Deer Industry News

Time-saving drone tech

LOOKING GOOD
The latest gross margins prove deer are profitable

VENISON FOCUS
Venison breeding hinds are the engine room at the Brookers farm

REGEN RECOGNITION
Mountain River sights set on global regenerative standard

Deer Industry New Zealand | NZDFA NZ Deer Farmers Association

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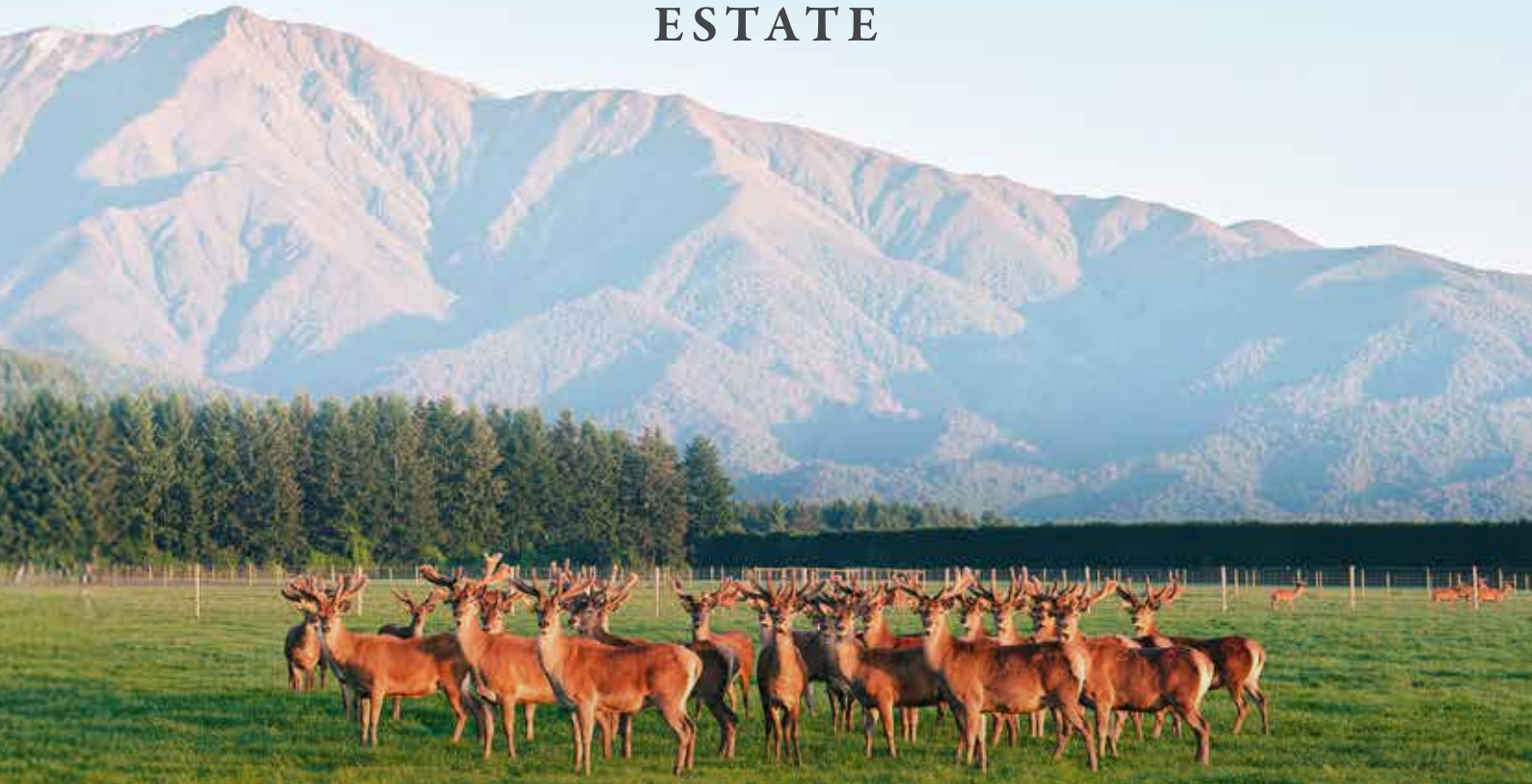

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Deer Industry News

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF DEER INDUSTRY NEW ZEALAND AND THE NEW ZEALAND DEER FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

ISSUE 127 | September 2025
ISSN 1176-0753

Contents

Cover photo: *Lynda Gray*

Deer Industry News is published by Deer Industry New Zealand in March, June, September and December. It is circulated to all known deer farmers, processors, exporters and others with an interest in the deer industry. The opinions expressed in Deer Industry News do not necessarily reflect the views of Deer Industry New Zealand or the New Zealand Deer Farmers' Association.

Succession challenge

Succession is a looming challenge for New Zealand's primary sector.

Recent Rabobank research estimated that successful succession for the estimated 17,320 of farmers/growers aged 65-plus will involve the transfer of $150 billion in farming assets over the next decade. That's an eye-watering amount, but equally alarming was the revelation that only one-third of farmers have a formal succession plan in place. That figure surprised me given the number of seminars, workshops, and field days I've attended in recent years where succession has been a big topic of conversation. It seems the farming fraternity is good at talking the talk of succession but not so good at following through and getting a plan in place to make it happen.

Rabobank's Todd Charteris said on release of the June *Changing the Guard* report that succession was much more than a 'moment in time.' Rather, it was a "process that took years of planning, conversation and adaptation" – in other words, it's a huge and gnarly topic that farming businesses and families should have started to plan for yesterday!

Succession has been a popular topic at the Next Generation events I've attended, which is understandable given the age and stage of the crowd. I know from feedback that a professional perspective from a banker or consultant on successful succession business models, backed up with real life stories from people who are on the pathway or have achieved farm ownership, are always well received.

At this year's event, BNZ's Matt Hood gave a good overview of the topic, sharing two succession-done-well stories. In the first example, a couple leased dairy cows and built their equity from 12 to 22 percent over 10 years; the couple in the second example had an equity partnership with a company that owned the livestock and plant, and through hard work and financial discipline, the couple eventually bought their own farm. Aside from smart financial investment and discipline, Hood said that the 'capital inside your head' – be that tech know-how and/or management experience - was crucial in helping achieve the goal of farm ownership. "Package yourself as solution providers to the older generation," he said.

Hood also touched on another aspect of succession - helping the older generation transition out of farming. This transition was not just about building a house in town for retirement; it was also about planning for the social/emotional challenges faced by the older generation as they adapt to life after full-time farming. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to address this. The important thing is that conversations are had to make sure that family members have a clear understanding about what the practical process of succession would look like for all family members once the retirement phase started.

Hood's comments and thoughts about supporting the older generation through this stage are further explored in a 2018 Polson Higgs report by Rhodes Donald, *Life after Farming*, which concludes that having a sense of purpose or contributing in some way beyond life on the farm is the key to staying well and happy.

On another succession slant, it's great to see new faces taking on leadership roles across our industry. Having said that, *Deer Industry News* acknowledges and salutes the contribution of those who are stepping aside – thank you for committing time and expertise to helping shape the future of deer farming in New Zealand.

The DINZ Board has two new directors, producer representative Simone Hoskin and processor/exporter representative Rob Kidd. Meanwhile, the NZDFA has brought on board several new faces. The executive team welcomed South Canterbury farmer Tom Macfarlane, while at the branch level, new chairs have stepped up: Rachael Inch (Canterbury/West Coast); Colin Jordan (SCNO); Matt Krs (Bay of Plenty); Vanessa Crowley (Waikato); and Dean Wilkinson (Wairarapa).

Deer Industry News looks forward to catching up with some of these new faces in coming issues. ■

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

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Beetlemania

Justin Stevens' says that the $6000 spent on 400 dung beetles proves there is money in sh*t. He's not begrudging the money, however, acknowledging that the breeding of the dung-loving critters is a labour-intensive business, but one that can help improve soil health and reduce runoff. The Stevens are looking at the beetles as a long-term biological tool to help reduce E. coli levels in waterways, which spike after heavy rain washes dung down hills and into streams and creeks. "We hope they'll help roll, bury and mix the dung into the soil, which will reduce runoff and could also help reduce internal parasites in our young deer," Justin says.

Delivery of the Stevens' beetles started in mid-2022 and finished last year. The staggered arrival was due to the time taken to breed the required number of beetles, which fall into three broad groups: dwellers, rollers and tunnellers. The beetles were released in the centre of the farm where the deer camp, and Justin says he's noticed less dung around this area. "It's early days and we're told it will take a decade to get them fully up and running." Find out more about dung beetles at: dungbeetles.co.nz

Reuben's Rudolph

Venison was the star in a finalist entry of the Great NZ Toastie Takeover 2025. Greytown café, The Offering, created 'Reuben's Rudolph,' a mouthwatering, doorstep-sized toasted creation featuring venison prepared in one of two ways. The first featured slow cooked venison, pulled and folded through a secret-recipe espresso BBQ sauce, while the second featured marinated and smoked venison. Both venison recipes were layered with a mushroom and chickpea spread, beetkraut, bread and butter pickles, French mustard, baby spinach, and a four-cheese blend sandwiched between bread baked in-house. 'Reuben's Rudolph' didn't win the competition – the honour went to the 'McChickle & Bacon' – but we reckon The Offering deserves a special mention for their lip-smacking creativity and support of venison.

Eric honoured

Almost 60 years of service to primary industries and rural communities earned Eric Roy the Outstanding Contribution to Primary Industries Award at the June Primary Industry Summit. Eric, a Southland farmer with a deer farm near Te Anau (*Deer Industry News, Issue 11*) and NZ Pork chair, has fulfilled numerous leadership and advocacy roles. "Few can match his contribution. Eric Roy is a truly exceptional New Zealander," the judging panel said. He excelled in roles with Federated Farmers, Pāmu, the former Meat and Wool Board, and a host of community and charity initiatives. He was a six-term Member of Parliament and has served on Environment Southland.

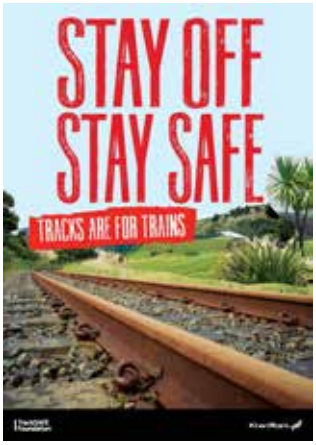
NZ Pork deputy chair Jason Palmer said Eric's decades of service to farming, rural communities and public life reflect a commitment to doing the right thing for farmers, the primary sector and the country. "He has provided invaluable leadership to NZ Pork during his time as chair on our board, helping shape the future of sustainable pig farming in New Zealand. We're really pleased to see that contribution recognised at a national level."

Blue September

BlueSeptember
Facing up to Prostate Cancer

September is Blue Ribbon prostate cancer awareness month, which *Deer Industry News* considers important and relevant given the male domination of our industry. Prostate cancer is the most diagnosed cancer in New Zealand and the second leading cause of cancer-related death in men. Every year, around 4,230 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer. The good news is that it's treatable if detected early on. An annual check is recommended if you're over 50, and if there is a known family history, annual check-ups should start from 45. Find out more at www. prostate.org.nz.

Stop!



Stop and look both ways before proceeding across a level crossing is a timely reminder to those driving in rural areas. People driving in rural areas are at higher risk of railway level crossing accidents, according to a KiwiRail report. Between 2010 and 2020, 52 fatal and serious injury accidents occurred at level crossings (LCs).

Previous research showed that 54 percent of these crashes occurred at passive LCs, where there are no automated lights, bell or barrier arms. Rural areas are more likely to have passive LCs, and stopping behaviour is generally worse at these crossings, Ia Ara Aotearoa Transporting NZ's Bill Clemens says. "So basically, there's higher risk in rural areas, on a per-vehicle basis."

He said the June KiwiRail report noted that drivers not stopping

at passive rural LCs make up 15 percent of crashes across all LCs, indicating a crash risk due to non-compliance. Another study mentioned in the report found that drivers in rural areas felt that LC design faults and location compromised sight-distances and train visibility, and that there was inadequate signage of approaching crossings.

Game-changing tech

Significant growth is projected in agricultural drone use, with the market size predicted to increase from $US1.59 billion in 2024 to $US10.46bn by 2034. A July 2025 report by Canada and India-based market research consultancy Precedence Research said the use of small drones in agriculture is rapidly growing, fuelled by the technological advancement in components, sensors and drone size and capability. Many farmers have taken up the controls of UAV technology for the checking and mustering of stock, but as *Deer Industry News* discovered, there is plenty more opportunity for this smart and time-saving eye in the sky technology (see page 18.)

Waste Not

Plasback has collected 38 million kilograms of plastic since its establishment in 2006. The company's recycling processes repurpose the plastic waste into Tuff Solutions products, some of which featured in Justin and Rebecca Stevens' deer shed, a stop-off at this year's Next Generation event. Tuffboard has replaced plywood doors, which were starting to rot with the frequent washdowns, and the walls are lined with Tuff Roll, held on with about 3000 stainless steel screws. "It was affordable at the time and easier to wash and clean than what we had there before," Justin says.

What the skibidi?

Skibidi is among the 6000 new words added to the Cambridge Dictionary in the last 12 months. According to Cambridge Dictionary editors, internet culture is changing the English language, and words such as skibidi, delulu, tradwife and broligarchy have grown in use across social and mainstream media and beyond. The uptake is due to influencers such as Kim Kardashian (skibidi), and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's (delulu with no solulu) comment about his rivals' energy and economic plan.

