

Hybrids bring home the bacon

by Ken Drew and Tony Pearse, Invermay Agricultural Research Centre Otago

'A TOUCH of Wap' has a certain ring to it and can be used reluctantly by some Red deer farmers to justify the lavish claims of superior stock performance when faced with a disbelieving bar room group of fellow (not Fallow!) deer farmers.

There is no doubt that there has been a marked surge in interest in Wapiti from a wide range of deer farmers during the last six months. Why? And is the interest justified?

Invermay staff have sometimes been labelled as parochial toward Wapiti and while there may be some truth in that, our enthusiasm comes largely from production records — and that after all is the bottom line of all commercial animal operations.

Probably the biggest change in deer farmer attitude in the last year has been in relation to carcass value. Large, heavy weight carcasses, even when they were from young lean animals, were penalised and discounted.

Exporters now perceive the advantages of size in young animals in their marketability and are paying premium prices. As the deer industry moves toward a product rather than live sales base, carcass returns become more important.

Because of the uncertainty about the genetics of 'New Zealand Wapiti' we have been doing quite a lot of cross-breeding of imported Elk bulls across well grown Red deer hinds. The progeny are called F1s (Elk/Red) and

these have shown quite spectacular meat characteristics.

The F1 bulls are now being widely sought by Red deer farmers to use as terminal sires and these progeny are 75/25 Red/Elk — definitely more than a 'touch of Wap'.

Production of F1s is a fairly specialised operation — caution, experience and understanding are needed to get a good reproductive rate and avoid calving difficulties. Comparative carcass performance with Red deer is shown in Table 1.

Carcass weight (kg)	Months of age		
	11	14	27
Red/Red	45	56	70
F1 (Elk/Red)	68	80	100

There is a major effect of 50 per cent Elk in growth rate, and remember that both sets of progeny have the same dam — a Red hind.

Few Red stags at 11 months will give an acceptable commercial carcass, but the F1s are excellent. They are a good size, have proportionately more saddle, less neck and ribs and much less fat (GR 5 mm) than Red stags of similar carcass weight, but a year older. Rather surprisingly the F1s don't seem to contain more bone than similar size Red deer (19 to 20 per cent in both cases).

The F1 bull can be very readily used

over average Red hinds and although the performance of the progeny won't be as good as F1s themselves, it will be possible to achieve good commercial carcass weights by November as a rising yearling.

As deer farming comes of age, and there is evidence that this is now beginning to occur, some surplus young female animals will be slaughtered for meat. That is where F1s have a real advantage.

Female weights at 14 months	Live	Estimated
	weight (kg)	carcass weight (kg)
Red/Red	80	46
F1 (Elk/Red)	130	74

There is a huge difference in estimated carcass weight between Red and F1 females at 14 months (Table 2). The use of F1 bulls over Red hinds can be expected to produce female progeny which can either be sold to farmers who aim to establish a breeding herd of 125 to 130 kg females (able to be mated to an Elk bull) or slaughtered for meat production as yearlings giving an excellent 60 to 70 kg carcass.

We seem to be fast approaching the stage where Wapiti genes can be profitably used in the deer farming industry and the best bet at the moment seems to be to use F1 or equivalent New Zealand Wapiti type bulls over average sized Red hinds. □