

WELFARE CONCERNS AT A D.S.P.

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New Zealand venison is promoted as a lean red meat produced in a clean, green, and caring environment. At the moment animal welfare issues are very much on the mind of many deer farmers with the introduction of the Velvetting Code of Practice and accrediting farmers to safely, humanely, and hygienically remove velvet from their own animals.

The New Zealand Game Industry Board, N.Z. Deer Farmers Association, and NZVA Deer Branch have recently combined in attempting to establish a Quality Assurance programme for farmers, furthering the NZGIB goal of gate to plate quality assurance. Programmes have already been developed in Deer Slaughter Premises, and for deer transporters, and the development of the farmers programme is well underway. Animal welfare is an important component of all of these programmes.

The Animal Welfare Code takes into account five basic requirements:-

- freedom from thirst, hunger, and malnutrition
 - the provision of appropriate comfort and shelter
 - the prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment of injury, disease, or infection
 - freedom from distress
- and,
- the ability to display normal patterns of behaviour.

Animals are currently protected by law in the Animals Protection Act (1960)

Relevant sections of the Act are :-

Every person commits an offencewho

- cruelly ill treats any animal
- being the owner or person in charge of any animal fails to supply the animal with proper and sufficient food, water or shelter
- being the owner or person in charge of any animal, without reasonable excuse, neglects the animal so that it suffers unreasonable or unnecessary pain, suffering or distress.

Animal welfare is important for several reasons:

- it is our moral responsibility to assure the welfare of animals
- to improve the quality of venison and co-products
- to minimise the risk of the use of welfare issues as a non-tariff barrier to restrict trade.

Significant losses to the industry occur due to animal injury. In a study reported by Selwyn and Hathaway, 3.14% of all deer processed at one plant had trauma related defects, and estimated losses due to these defects were 0.79% of the total carcass value. These are the visible losses due to bruising, fractures, and arthritis and cost the farmer on his produce cheque. Other losses

associated with trauma are the losses to co-products such as hides which are often downgraded severely in traumatised animals. Stress due to poor handling or poor temperament also contributes to considerable losses through blood splash. In some lines of fallow deer blood splash leads to severe downgrading of product, and some lines of smaller red deer are also badly affected.

Early onset of rigor mortis caused by severe stress may also cause significant losses to the deer industry in the future, as this may affect the pH of the product which will affect its shelf life and its texture.

It is to be hoped that many of the issues mentioned and demonstrated during this presentation will greatly diminish or disappear in the near future with increased animal welfare awareness brought about by the quality assurance programmes soon to be implemented.

Animal welfare issues which concern veterinarians at deer slaughter premises may be related to problems on the farm, during transport, loading and unloading, or at the DSPs.

Farm Issues

(i) Removal of velvet antler.

It is very obvious that many spikers have been velvetted without the use of anaesthetics or analgesics, and significant numbers of stags being slaughtered have been polled at some stage.

Often tourniquets are left on animals destined for slaughter, and this often leads to infection or dry gangrene. In some cases infections due to this practice, or poor hygiene at velvetting have led to carcasses being condemned due to septicaemia.

On some occasions hard antler has been removed by using a blunt instrument, and considerable force leading to skull fractures.

(ii) Injuries.

Injuries caused through poor handling, poor facilities, or both range from cuts and bruises to broken velvet and broken limbs.

(iii) Disease

Some farmers still consider DSPs are a dumping ground for animals that are going to die, or will cost too much to treat.

Transport and DSP Issues

Transporters and DSPs are "persons in charge" under the Animals Protection Act and must be aware that they are responsible for the welfare of animals while they are in their care.

Problems common to both transporters and DSPs may be:-

- poor maintenance where animals may become caught in gaps in the floor or under doors leading to injury
- protrusions which may lead to injury of animals
- floors should be non-slip
- poor stockmanship leading to severe stress and discomfort of the animals must be avoided (eg excessive use of electric goads)

A number of articles have been produced by MAF in the Aglink series (FPP 256,888,892) about the transport of animals and prevention of bruising, and these combined with transport operators knowledge and experience have been incorporated into the Deer Transporters Accreditation Scheme.

Pertinent points from this set of standards are:-

- the welfare of the animal is paramount
- there should be adequate space, secure footing, and adequate ventilation in all deer crates

- prodders and dogs should not be used in yards
- strange groups should not be boxed
- deer with bleeding antler should not be accepted
- unfit animals should not be accepted without a vet certificate
- unfit animals are classified as:-
 - animals -unable to stand
 - with compound fractures
 - with whole or part of limb amputated
 - scouring
 - open wounds or lesions
 - with staggers
- dangerous animals should not be carried
- animals with hard antler or velvet longer than 60mm should not be carried.

Other recommendations are that:-

- stags and hinds should not be mixed
- age classes should be kept separate
- there should be a 7 to 10 day healing time after velvetting before animals can be transported
- stags older than 2yo. should not be transported during the roar.

If all people within the industry openly support the initiatives of farmers, transporters, and DSPs to improve the welfare of animals under their care, a large proportion of the wastage which currently occurs in the industry through trauma and stress related conditions will be prevented.

Many veterinarians are asked to certify whether an animal may be fit for slaughter, and the following are some guidelines which may be used in assessing this.

The first question to ask is "would I eat this animal?". If the answer is "no", ask the farmer and he may make the decision easier for you.

The animals welfare must always be the first consideration, and humane aspects must over ride any economic consideration.

The following sections of the Animals Protection Act state the legal requirements:-

Part 3 - Offences of Cruelty

Part 7 - Transport of Animals

Part 12 - Destruction of injured or suffering animals.

Specific Conditions

Fractures - Compound fractures are totally unacceptable. Acute non-compound fractures below the carpus or hock should be splinted for transport and penned separately. A veterinary certificate is essential.

These animals should be sent to arrive at the slaughter premises during working hours so that they can be slaughtered on arrival, without delay.

Arthritis - Arthritic conditions only require certification if they have been associated with drug use or weight loss.

Metritis, Retained Foetal Membranes - Hinds with retained membranes or acute metritis are unacceptable.

Antibiotics and Toxic Substances - Residues in meat above statutory levels place our export meat trade in jeopardy.

Animals which have been exposed to toxic substances

(1st,2nd,3rd,&4th schedule poisons) or which have been treated with drugs recently require veterinary notification.Any animals which have been treated within standard withholding periods will not be accepted for slaughter.

One significant cause of downgrading of carcasses from stags presented for slaughter at velvetting time is the presence of injection site lesions in prime cuts.It should be noted that the drugs used for sedation are registered for injection in the anterior third of the neck.The reason for downgrading is that these lesions have to be excised,and prime cuts are damaged rendering those legs suitable only for certain specifications.

References.

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