Skibidi can be used to convey that something is cool, bad or meaningless; delulu is a shortened version of delusional; tradwife is shorthand for traditional wife, a 'woman who believes in and practices traditional gender roles and marriages'. Broligarchy, a combo of oligarchy and broism, describes a small group of ultrawealthy tech guys who have made political-influencing inroads. ■

A boots-and-all approach to QA

There hasn't been a lot of down time since Merryn Pugh stepped into the DINZ Quality Assurance Manager role in May. She's pulled on her Red Bands and got out and about for a whirlwind introduction to the deer industry, getting useful background and context for her wide-ranging role. The primary sector is Merryn's happy place, having spent 30 years in farming, education and management roles, and she says it's exciting to be embarking on a new chapter with the deer industry.

Your LinkedIn profile says you're a "rural professional who loves to pull on your gumboots and get your hands dirty." Have you had a chance to do that since joining DINZ?

Sort of! I've had my gumboots on in most of the venison processors, and while assessing the crates on a new stock truck and trailer unit and visiting a couple of deer farms. I'll likely be wearing my gumboots when I get to spend time with some truck drivers to learn what they are dealing with and understand 'a day in their life'.

Prior to joining DINZ, you worked across the primary sector, including roles with AsureQuality and OSPRI. What are some of your career highlights?

1. Using RFID technology to audit TB infected herds, prior to NAIT implementation, to understand herd make up and the source of stock. This was later used during the M. bovis response to understand herd dynamics and risk.
2. Creating an online Biosecurity Act Authorised Persons training manual.
3. Creating a suite of audit/QA tools to assess compliance across industry. This was reliant on building trusted relationships with meat processors, transport operators, stock agents and farmers.

What are your first impressions of the deer industry?

It's innovative and agile and seems more cohesive and coordinated than other livestock sectors I've been part of. It's big enough to have a strong and effective voice, but small enough to pivot and address issues as and when they arise. The vibe is optimistic but cautious.

For farmers, it's a balancing act. They have multiple balls in the air and are seeking the 'sweet spot' by taking on new technology, sustainable practices and diversification, while navigating regulatory complexity and climate uncertainty. They have a lot on their plates, and I am mindful of the increased costs of compliance.

What exactly does your DINZ Quality Assurance Manager role involve?

Essentially, I have a role to play in all situations where deer farming is impacted by compliance or QA requirements. Part of my role is to work closely with transport operators and processors to ensure that deer are transported to processing in a way that meets the Welfare Code and our agreed Transport Standards. I'll ensure that transport operators are using certified crates and that their drivers have completed a comprehensive deer transport training programme.

I will also work with processors to review the Industry Agreed Standards, which support customer requirements, and improvements in processing standards.

I also oversee the NVSB (National Velvetting Standards Body) to ensure that velvet removal by appropriately trained farmers is regulated, controlled and managed by a supervising veterinarian. I also manage the VelTrak system – our fully electronic, web-based system that tracks and traces velvet from farm to market.

What's on your immediate to-do list?

4. Finalising and publishing the 2025 Deer Transport QA Standards
5. Reconvening the Venison Processors Technical Committee and amending/confirming the Industry Agreed Standards
6. Hosting the annual NVSB and auditors meeting

Beyond work, what are your interests/community involvements?

I love to throw a dinner party and am a dab hand at smoking salmon. We are never short of protein, with three sons who are pretty handy divers and hunters. I am a White Dorper sheep breeder and have a couple of handy racehorses (a trotter and a pacer). I enjoy fishing and hunting and anything outdoors. I like to travel and spend a bit of time support-crewing for my mega-ultra-marathon-running son.

Do you have a recommended podcast and/or book?

I've just started following *The Ultimate Human*, a podcast with Gary Brecka, a human biologist. I think his science makes a lot of sense. As far as books, I've found *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris, an intriguing read.

What are a couple of things on your bucket list?

To view the Northern Lights from Northern Scandinavia and visit Europe – that's assuming I accumulate enough annual leave after travelling around supporting our sons!

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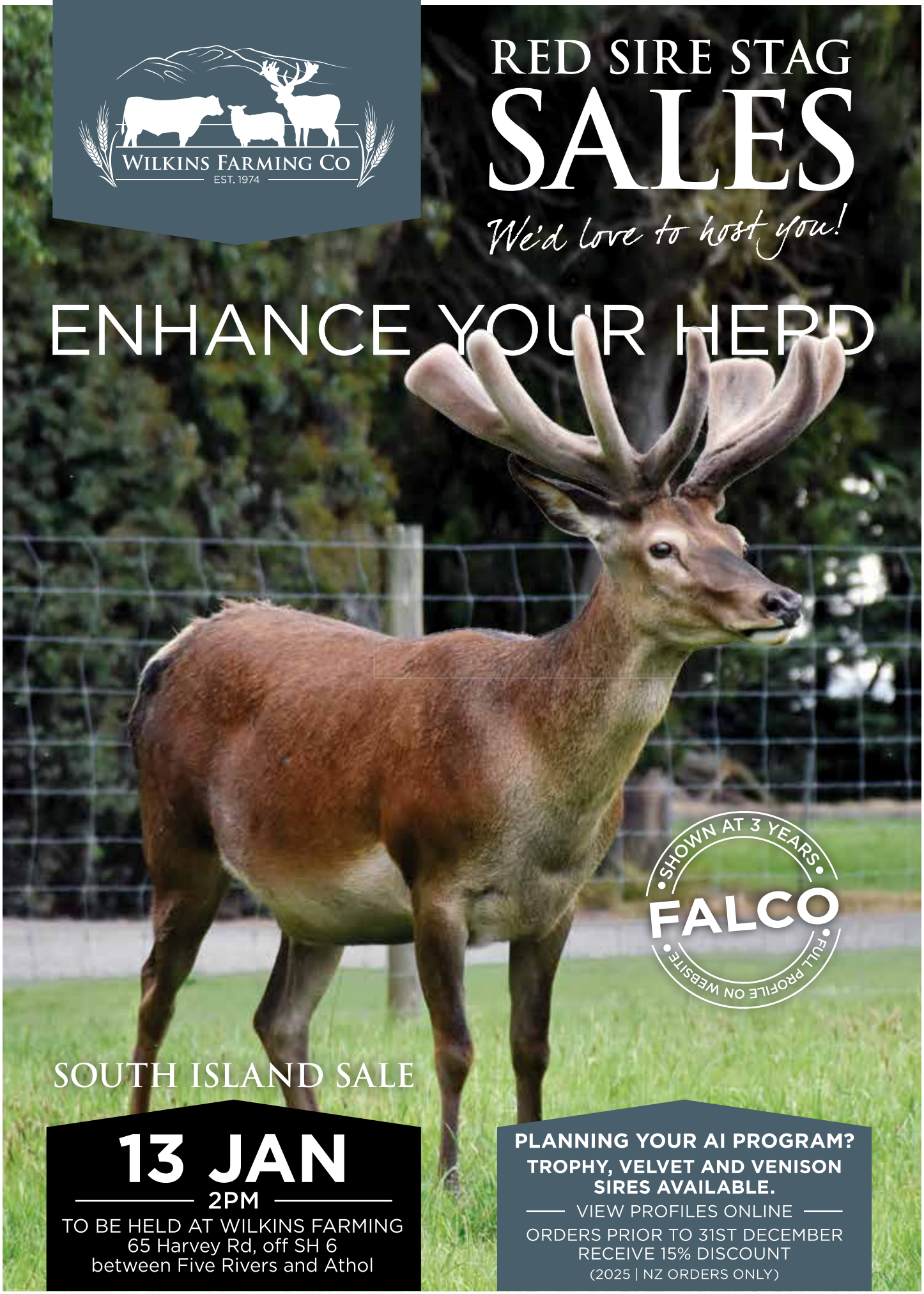

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Busy winter for EWS

The Elk & Wapiti Society had a busy winter, running another webinar series and its first online Bidr auction. A Zoom online presentation in August by farm consultant Wayne Allan looked at the costs/returns and gross margins of an elk/wapiti terminal sire system. A session on 9 September, presented by AgResearch's David Stevens, covered the nutrition of elk/wapiti weaners.

WINNING SHOT: 'Proud' by Tony Pidgeon was the winner of the Elk/ Wapiti category at this year's Deer Industry Photo Competition.

Another August happening was an online sale of live animals and semen straws. The auction was the idea of Alan Clarke, who saw the opportunity to raise funds for the society's upcoming 40th anniversary and to provide a central online selling platform for elk/wapiti cows outside the traditional sale season. The 28-lot lineup comprised seven live animals, and semen straws. Buyer interest was from throughout the South Island, with a top price of $10,000 each for two 5YO elk cows from Mayfield Elk. Semen straws from Raincliff Station's Prophecy sold for $300 each, while a Heritage Pack of straws from imported Canadian bulls from Hasse Elk went for $1175.

"Overall, we're pleased with how the sale went. It would have been nice to have had more live animals, but it was a good first event," Alan said.

"We appreciated the support of Bidr and Xcell Breeding, who waived the transfer fees on the semen sales."

EWS President Glen Whyte says the auction could become an annual event.

"It's a way for our members to sell some of their cows or bulls that otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to sell in an auction setting. We're very grateful for the support we received at this year's event from both the vendors and buyers."

For recordings of the EWS Zoom webinars, email samanthaelderah@gmail.com

Time to swap ASD books

If any deer farmer has not swapped out their old ASD book for the new one, complete with updated forms, it's time to make that change as the transitional period between forms is set to end on 30 September.

From 1 October, only the new ASD forms will be accepted. Not using the new forms could mean animals are not processed in a timely manner at the works, or that the resulting product is ineligible for key markets.

The updated ASD form is required due to new animal treatment rules for producing and exporting animals and/or animal products to the European Union (EU). Under the new rules, animals used to produce food products intended for import into the EU must not:

- be treated with antimicrobials for the sole purpose of growth promotion or to increase yield; or
- be treated with antimicrobials listed by the EU as reserved for use in humans.

Another option is to fill out an electronic ASD in MyOSPRI. If you are not already using the electronic ASD, this is a good opportunity to consider doing so.

FWFP workshops

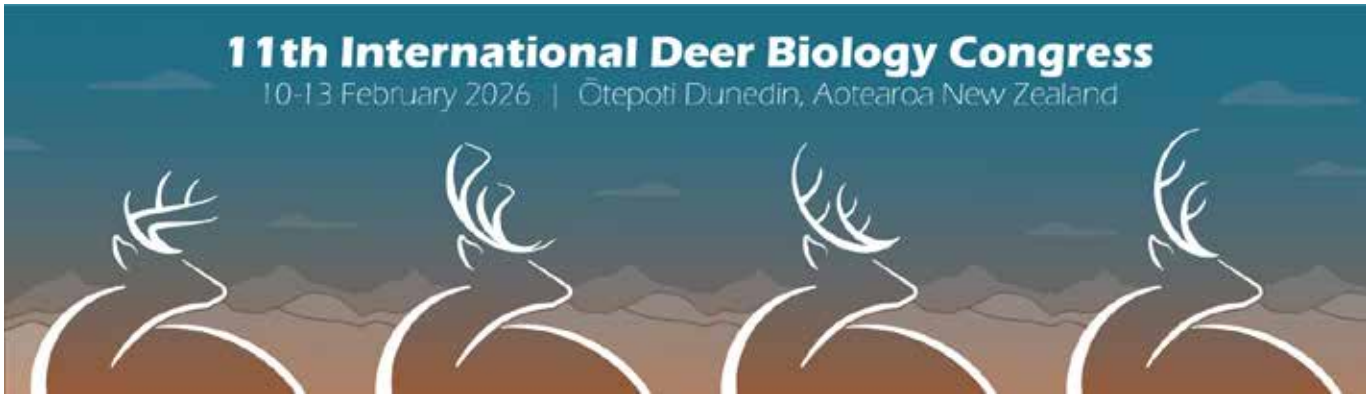
Deer farmers are strongly encouraged to sign up for an Integrated Farm Planning (IFP) freshwater workshop. Several will be held in early 2026 and are an ideal opportunity to start developing a compliant electronic freshwater farm plan (FWFP).

Although recent changes to the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management have reduced some of the cost and regulatory requirements, DINZ Environmental Stewardship Manager Luka Jansen says that farmers would be mistaken to think they don't need a FWFP. "I strongly urge farmers to get a plan in place. The IFP workshops are a perfect opportunity to get one on the way and for a fraction of the cost," she says.

The workshops are funded by a $700,000 Ministry for Primary Industries' Integrated Farm Planning Accelerator grant, which will expire in March 2026. Keep a look out on the DINZ website Events page for the location and dates of the workshops. For information and questions, email: ifp@deernz.org.

11th International Deer Biology Congress

Planning is well underway for the International Deer Biology Congress, from 11–13 February in Dunedin.



The inaugural International Biology of Deer Production Conference was held in Dunedin in 1983, and 40-plus years later, the time is right to bring the renamed event back to its origins, Conference Convenor and AgResearch scientist David Stevens says.

"We believe 2026 is a great time to bring the congress to the South Pacific, given the considerable change in the New Zealand and global deer scenes."

The theme of the DINZ and AgResearch sponsored event is 'Your Deer Here', highlighting the unique situation that cervids, and the people managing them, experience in New Zealand.

"Our environment has led to scientists and managers making a range of innovations and research that we believe will be of interest to the international deer biology community," Stevens says.

