Better than Red 448

The fall-out from TDF's October Red feature continues. In this article, Elk and Wapiti Society secretary **Tony Pearse** discusses research that shows superior venison yields from young Wapiti animals as against older Red carcases.

IN AN article headed "Telling it like it should be" in TDF October, Te Puke farmer Kelvin O'Hara took the view that meat yields from 15-month Red deer are better than those from 11-month hybrids.

This is not correct. Research results as shown in Tables 1 and 2 below clearly bear this out. This research was carried out by Dr Ken Drew of Invermay, and compared the yields of 11-month old Wapiti animals with those from 15 and 26-month Red deer.

In terms of saleable venison — bone-in or bone-out — Wapiti hybrids at 11 months of age yielded more total weight per primal, more lean muscle, and less fat and bone than the older Reds.

And the 15-month hybrid retained this advantage, with greater carcase weight, that is now valued at least on a similar basis to AP2 payouts. At least three exporters are offering a heavyweight schedule on carcases with at least 50 per cent Elk genes where producers are prepared to verify their product.

To get some idea of commercial yields, a line of 30 yearling Wapiti hybrid males was randomly assessed by an Otago processor (Table 3). The animals were between 10 and 11-months old at mid-October. These animals were coming out of a very tough winter and a slow spring and were from an acknowledged well managed herd. For these animals, the average carcase weight

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was 56.7 kg and the average GR was 3 mm.

Individual primal yields — lean, fat and bone — were not possible because of the variety of bone-in and bone-out cuts, but the processor reported that typically lean meat yields from hybrids at this age are excellent, equal to or slightly ahead of Reds of the same weight.

These commercial figures confirm previous research, and the Elk and Wapiti Society will be actively seeking further commercial data from other sources.

It should be noted that this type of hybrid — and indeed well grown young Red deer — are slaughtered before their pubertal peak at 15 months. This is due to peak market demand over the October-November period, but these young animals are only immature in terms of realising their potential liveweights.

There is a huge advantage on-farm in being able to target market requirements by using the biological flexibility of all strains of Red and Wapiti to achieve the best commercial result for producer and exporter.

It should also not be forgotten that for a large and growing group of producers the true role and flexibility of Wapiti sires depends absolutely on the commercial Red hind. The more rapidly she can be improved through selection for milking ability, early and trouble-free fawning, conformation and superior antler genes, the better.

There is also a larger issue here. Hybrid venison finishers are not paying as much attention to selecting Wapiti sires as they should, and there are too many sires being used that were originally purchased as culled velvet stags, sold on relative size and price.

This deficiency is compounded when venison sires are not fed adequately, irrespective of background. This issue has been consistently identified as the greatest limitation to good production within the whole venison industry.

It may be that management lapses and lack of application to the basics are behind poor performance, because poorly fed young animals of any background will not yield to their potential.

Hybrid production systems fail to reach their potential if the sire choice is not backed by genetic merit, selection and sale with objective integrity. We have much to learn from leading breeders in eastern Europe and the UK, as well as the better NZ Red breeders of the species *Cervus elaphus* — to which Wapiti also belong.

In that sense, O'Hara's argument certainly contains some sound views and a vision for the future through continued selection for improved features.

But make no mistake — there are excellent Wapiti sires in the industry and they and their progeny must be used to maximise crossbreeding. However, adopting O'Hara's rhetoric doesn't change the principle — the yields speak for themselves. □

Table 1: Average Red and hybrid carcase composition

	Red Deer				Elk x Red cross (50:50)	
	15 Month		26 Month		11 month	
Liveweight (kg)	104		130		116	
Hot carcase weight (kg)	58.2		74.1		68.4	
Cold carcase weight (kg)	56.4		72.3		66.6	
Dressing percentage	55		57		59	
Typical yields	**Kg**	**(%CW)**	**Kg**	**(%CW)**	**Kg**	**(%CW)**
Saddle	8.4	(14.5)	10.9	(15)	11.8	(18)
Hind legs	21.7	(38.5)	28.1	(39)	26.8	(40)
Shoulder	11.5	(21)	13.7	(19)	12.9	(20)
Neck	8.6	(15)	11.6	(16)	9.3	(14)
Ribs	5.7 (10)	8.0	(11)		5.5	(8)
GR (tissue depth 1/12th rib)	6 mm		10 mm		4.7 mm	
— fatness indicator						

Table 2: Yield by primal cut (lean, fat, bone) of 15-month Red deer and 11-month hybrids
Lean, fat and bone content of primal cuts (tissue as percentage of primal cuts)

Primal Cuts	Lean %		Fat %		Bone %	
	Red	Elk/Red	Red	Elk/Red	Red	Elk/Red
Saddle	69	74	7.9	3.9	24	22
Shoulder	74	78	5.2	4.6	21	16
Hind Leg	77	78	5.2	3.5	18	18
Neck	67	70	6.8	5.7	26	24
Ribs	68	76	13.3	5.5	19	19
Total yield	72.7	76	7.0	4.7	20	19

Table 3: Percentage of saleable carcase — commercial yield
Comparison of 11-month Wapiti hybrids and 12-15 month Red deer — boning room floor yields

Hybrid Wapiti yields	Percentage	12-15 month Red deer yields — typical commercial expectation (percentage)
B/L shoulder	16.9	15-16
Leg	37.5	35-36
Neck (trimmed)	5	5
Tenderloin	1.5	1.2
Striploin yield — not available, as a mixture of rack/striploins was produced	est. 15.5	14-15
Total yield	74	Range: min. 68 - 74 max.