FERTILITY PROBLEMS

The key to breeding herd profitability

by Trevor Walton

FERTILITY IS an issue of vital concern to Fallow farmers the world over.

In a recent issue of Wildtiere in Gehegen, the German game farming magazine, Professor G. Reinken of Bonn points out that an improvement in reproduction rates from 85 to 90 per cent (five percentage points) will increase net herd revenue by 20 per cent.

Fawn birth weights have a direct bearing on fawn survival and this in turn depends on the nutrition of the dam in the three months before fawning when foetal growth is strong. He targets fawn birth weights of between 4.2 and 5.1 kg for males and 3.6 and 4.9 kg for females.

In New Zealand, low birth weights and leptospirosis infections have been identified as likely key factors in poor weaning performances on many farms.

At the 1989 Fallow Forum, Ruakura Fallow expert Geoff Asher gave an excellent overview of Fallow reproductive performance — pointing out that while some farmers were getting 90 per cent survival at weaning, some newer farmers were only getting performances in the low 70s.

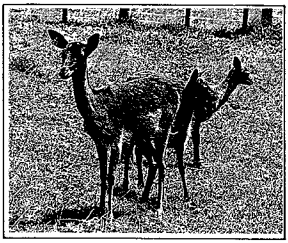
ASHER told the forum that ovulation failure was one of the rarest events in nature and, on recent survey data, extremely unlikely to be a problem on NZ farms. The same went for problems with mating management.

Abortion related to stress is a fear all farmers have when handling pregnant animals, but Asher said he'd never heard of a case linked to yarding or management.

Abortion from macrocarpa poisoning, on the other hand, is a well-documented cause of abortion storms.

"Abortions are very hard to detect, especially during the first few months of gestation when the foetus is very small," said Asher.

"Also it is common for the female to eat the foetus once it has aborted. Abortion is more common than many people have thought. On one problem farm I visited, I walked around the paddocks and found 20 aborted foetuses on the ground. The farmer himself hadn't noticed any."



A Fallow doe and dependants

Lepto and low birth weights are the big killers

Asher said he had screened problem herds for all known diseases and the common factor appeared to be subclinical leptospirosis — a disease which causes abortion in many animal species.

"The finding that it could be leptospirosis means that 90 per cent of the problem is over — because there is a commercially available vaccine. I feel that all does on problem farms should be vaccinated for leptospirosis at least twice a year.

"If you have any suspicions that you might have an abortion problem in your Fallow, contact your vet and get him to find out."

LOSSES OF fawns are something of a mystery on most Fallow farms because of the 'leave-alone' policy adopted by most farmers at fawning.

In a survey of 161 dead fawns from Waikato and Bay of Plenty farms, Asher found that 'non-viability' was the biggest cause of death — resulting in 25 per cent of losses.

Other causes were (percentages in brackets) starvation 19.3, dystochia 14.3, misadventure 11.2, gut infections 9.9, throat and jaw infections 6.8, lung infections 3.7 and in utero complications 3.1. Hypothermia losses were very low.

"I can't generalise for all New Zealand from these figures, but they give an indication of what happens."

Further analysis of these deaths showed many were birth weight-dependent. Below 3 kg at birth, 60 per cent of fawns died; from 3 to 4 kg, 16 per cent died; over 4 kg, losses were 11 per cent.

"Whatever you do," said Asher, "don't screw back feed in the last month of gestation as you do with Reds. It's a sound thing to do with Reds because they have a dystochia problem under NZ feed conditions; but not in Fallow where non-viability — low weight — is a problem."

Misadventure is a significant cause of losses and Asher said this was a result of putting a wild animal in an unnatural environment: "If they are getting hung up in fences, you should ask yourself why they are trying to get through anyway."

Deer naturally like to fawn and hide their young in cover. It not only protects them from the climate and predators, but also from other does which — on intensive farms — which will disrupt many other fawns when looking for their own. □