The 1983 event attracted hundreds of people from around the world. Stevens is envisaging a more modest attendance of around 180 people but is promising a vast and interesting lineup of deer-related research – from ecology, environmental impacts and ecosystems to physiology and nutrition, as well as the indigenous uses and cultural significance of deer in New Zealand.

Balancing out the University of Otago lecture theatre-based content are field trips to an Otago deer farm and Orokonui Ecosanctuary on Day One, followed by the Invermay Research Centre and Duncan Venison on Day Two.

Congress registrants will have the opportunity to join a pre-event tour, hosted by the Game Animal Council, visiting a game estate and a free-range deer hunting property.

Post-congress, international guests can choose to visit the farms of some Deer Farmers' Association members.

There are a lot of "moving parts at this stage" Stevens says, but he's quietly confident the event will attract the people and deliver a memorable industry experience. ■

For more information:
www.ivvy.com.au/event/IDBC26

Velvet season arrives with updated VelTrak terms

It has been a busy few months behind-the-scenes in the velvet space as new and updated structures and systems are put in place to help add rigour, discipline and transparency to the workings of the velvet industry.

While "structures and systems" may not sound the most exciting, these are necessary pieces of work that bolster the industry's credibility and professionalism while encouraging good corporate citizenship.

On 1 August 2025, re-registration opened for all VelTrak Accredited Account Owners (AAOs). By 10 September, twenty organisations had submitted their applications. As part of their re-registration, every AAO – typically a buyer, processor, or exporter – must reaffirm their commitment to the updated Terms of Use.

DINZ and the DFA (see Evan Potter's article in this issue) jointly briefed attendees on the changes for the upcoming season at the Annual Buyers' Meeting in Christchurch on 21 August, where an open and constructive discussion took place. Topics discussed included the pros and cons of mandatory grading standards, the use of MPI-approved RMP facilities, and the timing and mechanics of a potential industry vote on export licensing. These inputs will help inform the work of the Export Licensing Working Group (ELWG) as options are considered.

Export licensing remains the goal longer term but won't be in place for the upcoming season, says DINZ CEO Rhys Griffiths. That is where changes to VelkTrak's Terms of Use for the 2025/26 season come in.

"Tightening up VelTrak for the upcoming season is really all about making sure systems are working as well as they could be for all," Griffiths says. "This includes several areas of increased oversight, such as timely filing of monthly returns, on-time levy payments, accuracy of volumes, and chain of custody compliance.

"Now, you can take that as encouraging high-integrity systems or disincentivising poor behaviour, but the result is the same. It benefits the industry when everyone is operating on a level-playing field."

On 1 September 2025, DINZ rolled out an expanded verification programme covering AAOs. DINZ has engaged a new independent external auditor to complete these verifications. The first verification commenced in early September. Selection criteria for verification include past non-compliance, anomalies in data, scale of operation, and intelligence from other sources.

In response to stakeholder requests, DINZ has also introduced new levels of transparency. These involve publishing a list of approved AAOs on the DINZ website (deernz.org/deer-hub/handling-and-welfare/veltrak) and will also include the publication of any suspended entities from VelTrak.

This openness has been welcomed both within New Zealand and overseas. It provides confidence to farmers, processors, and exporters that all participants are meeting obligations. Equally, new overseas customers – particularly those forming fresh commercial relationships – are seeking this transparency as a signal of trust.

DINZ continues to advance the case for a stronger, more resilient industry through export licensing. In mid-September, efforts are centred in Wellington, working with central government and officials at MPI to evaluate a path forward for export licensing.

DINZ Trade Strategy Manager, Damon Paling

"Securing export licensing through legislative change by 1 July 2026 is a highly ambitious goal," says DINZ Trade Strategy Manager Damon Paling. "The industry is seeking change, and while success is not guaranteed, the work being done now has real value in shaping the future. There are encouraging signs of bipartisan interest and support, giving us the confidence to keep pushing forward. This advocacy is ongoing, and stakeholders are encouraged to 'watch this space' for further developments."

The velvet sector's credibility is one of our greatest commercial advantages, he says. VelTrak, with its digital chain of custody and independent verification, is a cornerstone of that credibility. When combined with transparent publication of AAOs and active advocacy for export licensing, the industry is taking tangible steps to safeguard integrity, level the playing field, and reinforce our premium positioning in global markets.

"The message from DINZ is clear," says Griffiths. "Stay on top of obligations, keep records accurate, and use VelTrak as intended. With these measures in place, every participant – from farmer to exporter – can be confident that we are operating in a system we can all be proud of." ■

This article originally appeared on the DINZ website.

Velvet supply dynamics – it's complicated

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Renegotiating China access for New Zealand's frozen velvet was the main pain point last season; will the oversupply of larger velvet be this season's Achilles heel?

That's the question *Deer Industry News* asked DINZ CEO Rhys Griffiths.

The short answer is it's complex. The market for the larger Korean grade velvet has plateaued but not for the shorter grades, where there is still increasing demand, Griffiths says.

Big grade NZ velvet has fed development of Korea's healthy food product market. Since 2010, the consumption of NZ-supplied SA grades in South Korea has almost doubled from about 430 tonnes to 850 tonnes in 2023.

Demand for these larger velvet grades is not expected to increase in the short-term but should resume in a couple of years as Korea's appetite for velvet-infused Health Functional Food (HFF) products develops. These products are manufactured with certified functional ingredients that have proven beneficial health effects for the human body and are subject to tight government regulatory control.

"We think the HFF market will pay dividends in the same way as when Korea moved from traditional medicine to healthy foods twelve years ago," Griffiths says.

"But it will take a few years before we really see this paying off."

Meanwhile, Korea's big pharmaceutical companies are spending on research and development to create HFF products containing New Zealand velvet. A good example is Kwangdong Pharmaceutical, which this year launched healthy prostrate function and anti-fatigue products.

RESET IN PROGRESS: The bedding in of new velvet exporter regulations and market developments in Korea and China over the next two years will help reset the velvet market, Rhys Griffiths says.

The companies operating in the Korean healthy food and HFF market are looking for SAT grades, Griffiths says.

"Based on messaging from our markets, it's our belief that the traditional Korean grades – SAT grades – are where future demand lies, whereas non-traditional (NT) grade is falling from favour."

Meanwhile in China, the transition from traditional Chinese medicine to more healthy food product end uses is gaining momentum.

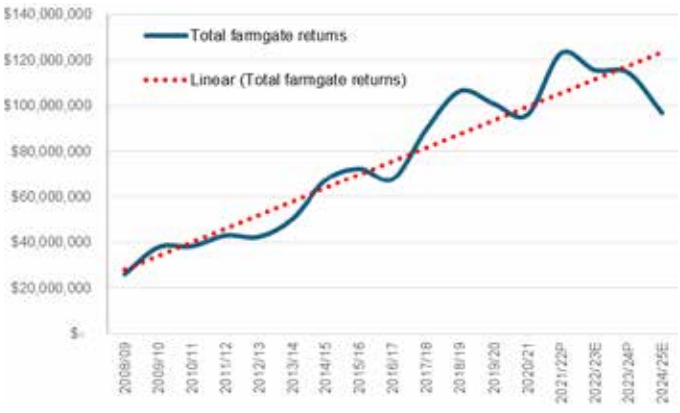
"China is the immediate future, but they've made it very clear they don't want the big velvet sticks. They like small sticks because it's what they understand and what their traditional industry is based on."

From a grower perspective, that means harvesting smaller, well-formed velvet.

It's likely that over time, their appetite for larger sticks will grow but possibly not to the larger NT, SA-L or overgrown grades.

Velvet market – past and present

Total farmgate returns NZ velvet



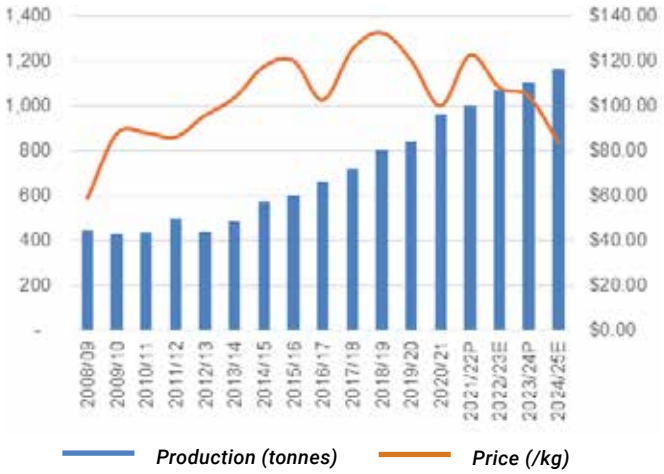
In itself, an oversupply situation did not drive the reduction in prices last year, Griffiths says. It wasn't helpful, but it wasn't the primary cause of the 20 percent drop in average price.

"It's not a simple supply and demand imbalance. The decrease was mainly felt in the SA grades – the main big grades. But if we look at the demand for regrowth, spiker and those traditional Chinese grades, demand was maintained and reflected in the prices."

To put the current average price drop in perspective, Griffiths points to the bigger picture over the past decade, hallmarked by the steady growth in Korean demand and price for New Zealand velvet.

"It's meant that we've been able to grow production without too much detrimental effect on price, and the prices were maintained up until 2023."

Velvet price and production (farm gate)



Since 2011/12 the average price and production had trended upwards from $86.12/kg (498 tonnes) to a peak of $132.50/kg (803 tonnes) in 2018/19.

The 5-year weighted average price, factoring in production, increased to a high point of $120.57/kg (840 tonnes) in 2019/20 and had trended downwards since to an estimated $103.10/kg (1160 tonnes) in 2024/25.

While the dent in price was not ideal, it could have been a lot worse if the market was 100% commodity-based, he says.

"DINZ cannot control prices, but we can drive overall consumer demand, and it's something we've done well in the Korean healthy food market."

He is unimpressed by the price-scaring antics of some buyers over the winter months.

"It was impossible to set a price then. It was destructive, and you've got to ask were those involved trying to create a solution or a problem."

Looking at the here and now, Griffiths says it's likely to be a "complex" season, but DINZ was working hard to pave the way for a smoother run in coming years.

An Export Licensing Working Group is currently looking at options for regulatory reform within the velvet supply chain.

"We're hoping to have the outcome of those investigations out for farmer support and voting next year.

"We think the model will bring a new level of maturity to the procurement and export of New Zealand velvet.

"We're excited by that prospect, but it's going to take time to embed." ■

No one-trick pony

At Melior, we've been accused of breeding hinds that are too big to handle a hard hill and high country. Instead of ignoring that feedback, we've done something about it, adding the hardiness of English genetics to our proven fast-growth genetics.

These dual genetics deliver the best for your farming operation: fast growing, good meat yielding, hardy and resilient deer, right at home in tussock high country.

We call our deer "match-fit" for good reason. We run them under strict commercial conditions, with little intervention, such as drenching, so you can be certain they'll cope whatever the conditions.

Our breeding objective is to put more money in your pocket by keeping the focus on fast-growth and carcass traits, conformation and temperament. We invest heavily in our genetics to stay ahead of the game, overseeing an annual comprehensive embryo transfer and artificial insemination programme. We also spend a lot of time measuring and recording large numbers of our deer for the productive parameters that matter: EMA (eye muscle area) and CARLA, in conjunction with live weight, to ensure our progeny remains at the front of the pack.

Our genetics team, onboard since Day One, continue to evolve, meticulously measuring and recording the Melior breeding plan. There's no guesswork, just truth – backed by the numbers that matter most, giving you full confidence that what we say is real and proven.

If you still don't believe us, believe our BVs. Better still, believe our animals. ■

Editorial supplied.

Next Gen embraces tech for smarter deer farming

Demonstrated by Gallagher Territory Manager Ben Dunbar at the recent Next Generation event in Marlborough, the TWR-5 weigh scale and data collection system captured the attention of the audience with its flexibility and simplicity.

For deer farmers, weighing is a critical practice. But whether producing venison or velvet, tracking performance is about more than just weight; it also includes factors such as velvet grade, beam circumference, symmetry, as well as general animal welfare.

"The days of relying on the 'eye-ometer' are gone," says Dunbar. "With the TWR-5, farmers make data-driven decisions in the yards, right at the point of handling."

Dunbar sees a difference in how younger farmers approach technology. "Older farmers absolutely see the benefits but can be apprehensive. The younger ones have grown up with tech. They want to do more with less, to free up time for the next task, especially where farms are diversifying more. They expect tools like the TWR-5 to make their work more efficient."

The TWR-5 is designed with that in mind. Farmers can customise data fields, build templates for different tasks, and see an animal's pedigree and full history instantly.

Integration with FarmIQ means treatments and activities sync seamlessly to the farm system. Perhaps most importantly, data transfer is effortless. Instead of plugging in, downloading, and re-uploading, farmers simply hit the sync button, then cloud connectivity pushes it straight to their phone and computer.

"It's the ease of use that wins people over," Dunbar explains.

"Everything is wireless, everything talks to your phone. You can finish a session, analyse the data, and make culling or breeding decisions before you've even left the yards."

For young farmers entering the industry, they see technology as crucial. It supports the path to more diversification, to run operations more efficiently, and stay resilient in volatile markets.

Looking ahead, Dunbar believes tools like the TWR-5 will continue to shape the deer industry through its precision and insights. His advice to younger farmers: "Know what success looks like to you. Data for data's sake isn't helpful. Knowing where you want to be is half the battle, and once you've got that point, it's just a matter of tailoring the hardware and software to suit that goal."

