



THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF VETERINARY SERVICE TO DEER FARMERS

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The deer industry has recently come of age after completing the first boom and bust cycle of a new industry in which many of the players were in it principally as an investment, or tax shelter

It is now a significant industry, contributing to the nation's growing economy with sales of venison, velvet and co-products. It is also currently a profitable industry to be in at a time when most other meat industries are not

Veterinarians can be proud of the pivotal role they have played in helping get the deer industry to where it is now. Many of us have been involved in deer farming directly, and also contributed at the local Deer Farmers Association branch level since the inception of deer farming as an industry from about 1978. In those days not much was known about the biology of deer, let alone their behaviour and welfare in a farmed situation, and it would be true to say vets and farmers "learned along together", often the hard way

Apart from a few veterinarians involved with specialist reproductive services, most of us have in the past earned 90% of our deer fee income from a hands-on involvement with velvetting and TB testing

Veterinary service to deer farmers started to change its emphasis with the industry acceptance of veterinary supervision of the velvetting operation for all stags, and in particular indirect supervision of farmers velvetting their own stags under the auspices of an industry accepted body controlled by a partnership between farmers and veterinarians. Deer vets had to be accepted by deer farmer clients in a regulatory way in regard to this quality control system, as well as in an advisory and supervisory role

That the road along this path has not always been smooth is irrelevant at this stage - there have been some fundamental changes on both sides in reaching where we are today. More recently the deer farming industry has again shown its acceptance of veterinarians in this new symbiotic role with a number of vets involved with the development of the deer industry Quality Assurance Programme. This again displays an acceptance on the part of deer farmers of vet's skills and knowledge in the areas of disease control, production and animal welfare

These changes have been driven by deer farmers and veterinarians on an industry - wide basis. It now behoves us as practitioners servicing individual deer farmer's needs to build on this changed relationship within our own clientele and sell to them services, skills and knowledge pertinent to today's environment and to that which is likely to prevail over the next decade

Deer farming has passed through its boom cycle, and the casual players have now mostly exited the industry. Deer numbers have stabilised among fewer deer farmers, and most deer farmers who remain in the industry have considerable experience in farming deer, and are now concentrating on their core business of producing more venison and velvet. With deer numbers static, quality of deer, real genetic improvement, and efficiency of production are the main issues facing farmers. Aside from this focus the industry has developed quality systems in the areas of processing, transport and production.

In the background to this more productive side of deer farming in which we deal more directly, we have to be cognisant of the market in which the deer industry sells its product, with widespread abhorrence of the practice of velvet removal for profit by the Europeans, and a requirement to reduce TB prevalence to market - accepted levels in all areas within a relatively short time, both of which may be wielded as powerful non-tariff trade barriers by their trading partners and competitors.

From out of this environment, we have never had a better opportunity to cast off our previous principal role as a labour unit for TB testing and velvetting, and establish ourselves as consultants to deer farmers and the deer industry. I use the word "consultant" in the sense of one who is paid for the transfer of knowledge or advice. However, just adopting the title of "consultant" will in no way guarantee the user an income - in fact in the deer industry I suspect it would have the opposite effect!

It will be necessary for deer veterinarians armed with the necessary skills and knowledge to pick up on, and in some cases develop opportunities for offering advice which is of value to his or her deer farmer clients, and then charge for it. We will have to think and act beyond the immediate problem and solution. We will have to be professional in the delivery of these services. Specific opportunities are beyond the scope of this paper but I believe they are many and varied, and fall into these broad categories -

- 1 Reproductive Management
- 2 Genetic Consultancy
- 3 Management for increased and more profitable venison production, and Velvet production
- 4 Disease control, on farm and industry - wide
- 5 Quality systems establishment on farms and quality assurance assessment

Thinking beyond the immediate solution is never better highlighted than in the reproductive area. As an example I had a call from a client some weeks back at the start of the roar who asked what I knew about mating. My immediate thought was to refer him to a different type of doctor, but closer questioning highlighted the core problem was a low weaning %, and he thought it might be a problem with his terminal- sire stags.

