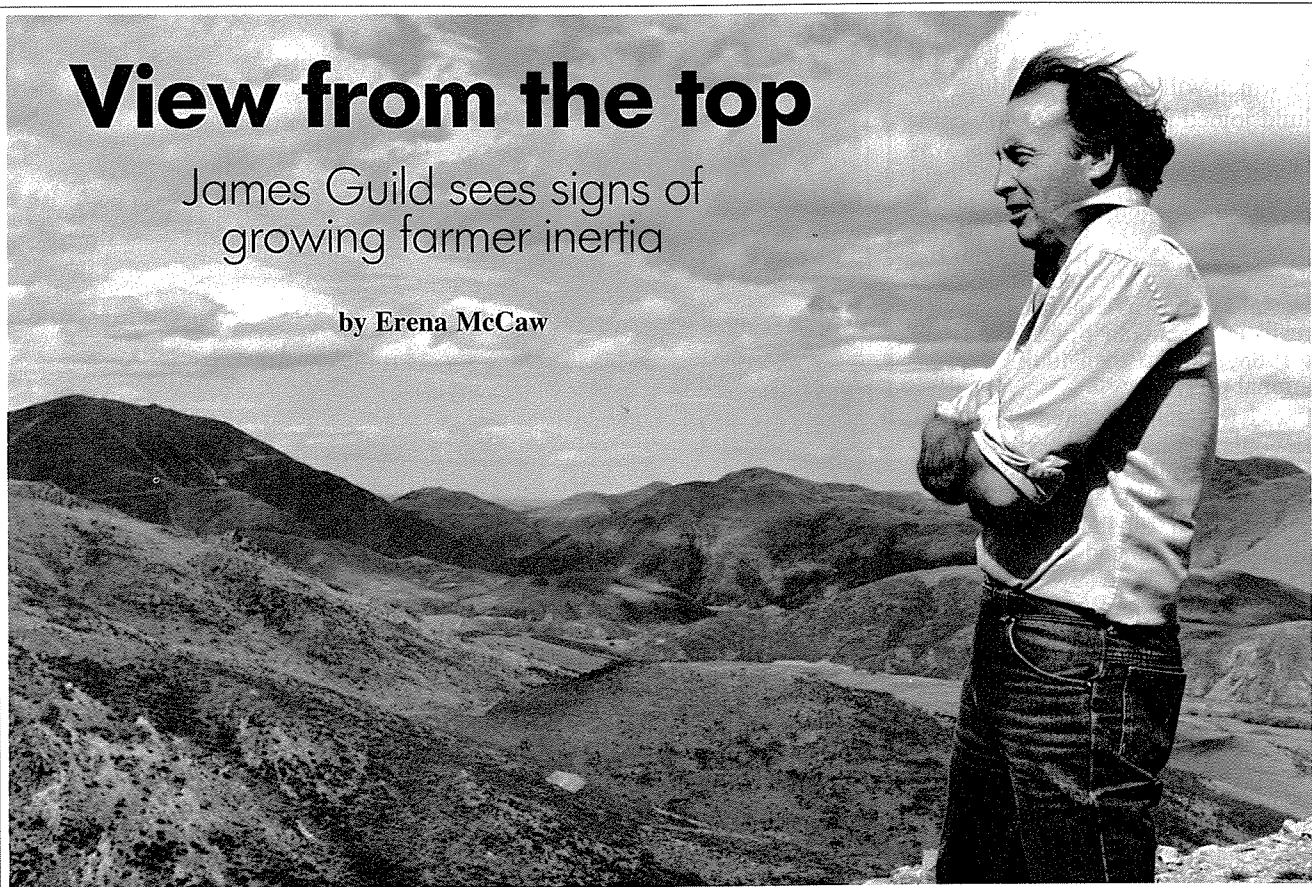


# View from the top

James Guild sees signs of growing farmer inertia

by Erena McCaw



**James Guild surveys the landscape from High Peak station**

*He and his brother chose the challenge of the high country in the early 1970s*

AFTER 12 months as president of the NZDFA, James Guild is still a little bemused to find himself in the position — his only previous experience in the chair was a three-year stint with the local NZDFA branch.

“Even that came as a shock as I’d never managed to be chairman of so much as the family discussions before,” he says.

For years, Guild’s political activities extended little further than occasional branch meetings of the High Country Federated Farmers. Deer farming turned him around both politically and financially.

In 1973 he and his brother opted out of flat land farming at Temuka, South Canterbury, and chose the challenge of the high country. One month after taking possession of High Peak, they were hit by a devastating snow storm which not only wiped out half their stock but left them scrabbling for financial survival for the next five years.

Only then did they feel confident enough to diversify into farming the wild deer roaming their hills.

“The deer industry was euphoric in 1978,” recalls Guild. “It seemed im-

possible to make a wrong decision. Everything we did made money, but I doubt if any of us realised the industry’s full potential until some years on.”