With technology in their hands and efficiency front of mind, the next generation of deer farmers is already shaping a smarter future. ■

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ANIMAL PERFORMANCE & TRACEABILITY

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Mountain River sets sights on regen standard

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Mountain River Venison (MRV) launched a pilot Ecological Outcome Verification (EOV) programme, a globally recognised regenerative standard.

Motivation for pursuing a regenerative standard came from Force of Nature, an American client of Mountain River Venison (MRV) whose key point of difference is the supply of healthy meat products from regeneratively managed farm systems. It's a holistic approach to food production that resonates with Force of Nature's environmentally conscious consumers, MRV's John Sadler explains.

CREDIBLE: The EOV programme is a globally recognised regenerative standard, backed with real data and credentials, John Sadler says.

"The team at Force of Nature gave us a clear message – that they can achieve an additional premium for our products if we are able to verify that they are produced according to regenerative principles in a sustainable and ethically based system.

"We believe that proving our farming systems are in balance with the land, soil and ecosystem will become a more important consideration for our clients and having our suppliers achieve EOV will provide real data and credentials."

Exactly what verification would look like and who would administer such a programme was an initial topic of conversation for Sadler and MRV's Procurement Manager Rob Millar. Much thought was given to the development of a company-managed programme but sidelined after consideration of the logistics, time and costs involved.

"We believe that proving our farming systems are in balance with the land, soil and ecosystem will become a more important consideration for our clients and having our suppliers achieve EOV will provide real data and credentials."

John Sadler

"We also felt that an internationally recognised standard was the best way to go," Millar said.

Force of Nature suggested the EOV land monitoring system, developed by the Savory Institute, a global nonprofit whose goal is to regenerate the world's grasslands through holistic management.

MRV enlisted New Zealand-certified EOV provider Āta Regenerative to lead a pilot programme, which started in May last year, supporting and educating 20 farmer suppliers about regenerative management.

Āta Regenerative Chief Executive Hugh Jellie says it's encouraging to be working with the MRV group.

"There's a high level of engagement and interest, and that's important because EOV is a different approach to measuring soil and ecological health, and it requires a mindset change.

"It's exciting to see how Mountain River is taking this on board, driving a quality rather than a mass volume approach to venison production."

The end goal is EOV certification, but as North Canterbury pilot programme member Scott Hassall is discovering, there's a lot of information to take on board.

"It's very new to me, but my view is there's nothing to lose and potentially a lot to gain if it will generate greater returns for farmers.

"Looking after our soils well is what we all strive to do, and if we can prove and verify what we're doing, it will be to our advantage."

OPEN-MINDED: There's nothing to lose and potentially a lot to gain if MRV farms can achieve EOV, pilot programme farmer Scott Hassall says.

The first step for Hassall was on-farm baseline monitoring by Āta's Emily House in early May this year. The day-long visit started at the kitchen table, with Hassall pointing out to House, with the help of a farm map, the various land categories across the 934ha flat-to-rolling hill dryland farm. House used this information to establish 20 monitoring sites, at which forage availability, forage quality, intensity of land use, visual soil characteristics, and an Ecological Health Index (a number calculated from several biological indicators) were assessed.

The 12-page baseline monitoring report Hassall received has a lot of unfamiliar terminology, numbers and science that doesn't mean much at this stage, he says.

"There's a lot of measuring and detail. What I'm keen to know is how to interpret the results and use it to improve soil health."

He's open-minded about what potential changes might be needed on farm and admits he is struggling to see how the soil conservation and environmental management practices already

used – including no tillage, strategic fertiliser placement, and soil testing – could be improved or replaced.

“I’m of the view that there’s no harm in investigating the regenerative principles.

"I'm not opposed or greatly enthralled by them, but if we end up with an internationally recognised standard that gets us a price premium, then it’s certainly worth it.”

Looking long-term

EOV is one strand of MRV's Future Value Project, a partnership with Lincoln University to add tangible values to farm-raised venison, strengthen the value chain, and boost long-term profitability. The second strand is the Deer Healthscape Farming Framework, a four-year project for PhD student Emilia Lopez Seco, who will investigate, among other things, feeding systems and management that could enhance the nutritional value of venison.

“It’s about connecting the dots between nature and nutrition.

“It’s early days, but there is a lot of potential for productivity gain and value-add in this future-focussed project,” Sadler says.

What is regenerative farming?

In a Beef + Lamb New Zealand report, *Regenerative Agriculture: Market Scan and Consumer Insights*, regenerative farming is broadly defined as:

“A set of practices that, in isolation or collectively, may result in improved outcomes for our productive land, freshwater and marine environment, our climate, our animals, and for the people that grow and consume our food and fibre products”.

The report notes that interest in regenerative agriculture among food producers, brands and consumers is growing globally.

“There is growing awareness of, and support for, regenerative agriculture among industry and consumers in Western markets, and consumers say they are willing to pay more for regeneratively produced red meat products,” report authors say.

“The research shows that positioning regenerative agriculture as part of the solution to climate change has the potential to capture consumer interest – however, linking regenerative production to health and product taste outcomes would drive even greater consumer appeal. Given the growing interest, we need to act before our competitors to capture this opportunity.”

The report is light on what premiums verified regenerative food producers and suppliers will achieve. However, a key findings summary states that: “Consumers indicate a willingness to pay more for regeneratively produced food, especially if science can show it tastes better, is better for you, and is better for the environment.”

DIGGING DEEP: Soil sampling and analysis is part of the baseline monitoring process.

EOV explained

The Ecological Outcome Verification system tracks tangible indicators of ecosystem health, such as soil condition, biodiversity and land function.

Baseline monitoring is the first step in achieving EOV. This snapshot of ecological health provides a starting Ecological Health Index (EHI) against which future annual monitoring is compared.

EOV auditing happens annually. A constantly improving EHI year-on-year confirms the management of the land is improving the ecological health of that land, making the farm eligible to supply produce to the Land to Market Programme. The programme, administered by the Savory Institute, connects food brands from around the world with raw materials from verified regenerative sources.

The EOV process is continuous and qualitative but science-based, Hugh Jellie explains, and helps farmers understand critical areas like plant litter incorporation, dung decomposition and soil capping.

“There is no starting point or outcome target other than constant improvement,” he says.

“There are no absolutes or prescriptions to achieving improved outcomes other than applying the principles of living systems, observation and recording of outcomes and the continued application of the methods shown to work.”

EOV is linked to the land, not to the farmer.

“Any produce from EOV land is recognised as coming from ecologically healthy land.”

Āta Regenerative has 250 farms throughout the country enlisted in EOV, with some part of the programme for seven years.

A regenerative approach could help achieve the Government’s goal of doubling the value of exports over the next decade, Jellie says.

CONTINUOUS: The EOV process is qualitative but science-based, with no starting point or outcome target other than constant improvement, Āta Regenerative Chief Executive Hugh Jellie says.

“If we're going to do that, we need to help farmers and the land they farm to be more resilient and to produce higher value products. That's what Mountain River is doing. It’s taking a really good product and taking it to the marketplace in ways that will provide better returns for farmers.”

Deer are a price competitive alternative

Deer have resumed their status as a profitable land use option. That's the bottom-line conclusion, based on a recent gross margin analysis by farm consultant Wayne Allan.

Despite the rapid lift in sheep returns over the past 12 months, deer farming remains an attractive alternative, particularly for those with existing infrastructure.

POSITIVE OUTLOOK: Returns for both deer breeding and finishing currently compare well with other livestock, especially on farms with deer facilities, Wayne Allan says.

Sheep income has recovered from the doldrums and is back to the peak prices of three to four years ago. But over the same time, the costs of sheep breeding and lamb finishing have increased significantly, diluting the operating surplus. Over the same time, deer returns have lifted steadily, while associated costs have risen but not impacted operating surplus to the same degree as with sheep.

The typical gross margin for a breeding hind sits around 16–18 c/kgDM. The deer industry is striving to lift this to above 21 c/kgDM with improved prices, fawning percentages and weaning weights.

Historically, deer have outperformed sheep financially in eight out of ten years. However, declines in deer market prices, when they occur, are typically more pronounced compared to those for sheep. These severe price swings have lessened, however, in recent years due to a diversified venison marketing strategy no longer dominated by the European game season market. There are now more balanced year-round chilled and frozen venison sales into North America, Scandinavia and China, and the upshot is a more stable year-round schedule. This stability is likely to continue as venison companies develop and release more year-round fixed price contracts for specific deer categories and markets. A good example are contracts for elk, providing more price certainty and further underpinning farmer confidence and optimism.

This year, minimum price contracts from various companies are around $11/kg for the early spring, falling to a $10/kg by December.

Breeding gross margins

Table 1 (see below) shows that the profitability of the deer breeding herd stack up well against sheep and beef on similar country. The typical gross margin for a breeding hind sits around 16–18 c/kgDM. The deer industry is striving to lift this to above 21 c/kgDM with improved prices, fawning percentages and weaning weights.

Comments

- All breeding gross margins include income from stock sales and co-products (wool and velvet), as well as direct expenses such as stock purchases, animal health, shearing and velvetting, freight on stock, etc. It does not include the costs of a more general nature, such as feed, labour, and repairs and maintenance.
- All breeding gross margins assume the retention of replacements for the breeding herd; sale of progeny at weaning, where average sale weight impacted by the lighter females.
- The cattle gross margin is currently at record levels.
- The lamb gross margin reflects a ewe flock run on similar country to the hinds.
- Profitability of the ewe flock improves as lambing percentage and weaning weights increase.

In addition to the favourable gross margins, there are feed utilisation benefits of integrating deer and sheep, particularly in a hill country system, where spring growth is often delayed and

Table 1: Breeding gross margins

	Sell red weaners	Sell 50% hybrid weaners	Sell crossbred lambs	Sell weaner cattle
Reproduction	**85%**	**85%**	125%	90%
Sale weight	53kg	59kg	28kg	206kg
Sale price/kg	$5.35/kg	$5.50/kg	$4.10/kg	$4.70/kg
Sale price/head	$285/hd	$325/hd	$115/hd	$970/head
GM/kgDM	16.1c	18.4c	15.7c	15c

summer growth is more reliable. A breeding hind has modest feed requirements in early spring, freeing up feed for ewes whose demand ramps up in August, September, and October. More availability of feed for ewes over this period means they milk better, and their lambs get off to a better start. However, more thought is needed on feed management on hill country where summer pasture growth is less reliable, and the intervention with baleage and grain is less practical.

Finishing gross margins

Regardless of the species – sheep, cattle, or deer – finishing is a high-risk business because margins can alter rapidly. Often the sale price is unknown at the time stock are purchased, and the finisher needs to make an educated guess as to returns. Also, as more farmers pursue a particular class of stock, the price usually goes up, reducing the margins that are critical to achieving a profitable return.

An astute finisher analyses the margin to be made over several enterprises and adjusts the mix as opportunities are identified. This year, many finishers felt uncomfortable about their margins given the strength of store markets and the competition in autumn for stock across all species. Time will tell if the prime prices reach required levels this coming season or if finishers will look to recoup their margin on the next crop of stock.

Typically, a finisher targets a margin more than 25 c/kgDM for short-term options and closer to 35 c/kgDM for longer-term finishing options. These returns are required to cover the higher cost of land and operating costs when compared with those of breeders.

Table 2 (see below) shows that deer finishing compares well against lamb and beef finishing, and dairy heifer grazing. The only deer category that falls short of the 25 c/kg–35 c/kg margin range is slow finishing red hinds. Red hind fawns can be on farm for almost 12 months so eat a considerable amount of feed, and some may not reach a 45kg carcass weight. The returns from the red hind fawns can be highly variable, often depending on how much they are discounted at purchase, which in turn depends on the overall demand for weaners in any given year.

Traditionally there has only been an autumn store market for weaner deer, however the emergence of elk contracts, which encourage farmers to hold on to animals longer to achieve heavier weights, could lead to the rise of a spring store market. This market may be an attractive option for farmers in summer dry-prone regions who could opt to on-sell hybrid deer in spring rather than sell to the works at weights well below their growth potential.

In summary, deer offer the opportunity for farm system diversification, improved profitability, and lower inputs. Returns for both deer breeding and finishing currently compare well with other livestock, especially on farms with deer facilities. Breeding hinds are the more accessible option; hinds are easier to source, and there is the flexibility to finish progeny or sell on the store market depending on market and climatic conditions. ■

Table 2: Finishing gross margins

	Fast finishing hybrids	Medium finishing red stags	Slow finishing red hinds	Heavy finishing hybrids	Winter lambs	20 minth steers	20 month bull beef	Dairy heifers May to May
Margin per head	**235**	**245**	220	375	65	800	1100	832
Dry matter per head	617	615	780	975	170	3200	3800	2510
GM (c/kgDM)	32.5	35	24	35	33	23.4	27.8	33

NB: Death rate and costs are deducted from the margin to give the gross margin per kgDM.

DUAL BENEFITS: In addition to favourable gross margins, there are feed utilisation benefits of integrating hinds in a mixed livestock hill country system.

RISKY BUSINESS: Livestock finishing is a high-risk business because margins can alter rapidly.

Eye in the sky

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

Jason Rentoul wouldn't be without a drone. He's been using iterations of a Phantom 4 drone for mustering sheep, cattle, and deer, as well as other farm activities, for the last decade at Wye Hills, near Blenheim.

Drone power came to Wye Hills soon after the hill blocks were fenced for deer.

