



## QUALITY ASSURANCE, FARM ACCREDITATION AND VETERINARIANS Ian Scott, Tirau

### Background

The past twelve months have seen the Deer Industry continue to consolidate its position as an innovative leader of quality-based pastoral production systems. The continuing focus is on closing all links in the *Pasture to Plate* integrated quality network to underpin the industry's brand marketing strategies supporting Cervena™ and Zeal™.

This programme has evolved because the New Zealand deer industry recognises the fact that farmers' future prosperity depends more on market performance than on farm efficiency.

### The System

Quality Assurance, or on-farm accreditation, is not AN END, or AN OBJECTIVE IN ITSELF. It is purely a means to achieving the industry's overall objectives, which includes premium positioning in the market, and sustained profitable returns. A closer look at the on-farm QA programme's mission statement will help to clarify this concept.

*To support all New Zealand deer industry sectors in accelerating the process of making quality a decisive influence for achieving a global competitive edge*

This statement acknowledges several important factors

- 1 Every link within the quality chain is vital to be ultimately successful. From service providers to venison processors, the product is only as good as the sum of its parts.
- 2 It recognises that *quality*, with all its inherent perceptions, is now the major factor in achieving market penetration.
- 3 To be truly successful, the New Zealand deer industry must be internationally competitive.

If, at the end of the day, we merely succeed in assisting farmers to reach a set of minimum standards, then the programme is destined for failure, for success is transient and the goal-posts shift with a market's changing moods.

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### Progress to date

- \* Approximately 220 farms were accredited at the time of writing;
- \* Another 350 properties have registered an interest in reaching accredited status, and are at various stages in the assessment process,
- \* Sixteen trained assessors are working with farmers to meet the standards set by the Technical Committee and set out in the New Zealand Deer Farmers' QA programme Operating Standards Manual,
- \* In the near future veterinarians will be involved in monitoring the overall progress of farms towards the stated standards and in insuring consistency between individual assessors

This scheme is designed to mesh with the velvetting welfare standards implemented by the NVSB and will support the goals and objectives of the soon to be introduced NZVA Deer Tb QA Scheme

### The Veterinarian's Rôle

A simple way to remember the goals of the on-farm QA programme is to focus on the needs of our customers. This is summed up by the mnemonic D I F O T A

D	Delivery
I	In
F	Full
O	On
T	Time
A	Accurately

A quick check of most deer farmers will reveal that this target is still some distance away and venison processors who have attempted to organise supply contracts will outline farmer deficiencies in rather colourful terms. Herein lies the challenge for veterinarians, and the theme to this conference *Achieving consistent farm performance, profitably*

A national deer industry survey undertaken in March 1994 indicated that

- i fawning percentages varied between 43% and 100%,
- ii 2-year-old velvet production varied between 1-2 kg average/head,
- iii the increased profit margin between high and low performers was almost 10-fold

This variability points to a window of opportunity for veterinarians with appropriate skills to develop an expanded rôle with his/her deer clients away from traditional disease response programmes. As industry profitability improves dramatically, then the ability to sell value-added consultancy services must surely be enhanced. A parallel to the dairy industry is clearly apparent where many practitioners function purely in a farm consultancy rôle

Management advice and on-farm QA programmes have a common goal to deliver a quality product, on time, consistently with maximum efficiency and minimum waste

The on-farm QA programme is just one part of an envisaged Total Quality Management (TQM) strategy for the entire deer industry

TQM involves several factors

- \* Focus on customer requirements
- \* Develop quality systems
- \* Develop relationships with all suppliers
- \* Involve all parties in the process of improvement
- \* Make continuous improvement the central business theme

Farmers who enter the scheme should do so with an altered mind-set where they are willing to continuously re-evaluate their production systems based on market signals, and that continuous improvement in farming techniques is an integral part of their farm. These people know that *Quality* is the entry price to the market, not a guarantee of higher returns, and that maintaining a competitive advantage is the only true future protection

### Summary

Vets should support the on-farm QA programme because

- it is designed to make sustainable, profitable farming the mainstay of the deer industry. No participant can prosper in isolation
- it focuses attention on the market. We must all be sensitive to customer needs
- farmers are encouraged to view their activities in a global arena.
- the processes of continuous improvement, increased efficiency and productivity need a catalyst for change. Veterinarians have the skills to integrate customer needs with on-farm quality systems
- the accredited farm indicates a client receptive to change and increased productivity

The QA programme needs veterinarians because

- we need to provide the market with a unified front supporting our current positions on welfare, disease and residues. As New Zealand increases market dominance on quality and price grounds, frustrated competitors will look increasingly towards non-tariff barriers. In particular the British have increased threats to play the 'welfare card' in an attempt to discredit our product in the consumer's eyes. This is the single largest threat to continued industry viability
- this programme needs to encompass sufficient numbers of deer farmers to satisfy the market that adequate product coverage is achieved. This will involve convincing those looking for short-term gain of the benefits of medium to long-term market positioning and/or protection. Vets see all farmers, not just the motivated, and so a PR rôle is very real

- veterinarians have a unique combination of skills to facilitate the process of continuous improvement
- veterinarians have a communication network recognised by farmers as a neutral source of reliable information

### **The Future**

Success of any brand marketing strategy can never be assured, even when backed by budgets hugely larger than that of the deer industry. To those who would question the logic of the on-farm QA programme, I can only suggest that they consider the alternatives. Our own sheep and beef industries, confirmed commodity traders, currently suffer returns less than one-third of venison's market price. Many producers, regardless of on-farm efficiencies, will never survive. This could easily be the deer industry's fate should we avoid the hard questions and allow the European game trade determine our future prosperity.