“We knew deer could be farmed, that velvet was valuable and there was a market for venison, but it wasn’t until deer farming became a mainstream pastoral industry that we saw how many advantages it really had.”

Even before the change of government, Guild had been uneasy about the direction of the economy and concerned that the reliance on supplementary minimum prices was creating an artificial farming environment. He believes the ‘lily-livered’ stance taken by the National Party on problems within the meat processing industry allowed the situation to continue so that only now — 15 years later — everything is ‘hitting the wall’.

The change of government and subsequent abrupt change in economic policies sharpened Guild’s desire to take an active part in shaping the industry’s future and ensure it did not

go down the same trail as the meat industry.

“It was important nobody stuffed it up by taking wrong attitudes or becoming complacent about what appeared to be a ‘can’t miss’ industry,” he says.

When the livestock tax review was introduced and the industry ‘tipped over’, Guild quickly became aware of the complexities surrounding farmer politics.

“We waged an intense and successful campaign to lessen the review’s potential for damage, and I realised then that unless there was a body fighting for the interests of all deer farmers we probably wouldn’t be in existence at all — something many people haven’t fully appreciated.

“It made me appreciate the work of Sir Peter Elworthy in turning over the Wild Animal Control Act and dealing with the plethora of restrictions about farming wild animals. Just getting the government to accept deer as an animal which was no longer noxious but could be contained was no mean feat.

“Farming in New Zealand is highly political and — while I don’t enjoy

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the battles — there is tremendous satisfaction in knowing I've contributed in the achievement of something which will benefit the industry." Guild joined his local NZDFA committee in 1981 and the next year was elected chairman, a position he held for three years. He became Canterbury representative on the national council in 1985 and moved onto the executive when elected treasurer a year later. He was South Island vice president when Ian Spiers died late in 1988, and he then took over the national presidency.

"I was fortunate to have served on the council with two previous presidents and to have known all four reasonably well. They each had strengths and attributes I admired and which influenced my interpretation of the role," he says. "Being on the Game Industry Board since June 1988 has added a further dimension, and the two positions often overlap.

'Ian's death came at a time when the council was delicately balanced in one of the first pro-active decisions it had made — that of pushing producers into ownership of a marketing processing company.

"We couldn't afford to have an interim president who wouldn't stand for office in six months' time when elections were due, so I stepped into Ian's shoes on the understanding I'd be available. If I wasn't elected, OK, but at least the chance for continuity was there."

During the recent campaign to dissuade the government from altering deer slaughtering regulations, Guild was gratified by the support from NZDFA branches and individual farmers who lobbied Members of Parliament.

"Such support has been typical of the industry, and I'd like to think it will continue," he said.

"There are however, signs of growing inertia and a loss of the sense of immediacy we once had. I think it's a by-product of increased security and larger numbers — there are nearly 5000 deer farmers now."

In the industry's pioneering days it was a case of deer farmers against the rest. "Nowadays, we still have deer farmers whose entire interests and finances are based on deer but we also have established pastoral farmers who are entering at a time when it's never been easier or cheaper, and market prices have never been better. With it, comes the traditional farmer mixture of caution and lack of entrepreneurial flair.

### Anna and James Guild on their 3440 ha property

*Knowing they had excellent permanent staff and a strong back-up of casual labour helped James Guild in his decision to offer himself as president*



"Pioneer farmers may have knocked over a few hurdles but they kept slogging on in spite of casualties. An element of today's entrants stumble at the first hurdle then turn around and go back. A few think their role in life is to attack NZDFA policies and I find that frustrating.

"Others resign in principle if they disagree with a NZDFA decision. For my money, the way to effect change is to get stuck in and make sure you're heard, not to opt out."

Guild believes a major problem facing the industry is adherence to the adage 'If it aint bust, don't fix it'.

"People say we're getting record prices for velvet and venison, so why tinker with the industry. It's a classic farmer cycle; prosperous times breed complacency, profitability is eroded, everything hits the wall and farmers wake up again."

If present prices hold for a further

two or three years, he sees complacency posing a real threat.

"The 1983/84 velvet adulteration scandal hit us hard when we were in a small way. If something similar hit now, it would be even more severe and could bring us to our knees overnight. We can't afford to slacken our guard."

Guild would like to see the NZDFA's subscription-only funding system changed. "About 60 per cent of deer farmers belong to the organisation and they own around 85 per cent of all farmed deer. That's good compared with some agricultural sectors and indicates most people think it's money well spent."

However the absence of compulsory levies for funding agro-political activities meant the organisation was beneficially active on behalf of all deer farmers but was funded at some cost by a percentage only, he said.

He would like some mechanism

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which would allow the NZDFA to recover, from all deer farmers, the cost of activity that benefits all deer farmers. But he concedes that the free market philosophies of the Labour Party, and the anti-compulsory union attitudes in the National Party, could make that difficult.