"It became too expensive to muster deer off the hill with a helicopter, which is why I got a drone," Jason says.

The Phantom 4 is used with a dog for mustering deer and sheep, and without for cows and calves.

He's also used it for sighting roads, fence lines and even an airstrip.

IN CONTROL: Jason Rentoul has been using a drone on-farm for the past decade.

After-work applications have included the unsuccessful herding of wild cattle and the couriering of two beers on a paper tray. Moderately successful was the herding of seagulls.

Jason gave a brief drone demo at the Next Generation event, flying it around the crowd and a bemused mob of Justin Stevens' deer.

The Phantom 4 is the eighth drone Jason has owned. He's crashed six, had one stolen, and lost another when it became entangled with a stroppy cow. Despite the mishaps, he wouldn't be without one.

"It's a life hack; every farmer should have one, especially deer farmers on hill country. They've been a huge time-saver for me."

His latest Phantom 4, which retails for about $1800, was bought off Trade Me for $900. The four batteries are also second-hand, from Trade Me for $140, less than half the retail price. Each battery has 30 minutes of flight time, and there's a beeper which warns when they're about to run out.

Jason has stuck with a Phantom 4 because there's a good second-hand market for buying for buying updated parts and accessories.

"Drones are a life hack; every farmer should have one."

Jason Rentoul

His advice to farmers starting out with drones is to get one that can't be ignored.

"Don't get one that's too small or with low-noise propellors because stock will ignore it."

Also, budget permitting, get one that barks. The 'barking drone' is a Mavic 3 Enterprise (retailing for about $7,600). It comes with modular accessories, including a loudspeaker that can be used to play recorded audio, such as a dog barking.

Gamechanger

Using a drone to muster the hills has been a gamechanger for Karen Middelberg.

TIME SAVER: Mustering, checking mobs and water troughs takes a lot less time with the help of a drone, Karen Middelberg says.

Over the last year, a DJI Mini 4 Pro has become her new best friend for mustering and checking water troughs. It took an unexpected turn of events, however, to put the DJI to work. Karen and husband Richard Hilson bought the DJI after seeing one in action during a ram buying excursion. They liked what they saw, bought one, put it aside and forgot about it. The drone was finally put to use when Karen was delegated the role of mustering, filling in for an employee who was on leave.

"It became my responsibility, and I muster on foot and don't have my own dogs, so that's when I started using the drone, and it was great. It's a real time saver."

Karen likes the foolproof settings, such as the automatic return to base function, although that's been switched off as she has become more confident and proficient at drone control.

Beyond mustering, it's used to check water troughs and for surveillance of lambing mobs, following a morning quadbike look in the morning.

Karen's phone footage of her DJI in action, along with Jason Rentoul's drone demo, was the call to action for NZDFA chair Mark McCoard to buy a drone.

"It's something I've been considering for a couple of years and seeing Jason's and Karen's made me understand just how useful they could be," he says.

He bought a DJI Mini 4 Pro ($2000) the week after the Next Generation event and hasn't looked back.

"It's incredible. I like using my dogs, but it's stunning to see what a drone can do and how quickly."

He's christened the drone Doug. "My son said I better not lose or crash it because I'll be Dougless...."

Next level drone use

Drones have gone from novelty to necessity, Agricultural Drone Association president Craig Simpson says on The Platform NZ YouTube interview *How drones are helping farmers.* Drone technology has advanced hugely over the last five years, leading to the establishment of specialist agricultural contracting weed/crop spraying and fertiliser application businesses, he says.

SMALL AND HARDY: Kaleb Godsiff says his DJI MINI 3 is a great for checking hinds without disturbing them. "It's small and not too noisy, and the deer don't get stressed by it...it's a bit like a soft heading dog." Kaleb, a 2025 Next Generation participant, bought the drone two years ago and uses it to check deer on his 70ha deer block near Kaikoura. "I fly it from the tractor. It's a great way to check the hinds and good for splitting off a hind if necessary." Although the drone has crashed a few times, it's still going strong. "It's small, but it's also hardy."

These big drones, with up to 70-litre payload capacity, were efficient and could be programmed for precision placement. In most cases, they were price competitive with vehicle or helicopter application, and had the added advantage of being able to safely access steep hill country areas.

He says spray drones are beyond the budget of most farmers due to the capital outlay (around $60,000 plus a trailer to tow it) and regulatory overheads.

Drones are nothing new. Many farmers use them for mustering and checking water troughs, but their full potential in agriculture has yet to be realised.

Any owner of a drone over 25kg who wants to use it for agrichemical spraying needs Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) Part 102 Unmanned Aircraft Operator certification; to prepare and submit to CAA a detailed operating manual; and to complete approved training for agrichemical application training. These combined regulatory costs range between $5000– $6000.

The CAA has a very conservative approach to the compliance required for flying a UAV, Craigs says.

"But I feel that over the next five years that will ease back, and if you're a farmer, it will make sense to invest in one."

SIZE MATTERS: Don't get a drone that's too small or with low-noise propellers because livestock will ignore it, Jason Rentoul says.

NEXT LEVEL: Agricultural spray drones, some with 70-litre payloads, can be programmed for precision spraying of crops and weeds.Photo credit: Flickr

Testing times

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Southland deer farmers put their winter crops to the test as part of a combined Southland Advance Parties winter feeding seminar.

In early June, members of the Southland and Southland Elk-Wapiti groups submitted winter crop samples for testing by Hill Labs. They met two weeks later at the Mossburn Hotel to look at the results and see whether their crops were effectively feeding deer. The objective of the testing and follow-up was two-fold, facilitator and vet Sam Elder said.

TEST IT: Be wary of the generic crop nutritional information online and in catalogues - test instead, Sam Elder says.

"It was about understanding the nutritional requirements of young stock and understanding how easy or otherwise it is to feed for growth over winter in Southland," she says.

The exercise was also about understanding the basics of crop sampling and how to interpret the results.

Most of the farmers were familiar with crop testing but not all routinely did so. None of the farmers tested silage or baleage that was fed with crop outdoors, but several tested baleage fed indoors.

A total of 15 feed samples was submitted for testing, covering fodder beet, swedes, kale, turnip and baleage. Some of the results were surprising, especially the variation in nutritional measures for the same crop variety. A good example was Morchard kale, where the crude protein (CP) on one farm was 8.7 and on another 15.1. While reflecting the differences in the soil, climatic and management factors on the two farms, the variation also highlighted the danger of relying on generic information about the likely yields and nutritional values of crops, Sam says.

"The results proved that growing the same cultivar as someone along the road doesn't guarantee you'll grow a crop with the same nutritional value."

The next step, how to apply the feed test results to the feeding of winter crop, was explained after an overview of deer feeding requirements during winter (see table 1 below).

Turning to the growth potential of a young deer, Elder says a realistic target was 100–150g/day for reds; 150– 80g/day for crossbreds; and 200–300g/day for wapiti, the upper limit representative of males wintered indoors (see table 2 below.)

"You can't manage what you don't measure."

Sam Elder

Next, a bit of classroom work came into play, with a step-by-step explanation of how to use the crude protein and dry matter information to balance the quantity of crop and supplement fed to achieve feeding targets. The exercise showed how difficult it is to add weight to weaner deer, who require 15–18% CP, on a fodder beet-based diet, which has only about 8% CP.

"In short, the numbers showed to balance the diet would require a lot of red clover baleage, which is expensive, and it would probably be physically impossible for a young deer to eat that amount of dry matter every day. In other words, it's best to avoid feeding weaners fodder beet!" (see table 3 on opposite page.)

Table 1: Red deer feed requirements during winter

Age of deer	Sex	Kg DM/day/head
Red weaner <75kg LW	Both sexes	2 - 28 stag 1.8 - 2.7 hind
Yearling	Hind	22
Adult	Hind	2 - 27
Yearling spiker	Stag	26
Adult (velvet)	Stag	3

Assumptions

- Feed energy: 10.5 MJME/kg (typical of turnips)
- Quantities are for feed consumed. Allow extra for wastage

Source: Deer Facts: Fodder crops for winter feed.

Table 2: Metabolisable protein (MP) requirements for maintenance of young deer

Liveweight kg					
	40	60	80	100	120
gMP/hd/day					
Hinds	35	45	60	75	
Stags	37	50	65	80	90

Based on easy hill diet of 105MJME/kg DM
Add 6% for hard hill, subtract 3% for fat
Add 13% per MJME below 105MJME/kg DM
Subtract 7% per MJME above 105MJME/kg DM

Source: Pasture and Supplements from Grazing Animals. Eds PV Rattrav, IM Brockes and AM Nicol.

TOP TUCKER: Save the highest quality feed for young velvet stags. Less than the best could impact their lifetime velvet production. Photo: Richard Hilson

Feeding for velvet

The feeding of young velvet stags got a special mention. Pedicle initiation and development of R1 velvet spikers was dependent on crude protein (CP), and getting it wrong could impact lifetime velvet production, based on the findings of research by velvet scientist Jimmy Suttie in the 1990s.

R1 stags needed 22–25% CP for pedicle initiation. A two-year-old stag needed 18–22% CP three weeks before button drop; and a MA stag 16–18%.

"What's of note is how hard it is to reach the high protein levels needed for young velvet stags during pedicle development on crop and baleage diets," Elder says.

High-quality pasture was the best source of CP for young velvet stags, and where possible the time weaners spent on crop should be limited in favour of pasture.

The crops that were fed to young stags needed to be the best quality and supplemented with high-quality red clover or lucerne baleage if possible.

The indoor wintering of young stags has become popular, and this required special consideration given that 50% or more of the diet was baleage or silage. To achieve the 18–22% CP requirements of a young stag, high-quality baleage/silage of 20–24% CP was needed. If the CP of the silage or baleage was below that, Distillers Dried Grain was an option but expensive.

NO-GO: Fodder beet is not a good option for the winter feeding of weaners. Its crude protein is too low and supplementing it with enough high-quality baleage is expensive and probably too much for a young deer to eat.

BEST OPTION: High-quality mixed pasture is the best feed for adding weight to weaners over winter.

Table 3: Typical feed values

The following table gives general information on the feed quality of a range of typical forages

Feed type	Dry matter (%)	Crude Protein (%)	Acid Det. Fibre (%)	Neutral Det. Fibre (%)	Digestibility (%DOMD)	Metabolisable Energy (MJ/kg)
Mixed pasture	12 - 25	20 - 30	20 - 30	30 - 45	65 - 80	9 - 12
Pasture silage	23 - 30	14 - 20	20 - 35	30 - 45	65 - 75	9 - 11
Cereal silage	35 - 40	8 - 12	25 - 40	35 - 60	55 - 65	9 - 10.5
Maize silage	25 - 35	6 - 9	25 - 35	35 - 50	60 - 70	9.5 - 11
Lucerne foliage	15 - 25	20 - 30	25 - 30	35 - 45	60 - 70	9 - 12
Lucerne hay	85 - 90	18 - 25	25 - 35	35 - 45	55 - 65	8 - 11

Source: Hill Labs

Takeaways

You can't manage what you don't measure was a message that Sam Elder wanted to get across to farmers.

"I think the practical crop sampling, followed by a discussion and explanation about the nutrition and growth rates of young deer, and what it takes to add weight in kilograms of dry matter, helped explain that."

There was good feedback from farmers, and several left motivated to test their winter crops. A couple of farmers were also weighing a sample of animals this winter, to compare growth rates with the tested crops.

The group was interested in repeating the exercise next year, Sam says.

"The variation in nutritional values within crops was interesting, and something farmers were keen to revisit. They were also interested in discussing feeding options for various classes of stock according to results."

More information on the winter feeding of young deer:

Metabolisable Energy testing at Hill Laboratories
hill-labs.co.nz/media

Deer Feed Intake Calculator
deernz.org.nz/deer-hub/feeding/feeding-tools/feed-intake-calculator ■

Key points

You can't manage what you don't measure.

Crop testing is affordable.

It costs about $80 for a brassica/bulb/root crop and $67 for basic level testing of silage/baleage.

Be wary of the generic crop nutritional information online and in catalogues – test instead!

Good quality pasture has far superior crude protein levels than many winter crops.

Avoid fodder beet for the winter feeding of young deer; its crude protein is too low and supplementing it with enough high-quality baleage is expensive and probably too much for young deer to eat. Save it for hinds and MA stags.

Your breeding hind - the engine room of venison profitability

If venison production is your business, start with mum.

Your maternal hind base sets the ceiling on how many fawns you wean, how fast they grow, and how reliably they hit the schedule.

But what does a profitable maternal hind look like?

She conceives early, rears a vigorous fawn, stays sound on hill country, and keeps a calm head at weaning. She's resilient to parasites and disease challenges, and has the constitution to milk and rebreed. In short, she's the right size and fit for your farm. Our Forrester sires deliver these attributes, leaving top-quality female venison herd replacements who are quiet, fertile, hardy, and efficient.

A strong Forrester maternal base doesn't compromise the profitability of a finishing system – it amplifies it. Forrester sires can be used across selected animals to breed replacement maternal hinds, and terminal sires used across the balance of hinds to build the numbers of fast-finishing progeny with a high dressing percentage. This dual breeding strategy means more even-weight lines, earlier kill dates, and fewer tail-end weaners.

Our Forrester sire selection process balances reproduction, temperament, health resilience (including a strong focus on Johne's and parasite resistance), and early growth without blowing out mature weight. Potential sires are put to the test in our commercial engine room system before selection and sale at three-years-old.