A visit was arranged to find out some background information on stag management and mating management (age of stags, weight of stags, stag hind ratios, backups, single-sire/multiple sires,

mob size, paddock size, age distribution of hinds, breed distribution of hinds, condition of hinds at mating, weight of maiden hinds at mating) Base performance figures were collected for empty % (dry/dry), fawns weaned to hinds put to the stag, % fawn deaths at birth and up to weaning and the main reasons for post-natal deaths established

Out of this data - gathering exercise it was established what the most likely problem areas were, and the most important ones to tackle first It is here that the significance of the work that Laurent Audige has done in establishing risk factors and coefficients is apparent, and invaluable for determining where to start Always start with the factors which are easiest to rectify and are going to give you the greatest gains Set targets for first and subsequent years, in the areas you are tackling Out of the data-gathering exercise, it was found some pertinent data wasn't available, so recommendations were made for changes to recording systems and management to allow appropriate records to be collected in subsequent years

Scanning for pregnancy was recommended to establish pregnancy rates, and monitor pre-natal losses Quite often in an acceptable overall empty % of 5% you will find 70% of the herd has a 2-3% empty rate, the yearlings have a 20% empty rate, and perhaps one sire has a 50% empty rate

If that sire with the 50% empty rate is leaving the highest 2 year velvet weight progeny, then there exists further opportunities in genetic consultancy, semen evaluation, AI etc

Quite often poor reproductive performance has a basis in sub-optimal nutrition Lower than acceptable hind condition scores at mating, weaner weights and yearling weights will need to be fully investigated to establish a cause, and set some targets and a plan for improvement

Our practice's consultancies in the dairy arena nearly all started from investigations into poor reproductive performance, and extended into controlled nutrition

Before being able to successfully integrate this type of consultancy into your practice, you will need to develop not only the skills, knowledge and expertise, but you will firstly have to sell the idea to your clients that there are productivity gains to be had in adopting what for many will be much more intensive management, farming and recording practices

Remember that many deer farmers are in the game principally because of the low management and labour inputs required

Tools such as local monitor farms, discussion days with local deer farmer groups and newsletters, all help to establish the feasibility and cost - benefit of your proposals, as well as helping to build up an aura of your expertise in the potential market and build your confidence

During this process you need to be educating farmers, and stimulating in them a desire to not only acquire new skills in pasture production and management and up to date management practices, but also a desire to attain a higher level of productivity It will help a lot if you can show also a higher level of profit

Taking the dairy farming lead again, Ruakura and Massey dairy farms have led the way in challenging the boundaries of the accepted standards in productivity, and in systems to achieve higher outputs. Individual farmers have taken up the challenge from there. Farmer's own natural competitiveness drags the rest along. The deer industry doesn't have a research resource quite like Ruakura, but a little data has come out of Massey and Invermay and a lot of the pastoral research from Ruakura relating to dairying is also applicable to deer farming. The "Deer Farmer" magazine is the deer farmer's equivalent of the "Dairy Exporter" in the transfer of practical information to deer farmers.

Veterinarians are the best vehicles for transferring this information into effective and workable programs for deer farmers. Similarly, other significant areas of opportunity exist in the area of disease control. Deer are naturally hardy and relatively free of major diseases, but pressures from markets and the processing sector will eventually force deer farmers' hands in the areas of TB and Leptospirosis control.

We should be encouraging deer farmers on an industry basis as well as in our local areas, to utilise our undoubted expertise in the area of disease control to help control these two significant diseases.

Already Roger Morris and Roger Marshall have undertaken significant research in these areas to get the ball rolling. It is now in our court waiting to be picked up and turned into market protection, asset protection, and personal health protection for our clients. We even have current legislation in the form of the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Biosecurity Act assisting any efforts we make. The Animal Health Board has pledged greater technical and educational support for farmers at a local level. Who better to deliver this support than veterinarians.

