

NA Elk breeders in high gear 297

Genetic gains push velvet heads to the max

By Brendan Hutching

SCENES SIMILAR to the early days of the NZ deer industry greeted Invermay scientist Tony Pearse at this year's North American Elk breeders convention.

Pearse attended the convention — held in Edmonton, Canada, at the end of February — to present a paper on basic velvet production, and was struck by the enthusiasm of the 900 delegates who forked out \$CAN370,000 on two auctions to raise funds for industry promotion and research.

The money goes into the coffers of the North American Elk Breeders Association (NAEBA), and is the main source of funding, although the 1200 members of the association also pay an annual sub of \$150.

Pearse said many of the delegates were new to the industry, and were intent on soaking up as much knowledge as possible from the many seminars being held on topics ranging from technical information for beginners to the pharmacology of antler velvet.

North American Elk breeders are on a roll at the moment. Not only are live prices good, but the animal commands a mystique among the public and animal breeders not shared by other deer species. Breeders tend to be wealthy, and owning Elk is seen as a prestigious occupation.

For Pearse, the most impressive development in North American deer farming is the speed of genetic gain by Elk.

"They're making tremendous gains in production, especially in the 2 and 3-year old animals. They are making very rapid genetic gain, and I can see industry growth hap-

pening on the scale of New Zealand in the 1980s."

The major difference is that North American Elk already have the genetic advantage, and are starting where the New Zealand animal leaves off.

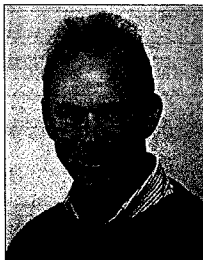
Velvet heads weighing around 40 lb (18 kg) are now becoming a standard for top heads from mature animals, and the talk of the convention was how many heads would better this standard in the coming (northern) velvet growing season.

Pearse said the New Zealand industry could learn from the Americans' willingness to get ahead, for example, in sire registration, which is well established on the continent. The next step is the introduction of production-based records and breeding values.

In discussion with his hosts, Pearse fielded concerns about New Zealand's increasing presence in their velvet market, although this cuts both ways, and a good proportion of American product is sold into Korea, and some suppliers are developing capsules for Hong Kong and China.

The American view of New Zealand's presence is that it is both competitive and complementary — the disadvantages of competition must be weighed against the advantages, where a higher profile for velvet should benefit all players.

One peculiarity of NAEBA is that it covers breeders across two countries. This is a deliberate policy that aims to play down parochial concerns in favour of focusing on the breed. The convention theme expressed this nicely: One Industry/One Vision.



Tony Pearse

Unfortunately, the full realisation of this policy is being hindered by outside factors. At the moment, trade in stock is only one-way, from Canada to the US. Agricultural Canada is the major stumbling block in its attitude to disease, especially Tb.

The department has reservations about the effectiveness of the US Tb scheme, and until these are laid to rest, the ban on US-Canadian traffic will continue.

More importantly, within the deer world, there

are other organisations, such as the Canadian Venison Council, who also speak for the Canadian industry.

One promising development that featured was an electronic device for producing anaesthesia, with the potential for drug-free velvetting — a marketing plus in these health-conscious times.

Pearse said the device has no connection with electroimmobilisation — a means of restraint using an electronic device that has been condemned by veterinarians worldwide.

It is a more sophisticated invention that has been used by humans undergoing dentistry, and is said to block the pain of the dentist's drill. It's not known whether the device was used in the Game Industry Board's own research into drug-free velvetting (see TDF March).

The convention elected a new president, Jim Fouts of Great Plains Elk in Kansas, who replaced Marty Stallings. □

Heading skyward

NORTH AMERICAN Elk breeders have well and truly broken the 40 lb (18 kg) velvet head barrier, and are aiming for the magic 50 lb (22 kg) head.

Invermay scientist, Tony Pearse, who recently spoke at the North American Elk breeders convention, said breeders are achieving 42-45 lb now through skilful feeding and breeding on top of first class genetics.

He said the upper limit can't be forecast at this point, and he did not discount the possibility of reaching 50 lb within a few years.

With the conference talk focusing almost exclusively on velvet, venison is seen as a poor cousin, if it was mentioned at all. The Elk industry is based almost totally on breeding and velvet, and is likely to stay that way, unless a major collapse in the velvet market forces a change of direction.

A third of conference-goers said they had tried velvet — a vote of confidence in their own product, and the Americans see the domestic market as a growth area.