Four steps to profitably grow your venison system:

1. Track the kilograms of venison produced per hind mated. Measuring and recording is the only way to track progress.
2. Condense mating. Earlier conception will deliver earlier, heavier drafts of weaners.
3. Prioritise the management and feeding of first-calvers. They are your genetic future, so don't sacrifice their lifetime performance for a single season.
4. Choose maternal sires on temperament, constitution and health resilience, not just growth on paper.

The takeaway: Invest in your engine room. If you want more kilograms of venison earlier, you need to consistently invest in the genetic quality of your breeding hinds. Choose Forrester sires.

Forrester 3yr-Old Sire Stag Auction — 12 December 2025

Catalogue & paddock inspections: mark@pfe.nz ■

Editorial supplied.

New research underway

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

A diagnostic tool to assess parasite burdens, the tissue-level happenings that trigger velvet regeneration, and the effect of low-pressure bands on future velvet production were the three research projects to get the go-ahead from the DINZ Research Committee earlier this year.

The projects align well with the DINZ Thrive 2035 science strategy, DINZ Policy and Research Manager Emil Murphy explains.

"The strategic driver for DINZ to invest in research is to drive credible, practicable results that can lead to improved outcomes through welfare, economics, time, or productivity; these projects fall under the productivity and animal welfare pillars. The issues and topics they address will be even more important to the industry in the future, which is why DINZ is investing in them now," he says.

The first project is a collaboration between AgResearch and the Disease Research Laboratory that look to validate and calibrate a Polymerase Chain Reaction-based (PCR) technology, which will amplify parts of the DNA chain to show and quantify parasite burden in deer. This will help fill the void for a reliable diagnostic tool for parasite management in deer, Murphy explains.

"Faecal egg and larval counts provide useful information during the autumn period for young deer but don't tend to correlate with total parasite burden in older deer. A calibrated diagnostic tool that can rapidly and cost-effectively quantify parasite burden would be a huge win. It could also allow us to detect drench resistance on farms without requiring expensive slaughter trials."

The second project, in conjunction with Massey University, will take a microscopic view of what happens to tissues and cells following velvet removal, and in the lead-up to velvet regeneration. This research will be the next step on previous work by Otago University and AgResearch, Murphy says.

"The goal is to form a better understanding of the growth transition process and the regenerative nature of velvet, which is tissue like no other in a mammal."

The third project is an offshoot from early investigations into post-velvet haemostasis, which questioned whether the use of treatments after velvetting could impact future velvet production of an animal. In several of the related experiments, there appeared to be a small but positive effect on velvet regrowth, in particular on animals that had prolonged use of a low-pressure band. However, due to how these trials were designed, it was difficult to conclude whether this observation was valid and related to the low-pressure band or the result of other factors.

"We hope to get a true understanding of the effect of using low-pressure bands for up to 24 hours on some of the stags at Invermay."

The three approved projects were among the 14 submitted to the Research Advisory Panel (RAP) for consideration. Their review, and subsequent ranking, was based both on the scientific merit of the proposals as well as their potential to deliver benefits to the industry in line with the Thrive 2035 strategy, Murphy says. In addition, several projects were referred to DINZ for further discussion with the submitters.

"More information on these projects will be available as they develop."

Priority areas for the next call for ideas will be agreed upon in late September. After that, DINZ will canvas industry participants for projects that fit those needs. Keep an eye (and ear) out for this opportunity to put forward any ideas you might have or get in touch with your local DFA branch, who can help put forward your thoughts.

The RAP with DINZ and AgResearch staff at Invermay in July.

The wrap on RAP

The Research Advisory Panel (RAP) is an eight-member group whose role is to recommend research priorities to the Research Committee, propose an annual research plan, monitor ongoing research projects, and evaluate completed research projects.

The RAP members have been chosen by DFA and by DINZ to ensure a mix of industry knowledge, perspectives and skills. RAP members are: Richard Hilson, a Hawke's Bay deer farmer and vet; Danette McKeown, a deer farmer with a background in environmental science; Dave Lawrence, a deer farmer and vet; Alastair Nicol, a retired academic with a long history in deer research; Sharon McIntyre, geneticist, Deer Select manager and deer/dairy deer farmer; Matt Gibson, from FirstLight Venison; DINZ CEO Rhys Griffiths; and AgResearch's Callum Livingston. The group is supported by DINZ's Emil Murphy and Amy Wills.

The Research Committee, a sub-committee of the board, oversee all the industry's research investments. It is responsible for setting the research strategy, the priority areas for research, and approving and monitoring each year's research plan. Committee members are Dave Courtney, Tony Cochrane, Simone Hoskin and Rob Kidd.

A venison focus

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

"Why are you getting into breeding hinds?" That was a frequently asked question when deer farming newbie Mark Brooker told farmer friends and family that he was prioritising venison over velvet production.

FAMILY FIRST: The move from dairy farming in Australia to deer farming in Kaikoura was a huge upheaval for the family (from left: Kirsten, Lucy, Mark and Charlie) but long-term will provide a better family-work lifestyle balance.

Brooker Ag

Deer and sheep breeding & finishing /dairy bull beef finishing/ calf raising on 125ha, plus an 80ha hill lease block at Hapuku, 10 minutes north of Kaikoura

Deer	
184 venison hinds	80 R1 venison stags
36 velvet hinds	
Cattle	
140 Jersey bull calves, reared and sold store at 12 weeks	80 Friesian bull calves, reared for selling prime at 16 months
Sheep	
1000 Wiltshire ewes	
Five-year goals	
300 – 400 breeding hinds	30 – 40 velvet stags
80 Friesian bulls	All deer fenced
Regrassing	

But for Mark, the answer was simple and straightforward.

"Really, it's about playing to our strengths.

"We believe there is more profit from breeding and finishing deer on this class of country, and also it's my personal strength – I love handling hinds," Mark says.

Mark and wife Kirsten took ownership of the Hapuku farm in March this year following a six-month transition alongside the previous owner and Mark's uncle, Neil Morton.

Mark's mum, Mirie, grew up on the farm, and her father, Jim, was a pioneering deer farmer who, like many of that era, live-captured deer and started farming them.

Mark grew up on a 1200ha mixed cropping and lamb finishing farm at Kirwee in Canterbury but was a regular visitor to the Hapuku farm to help with the deer.

"I always liked working with them but didn't seriously think about farming them."

"We believe there is more profit from breeding and finishing deer on this class of country."

Mark Brooker

On leaving school, he worked as a shepherd in the Awatere Valley and Rakaia Gorge, where he gained an appreciation for both the region's remarkable landscape and the significant role helicopters serve in high-country farming operations.

"I saw how the pilots worked and that what they did – mustering, spraying and other stuff – really helped farmers."

It set Mark's sights skywards along a new career path in helicopter aviation. He obtained his commercial helicopter pilot licence and agricultural rating, which was his ticket to Australia. There, he spent a decade employed in agricultural contract work in southeastern Victoria and southern New South Wales.

The first couple of years were dedicated to aviation but that changed on meeting Kirsten, a schoolteacher. They met in 2017 and got married in 2019, and in a move back to the land, took on management of an extensive high-country sheep and beef farm in Victoria, which Mark worked around flying.

Looking for a new challenge, in 2021 they bought a 120ha dairy farm in Gippsland, milking 300 cows.

"People often ask how we managed to milk cows on a dryland property, but we had a 900mm rainfall, so it wasn't too dissimilar to New Zealand."

It was full-on for the couple; Kirsten juggling parenting duties with calf rearing, occasional help on the farm and part-time teaching, while Mark continued helicopter contracting around dairy farming. Although a great opportunity to build equity, it wasn't a sustainable or healthy work-life balance.

"I'd milk cows in the morning, head off for a day of flying, and get back home for milking in late afternoon," Mark says.

The birth of Charlie in 2021 led the Brookers to reevaluate their long-term plans and work-life balance. They made the decision to flag helicopter contracting permanently and dedicate themselves fully to farming. While expanding their dairy operation was an option, Mark and Kirsten decided it wasn't the lifestyle they wanted for their family.

Meanwhile, the couple were told about the sale of Mark's uncle's farm near Kaikoura. The opportunity sparked an immediate interest, and in late 2023, the Brookers sold their dairy farm, having made the decision to move to New Zealand and take up the deer farming opportunity.

The move was an upheaval logistically and emotionally for Kirsten, who had spent most of her life in southeastern Victoria.

"It was huge, because we packed and moved just about everything from the farm – dogs, vehicles and a lot of equipment," she says.

Back in New Zealand in autumn 2024, they lived on the Brooker family farm at Kirwee until takeover of the Hapuku farm on 1 March this year.

In the interim, Mark spent time with his uncle, familiarising himself with the farm, 156 hinds and a handful of sheep.

Velvet production was the predominant deer focus, but Mark decided from the outset to grow the breeding hind and weaner finishing side. He could see that the terrain, climate and feed growth curve were better suited to breeding hinds and weaners because of the reliable and reasonably spread 1400mm rainfall, along with the comparatively dry and mild winters. Further swaying the deer farming pendulum from velvet to a venison breeding focus was Brooker's own preferences.

"I've always liked working with hinds, and the workload is less than with velvet stags, which will give me opportunity for casual off-farm work."

FENCING OFFENSIVE: In the five months since takeover, six kilometres of deer fencing has been added or replaced.

But getting off farm is still a while off as Mark gets livestock systems sorted and infrastructure in place.

Since takeover on 1 March, the couple have wasted no time, buying 64 in-fawn R2 hinds and 50 weaner stags for finishing. Also bought were cashflow generators – 1000 Wiltshire ewes and 200 dairy beef bull calves.

All calves – 140 Jersey bulls and 100 Friesian bulls - were bought in at five-days old and reared. The Jersey calves were sold store at

THE ENGINE ROOM: Breeding hinds and their progeny are the main cash generators on the Brooker's farm.

12 weeks, while the Friesian calves will be taken to prime weight before their second winter.

The first farming season has unfolded with minimal glitches, although there wasn't enough winter crop to feed the 120 hinds and progeny. Instead, the weaners were all-grass and baleage wintered, which obviously agreed with them as they averaged 180 grams growth from March to early August. Given the growth results, it's highly likely the weaners will be wintered on grass next year, leaving the fodder beet and kale for the hinds.

The ewes lambed over six weeks from early July and at weaning in early November will go to a leased 80ha hill block about two kilometres from home. The sheep-fenced block complements the home block, Mark says.

"We think it will be good summer-safe country for ewes and bull beef.

"Running them there for most of the year leaves more space at home for the deer."

At weaning, the lambs will be sold to Mark's dad, Andrew, and brother Shane for finishing on the Kirwee farm. It's a win-win arrangement.

"We want the lambs gone before we set-stock the hinds for fawning at the start of November, and they have a good system for finishing and can make a good margin."

Aside from buying in livestock, deer fencing has been a high priority. About six kilometres, or $120,000 worth, has been added or replaced, with another eight kilometres planned.

"We have a small area for intensive grazing, and we want to fence and subdivide it to maximise grazing efficiency."

Although venison production is the focus, the growing of quality velvet will still be important in the overall farming mix.

"I see velvet as an income diversification and risk-mitigation thing, and we'll be velvetting weaner (venison) stags and sire stags anyway.

"But the venison hinds are the engine room, and we'll make everything else work around them."

Getting an efficient deer-centric system up and running and in sync with feed growth will take time, but the Brookers are taking it in their stride.

Kirsten says deer farming is not a thing in Australia, and she has a lot to learn about deer. She helps where possible, but her time is limited with two preschoolers and part-time primary school teaching.

Mark says he's confident with managing and growing good pasture, thanks to practical dairy farming experience. Deer-specific knowledge is what he's lacking, but he's getting good support and advice from across the deer industry.

Deer Facts has become a regular go-to, as has Tom Macfarlane, who has been very helpful with management tips and advice on benchmarking deer performance.

"For me, it's about learning what to expect in terms of growth rates and production targets, and Tom has been really helpful with that."

Once the first season is out of the way, he's keen to get involved in more deer-related groups, possibly the local DFA branch or an Advance Party.

Mark is taking a keen interest in genetics, using breed values to help select and breed the ideal hind for Hapuka – a big Eastern red-type who will produce big-framed weaners.

Proof of the breeding programme will unfold over the next few years; in the meantime, there are a lot of other things Mark wants to tackle. He's keen to expand or rebuild the deer shed – to date he's removed the crush and added a drenching race – and investigate indoor wintering, which he thinks might work well in his developing system.

He's upbeat and excited about deer farming.

"The schedule is looking good, and we think the venison marketing side of things is in a good space.

"It's early days, but we're pumped about what we can achieve with the weaners."

ON TRACK: There's lots to do, but Mark Brooker is happy with what's being achieved since taking ownership on 1 March.

HELPING HAND: Charlie (3) is always keen to help on the farm.

Venison the priority as deer return to Argyll hills

Tony Leggett, *Deer Industry News* writer

Venison production is the focus of a revived deer farming operation for the Twist family, farming in the Argyll district of central Hawke's Bay.

TEAM EFFORT: Theo Twist and stock manager Brodie Thomson run the deer in conjunction with large-scale sheep and beef breeding, trading and finishing.

Twist family farm

Argyll, central Hawke's Bay.

1400ha plus a 100ha lease block.

Large-scale sheep, beef breeding, trading and finishing operation; reintroducing 300–400 breeding hinds for venison production to an existing 140ha deer unit.

Deer wintered: 210 R2 hinds, 114 mixed-sex weaners, 6 sire stags.