While on the subject of TB control, much has already been done by our branch on the standardisation of TB testing performance. In the same way some farmers brayed at having to pay for assessment and entry into the velvetting scheme, the boot is now on the other foot with a "Quality Assurance" assessment requirement for the standardisation of TB testing. This should be seen as the cost of entry to industry-wide disease control which has wider market repercussions.

Once locked into national disease control, there will be opportunities for some in the area of compliance as auditors, as well as other national disease surveillance which MAF currently has a monopoly on. Barry O'Neil, the CVO has recently indicated much of this type of work may soon come up for contract, but effective quality systems will be a necessary prerequisite for any successful tenderer.

By having a set of auditable standards for TB testing, the potential will exist for veterinary practices to employ certificated lay staff for TB testing. The same could apply for other routine operations such as ultrasound scanning.

Conclusion

The principal thrust of this paper has been to establish that there are plenty of opportunities already present and even more still to be developed in the area broadly described as 'consultancy', in which we work to help farmer clients to achieve their production goals

Consultancy doesn't happen overnight. It may take several years to educate farmers in the benefits of a different way of thinking, and that they will have to invest \$1000 to make \$2000 in this area. To be successful it needs to have the enthusiastic support of farmers - the deer industry will need to keep on a steady roll for that to happen.

The skills necessary to be an effective consultant are both technical and in communication, and are different to those required in a fire-brigade service. These skills have to be acquired and honed outside the farmer - client arena - it is no longer appropriate to "learn along together" with our clients when it is the consultant who has to be the educator.

The veterinary consultant must have the commitment to fully support the service and the farmers using it. This will involve handling the emotional reliance which comes with the consultancy role as well as the knowledge that as a consultant you not only have a say in, but in many cases a controlling interest in the financial security of clients.

The time commitment extends beyond the normal 40 hour working week. Time management is critical to be a successful consultant. Not only do you have to turn up to appointments on time, and schedule forward visits often a month in advance, but reports of work covered and decisions made always have to be written and in the hands of the client within a reasonable time - we say within a week of the visit.

Consultants have to realise that they can only sell their time, skills and knowledge, and being able to charge for all of this input time, about half of which is desk time away from the farm, is essential to the veterinary practice being able to provide a long term commitment to this type of service. The practice as a whole has to realise that an effective consultant needs quality time to perform, and cannot be expected to be interrupted by the inflow of normal routine and emergency work. An understanding and supportive family also helps.

The veterinary profession as a whole, especially on a regional basis, but also nationally, cannot afford to shoot itself in the foot by having some individual vets prepared to undersell or give away these consultancy services on the premise that they will make it up on the sale of a box of staples, a pair of gumboots, or even a drum of drench.

Trevor Walton in his survey of farmers' attitude to vets published in the Deer Farmer Magazine of October 1994 has laid down the gauntlet to vets servicing the deer industry.

We are deer farmers' preferred advisers, and well regarded in this arena, but seen as another casual labour unit available to deer farmers, at a price not much different to the local mechanic.

It is up to each one of us to grow our role in the deer industry, and start taking on the psyche of veterinary consultants, not technicians The programme of this conference is geared toward giving us a start

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY

- 1 Reproductive management
 - 2 Genetic consultancy
 - 3 Management for increased and more profitable venison production
 - 4 Disease control, on farm and industry-wide
 - 5 Quality systems establishment on farms and quality assurance assessment
- * Age of stags
 - * Weight of stags
 - * Stag hind ratios
 - * Backups
 - * Single-sire/multiple sires
 - * Mob size
 - * Paddock size
 - * Age distribution of hinds
 - * Breed distribution of hinds
 - * Condition of hinds at mating
 - * Weight of maiden hinds at mating
 - * Empty % dry/dry
 - * Fawns weaned to hinds put to the stag
 - * % fawn deaths at birth and up to weaning
 - * Main reasons for post-natal deaths

