted by the national herd's breeding capacity over the next five to ten years. I do however, see that greater emphasis will be placed on venison production and herd improvements to produce higher quality breeding animals for what will essentially be a venison industry. The deer is a most efficient animal both in its pasture conversion and in the products that it provides for the market place. Virtually all parts of the deer, from its hide to its teeth, pizzles and sinews are readily marketable.

The most important bi-product from the industry will continue to be the velvet antler. I would however, stress that I believe that the number of stags farmed as velveting stags only will continue to reduce while the number of top quality breeding stags will continue to increase. The velvet market, as most know, is already limited in size and unless new products are developed for sale in western markets, it is unlikely that the traditional oriental markets will continue to expand from the present base.

CONCLUSION

For those of us involved in the deer industry for some time, it is clear to see that while high prices of live animals will not continue indefinitely, and while velvet will cease to become the produce of prime importance, the industry has an exciting future. As the industry develops and expands over the next ten years, there will ultimately be a settling down period which will bring the economics of the deer industry on to a more rational basis. Over the next few years, there will be an increasing involvement for the veterinary profession as they provide services to this exciting and growing industry. I believe that the future has challenges for both our Associations and I can only commend to the Deer Branch the need to maintain close communications on matters of policy and animal welfare as these will be to the benefit of both the farmer and the veterinarian.