The first breeding hinds arrived well before fawning last year to their 140ha deer unit, on easy rolling country within the family's finely tuned 1400ha (plus 100ha of leased land) sheep-beef breeding, trading and finishing operation.

Numbers were topped up in June this year with more in-fawn young hinds.

Theo Twist and his father, Neville, had previously farmed deer in the late 1980s and steadily built a herd of up to 400 hinds and 200 velvet stags. But when returns for venison and velvet dropped off, their deer numbers dwindled until the last remaining animals were slaughtered in 2006.

"From memory, we had paid up to $2500 for some of those first hinds we bought back when we started.

"When we killed the last ones in 2006, they averaged about $250 a head, so that tells a big story about the way prices had gone," Theo says.

Their first foray into deer was matched by three near neighbours who also put up fencing, built races and deer handling sheds, only to exit deer farming for more lucrative livestock options years later. Just like the Twists, their deer paddocks returned to running sheep and cattle once more.

Selling yearling deer at up to 60kg carcase weight at $10/kg or more has serious financial appeal and adds a new livestock enterprise to help balance out some of the risk in their overall business.

"Looking back, what got us out of deer was the massive fluctuations in the velvet and venison job," Theo says.

"But I had been studying the market for the past two years and noticed the venison job has been much more consistent lately, and the venison marketing guys are doing a great job too."

Selling yearling deer at up to 60kg carcase weight at $10/kg or more has serious financial appeal and adds a new livestock enterprise to help balance out some of the risk in their overall business.

They wintered 210 mostly young hinds, 114 mixed-sex weaners, and six sire stags. Their immediate plan is to retain 30–40 of the yearling hinds to keep building the breeding herd to between 300 and 400 head over the next few years.

Bringing back the deer

The move back into deer began with the purchase of 120 in-fawn, two and three-year hinds from Pāmu's Rangitaiki Station on the Napier-Taupo Road.

"Those hinds were bred for venison production, but Landcorp was in the process of switching from venison to velvet production, so that gave us a good start on where we were heading," he says.

Earlier this year, they added three smaller groups of high-quality hinds to their herd to kickstart their own breeding programme.

Respected and long-time deer farmer Gary Brady from Te Pohue in Hawke's Bay sold them 23 in-fawn hinds, plus two young stags and an older stag he had used across a mob of hinds from his own herd.

"We were really fortunate to get those quality hinds from Gary. He doesn't have a stud, but his deer have a great reputation."

They also bought 46 in-fawn two-year-old hinds from Timahanga Station on the Napier-Taihape Road, and another 20 mixed-age in-fawn hinds from Raetihi deer farmer David Seifert.

Both Timahanga and David Seifert are regular buyers of sires bred by Taihape deer farmer and veterinarian, Paul Hughes, who runs

the Ruapehu Red Deer Stud, whle Gary Brady has been buying his sires mostly from Melior Genetics.

Theo says the Timahanga and Seifert deer were purchased with help from Carl Lynch, a deer agent with Silver Fern Farms (SFF). Carl also helped negotiate the grazing of stud weaner hinds in the autumn this year from Paul Hughes' property, which was heavily impacted by drought.

"Paul was either going to have to sell them or find grazing for them, which is not that easy. We took on 179 of his weaner hinds on a weight-gain basis and grazed them on pasture and kale crops from March until I trucked them home for him in early June."

The weaners were grazed in one mob on a paddock of kale.

"I'm pleased to say Paul was extremely happy with how they looked when they were returned to his farm. They had put on more weight here on our farm than they normally would at home."

Theo weaned his own hinds post-rut this year, around May 10, and removed the stags at the same time.

"At mating this year, we put stags out at the start of March to two mobs of 70 hinds, and Gary's 23 hinds just had their boyfriend with them," he says.

"I had been studying the market for the past two years and noticed the venison job has been much more consistent lately, and the venison marketing guys are doing a great job too."

Theo Twist

At this stage, he is sticking with straight red genetics, but he won't rule out introducing specific terminal sire stags in the future to inject hybrid vigour into higher venison production.

"Our average carcase could be lower initially, but if I can hit 60kg before Christmas, I will be very pleased. I'm happy to feel my way into it and not try to set any records, because I probably won't."

Theo says he is not aware of any other Hawke's Bay farmers returning to venison production in the past year or so.

"When I look back at the deer farm that my father Neville built up over many years, it was done by fencing another paddock each

RED GENETICS: Theo is sticking with red deer for the meantime.

A mixed-livestock system

Deer breeding and finishing will provide the Twists with some balance to their large-scale lamb, cattle breeding and trading business.

They operate their own livestock truck, and most years, depending on seasonal conditions, buy 15–20,000 lambs for finishing at Argyll from farms as far north as Kaiwaka, an hour north of Auckland, to south of Martinborough and west through Taranaki.

The return of deer to the Twist family's property will force an end to a regular arrangement they have had with PGG Wrightson and Hazlett Rural to graze lambs and cattle shipped over from Chatham Islands.

"We've been helping with grazing the Chatham Islands stock for the past 12 or so years. They come here from Napier Port and are grazed before being sold," Theo says.

Theo says the stock firms have found another farmer to take over the lamb grazing arrangement, but finding another farmer to graze the cattle is not so easy because they ideally need deer fences to contain them.

"At the moment, we can handle the cattle for a bit longer, but as our deer numbers increase, the stock companies will have to find a new property to take them on."

YOUNG BLOOD: The best females from this mixed-sex weaner mob will be kept for the breeding herd, which will grow to 300–400 over the next few years.

year as our numbers grew. Over time, there was a lot of money, time, effort and pride that went into it.

"After watching the venison market in the past couple of years, I thought if we ever wanted to go back into deer farming, we have all the infrastructure already, so all we have to do was buy some deer and we'd be deer farmers again."

When the call was made to re-enter deer farming, their regular fencing contractor was brought in to tidy up a few broken posts, repair some netting and fix up some gates that had been damaged by cattle.

The deer handling shed got a waterblast, but it was still in great order and functional, thanks largely to the original builder, Joe Rossiter, who built several sheds in Hawke's Bay when deer farming first took off in the 1980s.

Reacquainting with deer

So far, one surprise for Theo from farming deer for the first time in nearly 20 years, was an outbreak of lungworm in the weaners.

"That's where being able to phone a couple of experienced deer farmers really helped. We had lost a couple of big heavy weaners, completely out of the blue, but when I called Gary [Brady] and explained what was happening, he suggested it would be lungworm. It was so frustrating to lose big animals, but once we got the vet's advice on the right product and drenched them with it twice, 25 days apart, the losses stopped," he says.

"One phone call solved that problem for us. It was the same when I was getting concerned about losing feed quality in our fawning paddocks, and I called Gary to ask if I could introduce a few cattle to help keep on top of the rank pasture. He said go for it, as long as all the hinds had already fawned."

Theo admits he had also forgotten how frustrating deer can be to move or yard some days.

"No two days are the same with deer. One day a mob will do a few laps of the paddock, but next day they will wander out the gate and into the shed without any issues.

"We're busy always, but we had to remind ourselves that we need to be patient and plan ahead. Opening a gate the night before a paddock move works well. Most times, the deer find their own way through so it's a simple case of closing the gate and latching it."

BREEDING BASE: These hinds, from Pāmu's Rangitaiki Plains deer unit, are part of the new breeding herd.

Theo says he is impressed by the willingness of deer farmers, like Brady, Hughes and nearby stud breeder Grant Charteris, to share knowledge.

"I want to surround myself with good people like them, get involved with deer and be able to tap into their advice."

Sales and marketing

Looking ahead to marketing his venison animals, Theo says he prefers to retain some flexibility on timing rather than be tied to a supply contract that has a pre-determined delivery window.

"Farming here in central Hawke's Bay is challenging. You could be happy today, but after a month of dry winds, you could be in real trouble.

"I do sign lamb contracts to supply at certain times of the year, but I'm not prepared to do that all year round."

All their lambs and beef cattle go to Affco, but it doesn't process deer, so they will be consigned to Silver Fern Farms (SFF) largely because of the work Lynch did to find the high-quality breeding hinds for the new herd and the grazing arrangement he negotiated with Paul Hughes for his weaner hinds.

SFF has plant in Rotorua, which the Twists are aiming to supply 55–60kg carcase weight deer from October to December each year.

"Our aim will be to kill as many of our yearlings as possible by December, but if we have a few left over, they could graze a summer crop, and we will have another draft of them in the autumn."

Feed and fertiliser

Between 70-90ha of the farm is cropped each year, starting with kale for winter grazing, then into rape for the summer, and back to a perennial ryegrass-white clover pasture mix in the autumn.

"We'll continue with renewing one paddock each year in the deer unit. As soon as it dries out enough, this winter's kale crop paddock will be disced up and we'll sow it in Main Star rape for feeding over the summer months," Theo says.

Central Hawke's Bay is notoriously summer dry, so forage crops are vital to filling any pasture gaps after December.

"Younger pasture paddocks perform better for the first five to six years. We've done everything that we can get over with a tractor, so now it's getting a second round of cropping and pasture renewal."

The whole farm will soon receive an annual application of 300–400kg/ha of dicalcic phosphate, supplied from the nearby Hatuma site.

"This year, we are giving the whole farm 400kg/ha to kick it along after doing less last spring. Also, soil testing showed some of our hilly faces were a little low in phosphate so we're going to top that up with a higher application rate."

NZDFA
NZ Deer Farmers Association
Your voice, our future

NZDFA Executive Committee: Chair Mark McCoard, Karen Middelberg, Evan Potter, Tom Macfarlane

New Blood

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Reinvigoration of the DFA branch network is a priority for the NZDFA Executive team.

"We want to strengthen the branch network and provide branches the resources to support their members, because if we lose branches, deer farmers will be out on a limb," NZDFA Chair Mark McCoard says.

NZDFA membership has taken a hammering over the last five years, falling by 343 to 804. It's not all imminent doom and gloom, however, given the new faces taking on chair roles at some of the recent branch AGMs: Rachael Inch (Canterbury-West Coast), Colin Jordan (SCNO), and Matt Krs (Bay of Plenty). You can see their bios in Stagline Issue 211. And although not a new face, past NZDFA Executive Chair Justin Stevens has revisited the role of Marlborough DFA branch chair.

"My main priority this year is to reach out to our members that are still farming and keep them updated on what is happening within the deer industry, because things can rapidly change as we've seen in the past," he says.

"Listening to our deer farmers and assisting them where possible is really important, and it's easier in a small branch like Marlborough. We used to have around 300 members back in the 1990s but that's dropped to around 25."

A few events are planned for the coming year, including the velvet competition run in conjunction with the Tasman DFA and a field day.

At AGMs held during August, Dean Wilkinson was elected chair for the Wairarapa branch, while Vanessa Crowley was elected chair of the Waikato branch.

While acknowledging the drop in membership due to the retirement of several deer farmers in recent years, Vanessa Crowley is taking a glass-half-full rather than a glass-half-empty approach to the future of the Waikato branch.

"There are five new members on the committee, and we are all looking forward to injecting some new energy into the mix," she says.

"It's going to be a neat opportunity to give back to a branch and industry that has been so influential and important to many of us."

The branch has 27 members.

"We have a great cross-section of passionate members, so we never run out of topics to discuss."

The committee has a long list of field day ideas to prioritise.

"We hope these will help re-invigorate the branch, attract new members, and be a place to encourage sharing, embrace further education, foster collaboration with neighbouring branches, and offer social support."

But before that, Vanessa will reinstating the 'legendary' newsletter.

"It will be quick and easy to read but full of the good oil and a joke or two."

Meanwhile Wairarapa DFA's new chair Dean Wilkinson says the branch is hanging on.

"We have about half a dozen members, and we meet once a year for the AGM, which is a social occasion," he says.

"We're all older and have been there and done that, as far as field days go. We need some younger people, but I guess that's a problem across the industry."

He's hopeful that branch members will get along to the mixed-species Hawke's Bay field day on 11 November.

"I think that's where the future is, young people who are looking to diversify into deer."

Wilkinson is one of the few wapiti breeders in the North Island, breeding and selling a handful of bulls from Totara Park Wapiti, near Masterton, since 1998. Although wapiti have never gained a huge foothold in the North Island, he says the rise of elk meat contracts has led to increased buyer enquiry.

FRESH FACES NEEDED: "We need some younger people, but I guess that's a problem across the industry," Wairarapa DFA Chair Dean Wilkinson says.

New but no stranger to the DFA

GIVING BACK: "Taking on the chair role is an opportunity to reinvigorate the Waikato branch, which has been influential and important to many members," Waikato DFA Chair says.

Some might say that Vanessa Crowley has been in training for the Waikato DFA chair role since childhood. She recalls being dragged along at eight or nine-years-old to branch meetings with her father (Joe) in the late 1980s and listening in on the business of the day.

"I remember those meetings would go very late into the evening, so I would curl up under a kitchen chair and go to sleep.

"I grew up around Waikato stalwarts Murray Powell, Bob Dunn, Bill Hodgson, and Murray Bertram, and attended branch functions including velvet competitions, the Mystery Creek Fieldays, Te Rapa velvet pools, and lots of BBQs!"

The people, and the events they organised, clearly made a lasting impression on Vanessa. She's been an intermittent member of the Waikato branch since her early twenties; the periodic membership related to her career movements and deer-owning status.

Deer and the Crowley family have been inextricably linked since the early days of deer farming.