“Even the changes made to amalgamate all land user groups may have to be reappraised, as virtually all organisation affiliated to Federated Farmers use different methods of funding. Some are entirely levied, others entirely subscription based while others are a mixture of the two.”

“The government has made it clear it doesn’t want non-members levied for political activities, which means subscriptions have to be high — too high according to some, who use it as an excuse not to join.

“In reality it’s a pittance and doesn’t equate to the value of a kilogram of

velvet or one back leg. A couple of nights at the boozier could cost more.”

While Guild has some sympathy for small-time deer farmers who find the subscription cost beyond their resources, he still considers they have some obligation to support the association. Without its activities, they might not be deer farming at all.

The sharemarket crash saw the loss of much of the urban element which had been a significant feature of the industry originally.

“The council has always had several non-farming members who have added a whole dimension of lateral thinking. They were a breath of fresh air and the industry is the poorer for their absence. I hope they’ll return when the economy lifts.”

He regards deer farmers’ diversity of backgrounds as a strength.

“We may have just lost our last two

urbanites from the council, but the remaining members come from all sectors of agriculture to form a group which I think has exceptional ability.”

He makes no apology for his stance that, as major investors and ultimate risk-takers in the industry, producers should have the final say over other participants in decision making.

“The meat industry wouldn’t be in such a mess had producers taken control of their own destiny,” he said.

“If taking control means we have a majority on the Game Industry Board and must control or monitor exports and the transfer of technology, I believe we should do it without apology. But — and it’s a big but — I’d hate other segments of the industry to feel they were denied the right to contribute.

“Diversity of input is our strength but inevitably there will be decisions which fall down sectional interest lines. To be equally balanced is a recipe for inertia.”

Guild acknowledged equal partnership with the processing sector had been successful in the past and that changing the balance in favour of producers would raise fears among processors that they might lose their influence.

“I agree it would be bad if their voice was not heard,” he said.

“I’m not advocating a Game Industry Board peopled by deer farmers, and I think a producer board would be a tragedy. Neither do I want a production driven industry but I don’t think the growth and producers’ collective investment of 90 per cent of the assets should be put to risk by another sector with less investment.”

He considers that, as world leaders in deer farming, New Zealand has a unique opportunity to help shape the international industry.

“The attitude that we can somehow keep our technology and information to ourselves is totally naive and counter productive. As regards exporting animals, the government has made it plain it won’t prevent live animal exports so we must live with that — better still, try to turn it to our advantage.”

Every nation with feral resource was moving into some form of deer farming and looking to New Zealand for assistance, he said. It would be irresponsible not to form policies and philosophies in the fledgling industries.

He dismissed fears of New Zealand

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### Anna and James Guild take a rare break

*Family life is difficult to plan: Sundays are supposed to be off-limits to NZDFA work, but it doesn't always work out that way*

conceding its position as leader, saying there was an advantage in having deer regarded as noxious animals.

"The conservation lobby is on our side, but in countries where deer are indigenous, they are held in some reverence and this puts constraints on farmers which we don't have. While we have momentum, we can stay ahead."

Deer could be regarded as a 'designer' animal, he said. It had a long productive life, good health, was highly adaptable, 40 per cent more efficient than either sheep or beef, produced a multiplicity of products and had built-in consumer appeal as a gourmet food and the food of nobility. It even met fashion trends with its low cholesterol.

"It would be a terrible indictment if we handle things so badly now that future generations look back and say 'You had it all there and you stuffed it up'."

So at the end of his first year in

office, how does James Guild feel about the job?

He says he knows why it has a high burn-out rate.

Both he and his wife Anna had given the presidency serious consideration before he accepted it. With three young children, one still a preschooler, they were aware of the extra load Anna would have to carry. Knowing they had three excellent permanent staff and a strong back-up of casual labour to run the 3440-hectare property made the decision easier.

The last year has been pretty much as they anticipated. Family life is precious and difficult to plan. Sundays are supposed to be off-limits to NZDFA but it doesn't always work that way.

"People think Sunday afternoon is a good time to get me as I'll probably be home. If they are right, it's at the expense of my time with the family. Anna is very understanding but, while I'm prepared to devote my

time to the association, I don't think family members should have to devote theirs."

Anna has found the unpredictability of the new lifestyle challenging. She enjoys her role as hostess to the throngs of overseas guests who pass through her home and would like to take more active part in NZDFA activities but for the moment, the family comes first.

"The children go to boarding school when they're 10, and with our youngest child now five I'm very conscious it's only five years before they're all away," she said.

"The past presidents' wives all know what it's like coping with the job and a family and have been very supportive. Shirley Spiers in particular has been a tower of strength. It isn't always easy being president's wife, but it's always interesting."

Guild, having survived his first year in office, is willing to tackle a second. Indeed, he gives the impression he's looking forward to it. □