"Dad used to hunt deer in the Waioweka George near Opotiki but fell in love with the animal so ended up leaving the gun behind and taking a camera instead," Vanessa explains

When Joe met and married Amy, the couple bought and deer-fenced a small farm near Hamilton, establishing Tower Farms in 1978, which is where Vanessa and brother, Todd, were born and raised.

"Todd and I spent all our time helping on the farm as kids. We were allowed to pick a hind each to get our own little breeding programme started.

"While I picked a cute one, Todd studied pedigrees for days before deciding on his selection. It's no wonder my deer are glorified paddock ornaments, while Todd has developed a successful business [Crowley Deer]."

Vanessa's deer-related career took shape after completing an agricultural science degree at Lincoln University. Employment with Deer Improvement was followed by a velvet marketing manager role with DINZ and employment at First Light Farms. She managed a Morrinsville block for three years, velvetting 600 stag, before accepting the role of North Island procurement manager for Duncan NZ.

Multi-species field days

The NZDFA will be out in force at two North Island field days highlighting the benefits of multi-species farming systems. The intention is to attract and motivate sheep and beef farmers with deer infrastructure to add deer into their livestock mix.

"It's a message we're keen to keep pushing – how the introduction or reintroduction of deer can bring real benefit to a mixed-species system, " Mark McCoard says.

The B+LNZ-hosted days are targeting farmers with mixed-species who are looking to change their system, and rural professionals. Content will cover how a diversified farming business comprising sheep, cattle and deer can improve financial resilience, reduce risk, and how multi-species grazing can combat drench resilience.

Local DFA representatives will be at the events to offer advice and answer questions.

"It's an opportunity for an on-farm, practical look at managing the feed demands of sheep, cattle and deer, and how they can be integrated in a complementary way," DINZ Producer Manager Lindsay Fung says.

"Some of the content will look at the historical benefits of a diversified business, showing how multiple income streams can reduce market risk and create business resilience."

The first field day on 7 October is at Keith and Logan Burton's Hawke's Bay farm, while the second on 11 November is at Westview Farming Partnership, Pohangina Valley in Manawatu. The North Island field days follow a similar B+LNZ multi-species day held in south Canterbury in May featured in the June issue of *Deer Industry News*. ■

Be informed

Lynda Gray, Deer Industry News Editor

Get the lowdown and align yourself with a buyer that understands you and your business.

That's the advice to velvet growers from NZDFA Executive Committee member Evan Potter.

"We want to get the message across loud and clear that farmers need to take responsibility for what they can control in the velvet supply chain.

"You have the choice of who you sell to and when, within reason, so deal with reputable buyers."

"The message came across loud and clear of the need to cut shorter, and this will be reflected in the upcoming changes to the velvet grading guidelines."

Evan Potter

While farmers can't control prices, they can minimise the chances of losing out to opportunistic buyers by talking to reliable sources, such as members of their local DFA branch, he says.

"Get an understanding of the company you supply.

"Who do they supply? What do they expect from you? How do they grade product? On what basis will you be paid and when? Does their way of doing business align with yours?"

For the first time this year, an NZDFA representative was invited to attend the annual pre-season velvet buyers meeting. Evan attended and said it was a worthwhile experience, hearing directly from buyers what the market wanted.

"The message came across loud and clear of the need to cut shorter, and this will be reflected in the upcoming changes to the velvet grading guidelines," he says.

"Exceptional gains in genetics and feeding over recent years means we're growing a lot of velvet that is too big for the machinery and plant of velvet processing companies to handle. There's also drying issues and wastage with the large sticks of velvet."

Cutting shorter reduces the weight but improves quality, while also helping to alleviate the oversupply of some velvet grades, he adds.

Practical on-farm strategies to reduce the supply of less sought after velvet could be to minimise the amount of OG1 and HV1 velvet cut, and cutting NT heads shorter. Another way of containing supply could be offloading surplus mixed-age velvet stags before cutting regrowth. That would rule out income from velvet but diverting them earlier to the venison market was now a more attractive option given the lift in schedule prices, he said. Earlier dispersal also avoided the problem of transport and securing processor space.

"[Processing] space is always limited post-velvetting, and we're aware that the period for transporting stags is being cut back by one week, so that's further reducing the window for supply."

He acknowledges that velvet farmers each had unique systems that guided their decision making.

"But the choices we make as individuals have a cumulative effect on the whole industry, and it's a message we want to get across: act now to maintain our reputation – as quality velvet producers."

Wilkins Farming presents exciting new sires, Falco and Colman

Wilkins Farming Co continues to lead the way in deer farming innovation and super deer genetics.

Over 45 years, we've drawn on practical experience, technology, and astute management to produce genetics that deliver on-farm performance. We've participated in Deer Select since 2005 and DNA test, EID record, and ultrasound scan to prove and verify with science the productive potential of every stag and hind.

Two new sires making their mark are Falco and Colman. Both represent the very best of our breeding objectives, showcasing the perfect balance of growth, velvet, and maternal strength.

Falco is the complete package. Retained from our 2019 progeny, he has an exceptional pedigree featuring matriarch hind 350 Red. His pedigree is matched by impressive production; at 15-months-old he weighed 188 kg and had an EMA of 41cm². At three-years-old, he produced 9 kg of velvet.

Pure English sire Colman continues to impress. He cut an outstanding 9.56 kg of elite velvet at three-years-old. His stellar velvet credentials and English hardiness, reflected in high 12-month-growth EBVs of +19 in progeny, make this bloodline highly sought after.

The 2026 season is an opportunity to secure sires by Falco and Colman. Invest and secure the genetics shaping tomorrow's deer industry at our annual stag sale on 13 January 2026 in Athol, Southland. ■

Editorial supplied.

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE: Falco

Mike's legacy

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* Editor

Dr Mike Bringans is the inaugural winner of the New Zealand Veterinary Association's Deer Branch 'Founders Legacy Award'.

Dr Mike Bringans

The award, presented at this year's NZVA conference in June, celebrates the legacy of Deer Branch founding members – their innovation and courageous pursuit in support of the industry through applied research and action to improve the health, welfare and production of farmed deer. It's awarded to current or past members of the branch who have shown leadership, contributed to knowledge and education, or have made significant contributions to the deer veterinary profession or industry in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

"The industry genetic gains due to Mike's applied expertise have benefited deer breeders throughout New Zealand."

Camille Flack, NZVA Deer Branch President

Mike is a world-leading authority on assisted breeding technologies for cervid and exotic animal species, and his achievements have received international recognition, NZVA Deer Branch President Camille Flack said on presenting the award.

Mike's pioneering work with embryo transfer (ET) resulted in the world's first live birth of a fawn from a frozen embryo.

"He also pioneered ultrasound scanning and practical application of foetal ageing, semen collection and processing," she said.

On graduation from Massey University in 1977, he was employed by a central Southland vet practice in Winton. He experienced first-hand the buzz of the fledgling farmed deer industry, becoming involved in the live capture of deer from Fiordland. He bought the Winton practice in 1983, and over the next decade, developed a deer-centric focus.

Mike's entrepreneurial and pioneering spirit saw him push boundaries in deer veterinary medicine, including live capture and recovery, import/export quarantine, and supervision of deer on charter aircraft to North America. However, he is best known for advanced reproductive technologies, notably laparoscopic AI in red deer and elk, as well as ET.

His passion for deer reproductive technology has endured, and after 30 years, he still hones his skills in the cervid breeding season in both the Northern and Southern hemispheres, Camille Flack said.

"The industry genetic gains due to Mike's applied expertise have benefited deer breeders throughout New Zealand.

"He's never been content to idle and has always pushed the boundaries with technology and innovations such as embryo splitting, using sexed semen, in- vitro fertilisation, and intra-cytoplasmic sperm injections.

"He's always tweaking programmes to optimise yields."

As well as his technical expertise, his willingness to contribute and share his knowledge at veterinary conferences was noted.

NZVA Deer Branch

The Deer Branch of the New Zealand Veterinary Association was established in 1984. Inaugural members included Peter Wilson, John Hunter, Hamish McAllum and Gilbert Van Reenen. Others instrumental in the branch's establishment included Colin Macintosh, Noel Beatson, Ian Scott, Ian Walker and Alan Hunter.

"These vets were the vanguard of deer veterinary medicine in New Zealand and globally, building the foundations of what we know today," Camille says.

"The recipient of this year's award, Mike Bringans, has many of the same qualities of those pioneering Deer Branch veterinarians."

Deer worm management in a mixed-species system

Ginny Dodunski

New Zealand deer farmers are renowned innovators and independent thinkers who have built a globally admired livestock industry. There is a danger, however, that too much 'independent thinking' on parasite management is leading some deer farms towards drench failure and serious problems with internal parasites.

The two biggest issues that threaten deer performance and drench efficacy are the insufficient provision of low-worm challenge feed to young animals and the use of suboptimal doses of drench when animals are treated.

Feeding for worm management: Low-worm challenge feed

One of the key pillars of managing worms in pastoral farming systems is the provision of easily harvestable, high-quality feed to young stock, with low levels of worm larvae. This type of feed reduces disease risk and enables young stock to grow at their fastest potential. It also means they more quickly reach a stage of maturity where they've developed their own immunity to worms.

In the early 2000s, animal scientist Simone Hoskin showed that R1 deer grazing chicory grew faster and required markedly reduced drench inputs, compared to their mates grazing permanent pasture. The higher nutritional quality of chicory, and the greatly reduced numbers of parasite larvae on it, enabled this outcome.

High-quality, low-worm contaminated feed can be provided to young deer in a variety of ways. In a deer-only system, crops or supplement are the obvious choices. In a mixed-species system, there is the added opportunity for planned grazing swaps or rotations with other animals. This assumes there is enough room for other livestock within the deer unit, which can be an issue given that addiction to deer is a real thing!

Every bit of grazing integration helps, but to effectively clean up an area of worm larvae takes repeated grazing, preferably over three months or more. One hard grazing may not do much, as larvae in the thatch and in the top layer of soil can repopulate the growing grass very quickly.

Healthy, well-fed adult deer can go some way to removing parasite larvae from weaner pastures. An example might be post-rut velvet stags grazing a weaning area for several months. Adult deer still pass low numbers of lungworm and gut worm eggs, however, so although an adult-grazed area will be less contaminated than one that has run only young stock, it won't be as safe as a crop or alternative species-grazed area.

An appropriate combination drench: Deer require higher doses

Drenching in combination with other management strategies preserves treatment efficacy and helps reduce the build-up of drench-resistant parasites. To be effective, however, the drench must be used at the deer-appropriate dosage rate.

The reason the industry's funding of the development of Cervidae® oral drench was that the concentration of anthelmintics in sheep and cattle combinations are too low for deer.

If you choose to use sheep or cattle anthelmintics in combination for your deer, make sure you're modifying the doses to meet the requirements, and get advice from someone who knows their stuff in this space. Both abamectin and levamisole can be toxic when overdosed.

Compared to sheep and cattle, deer require a double dose of the ML/mectin family when given orally, and a four-times dosage of the Benzimidazole family. Levamisole tends to be only partially effective in deer but can still have some additive efficacy when used in a combination treatment.

Many farmers cite cost savings as a reason for using off-label sheep and cattle drench products for deer. When you do the maths on increased dose rates to meet deer requirements, however, the savings may not be as much as imagined. Also, the volume that needs to be administered can become problematic.

Finally, stop adding things to your drench! Combination drenches have been carefully formulated to keep unrelated and chemically different compounds together in a stable liquid form. Adding supplements, minerals or other products to your drench runs a real risk of destabilising these formulations. ■

Ginny Dodunski is a vet and the Wormwise Programme Manager.

Upcoming animal health workshops: Finishing the job of eradicating bovine TB

Westport (1 October) | Hokitika (2 October)

Find out more: deernz.org/home/events

Venison Shabu Shabu

Graham Brown, DINZ Executive Chef

6 SERVES

Ingredients

Venison

900 g venison rump or leg fillet, sliced as thinly as possible

12 Shiitake mushrooms, quartered

8 green onions, sliced diagonally into shards

6 leaves Chinese cabbage, blanched, dried, rolled and cut into rounds

6 pcs Daikon radish, cut into thin sticks

6 pcs carrot, cut into thin sticks

450 g Udon noodles, blanched and drained

450 g firm tofu, cut into cubes

225 g bamboo shoots, cut into half-moon slices

Broth

6 cups chicken stock & cups water

1 thumb sized piece of fresh ginger, sliced

3 whole cloves of garlic

1 2-inch piece kombu (kelp)

6 peppercorns

Sesame dipping sauce

85 g white sesame seeds

¾ cup dashi (Japanese soup stock)

85 g soy sauce

30 g mirin

1 tbsp sugar

30 g sake

2 tbsp fine minced green onions

Method

Venison Shabu Shabu

Bring all ingredients to a boil and simmer for 10 minutes, then strain.

In a stockpot, cook carrots, mushrooms, radishes, green onions and bamboo shoots in the stock until tender (about 10 minutes).

Add tofu.

Remove vegetables and tofu from stockpot with a slotted spoon and arrange in six bowls with Udon noodles and cabbage.

Bring stock to a boil and quickly dunk the venison slices for about five seconds, just to warm.

Arrange venison slices on top of vegetables and noodles and pour hot broth over the mixture.

Use a Sesame Dipping Sauce for meat, noodles and vegetables.

Sesame dipping sauce

Toast sesame seeds in dry skillet over medium heat until golden brown.

Cool and grind in mortar until flakey.

Add remaining ingredients to form a paste.

Use to dip venison and vegetables. ■

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