Background

Under the market led production thread of the deer industry’s Passion2Profit programme sits animal health. Along with feeding, genetics and other technology, animal health has been identified by the Productivity Leadership Group (PLG) as an essential component of improvement that will drive on-farm productivity. For this to occur, the industry must first understand current producer knowledge of important animal health issues that can affect productivity. Once established, the next stage is to increase awareness of important clinical and sub-clinical diseases that could impact on-farm productivity.

The Productivity Improvement Programme, animal health group members have met and discussed critical diseases that can impact profitability. The group identified and categorised a number of core diseases, along with misadventure as key influencers of on-farm productivity. Eight were further refined to focus on during the initial stage of the programme.

Stage one

Research

To establish a snapshot of producer awareness of the above diseases, Cinta Research conducted a phone survey of 150 producers in Southland, Canterbury and Manawatu/Hawkes Bay. The research found that there was a lower awareness of some deer health issues impacting productivity, particularly among deer focussed farms (rather than mixed farming operations). Further, only around 5% of those surveyed used the deer hub to seek advice. Not surprisingly, Johnes Disease has a good recall, which is probably attributed to a focus on Johnes Disease (and particularly the establishment of Johnes Management Ltd (JML) over recent years.

Stage two

Awareness

A second stage to the animal health programme was implemented to achieve the objectives set out by the P2P Business Case (2014) under section 2.2.3, ‘2. Improve producers’ awareness of productivity limiting diseases and animal health conditions”. A small awareness campaign was created and executed over February to April 2015. In order to achieve improved awareness among deer farmers, the campaign targeted a traditional integrated media approach, featuring:

- Rural print advertising
- Direct mail
- Targeted press releases
- On-line banner advertisements (to link in with the Hub).
As the brief was to increase awareness of potential animal health issues (leading to improving profitability), the concept ‘A Clean Bill of Health’ was created as the theme of the campaign. While deer farmers where the primary target for the campaign, it was important to ensure deer veterinarians were included as a key target group. DINZ involved the NZVA, who issued an ‘e-news’ and ran an editorial in Vetscript (supported with print advertising).

**Review**

The timing of the campaign was February to April 2015, which reportedly is a time when deer farmers are starting to consider animal health options for the year ahead. It also fit with PGP approval (and go-early funding) by MPI and achieved a secondary benefit of providing visible action to the funding stakeholders.

As expected, utilisation of Deer Industry NZ (DINZ) levies in a manner that some farmers believe should be a basic understanding that all deer farmers should have, has attracted some negative comments. This negativity has been exacerbated due to unsatisfactory venison prices and dry weather over the campaign period. Anecdotal feedback suggests that farmers may have been seeking DINZ address these issues during this period, rather than running the Clean Bill of Health campaign.

While the campaign has not been measured to date, the fact that it was rigorously discussed at events immediately after its conclusion provides some indication that the small campaign to raise awareness was a success. However it also provides some direction to the next stage if the goal is to encourage farmer engagement to improve productivity through adopting a more proactive approach to animal health.

**Stage three**

**Adoption**

The feedback received on the small awareness campaign should provide a steer into the next stage (‘animal health planning’), which will seek to encourage farmer adoption of animal health plans. Feedback confirms:

- As agreed previously, simply providing an animal health planning tool for veterinarians to use in consultation with deer farmers could be difficult to get uptake following the feedback after the awareness campaign.
- Farmers appear to prefer farmer-to-farmer advice, based on what is working for them and their experience.
- Many veterinarians already have animal health plans with their clients
- Producing financial examples adds to motivating practice change.

There has been very positive feedback on the role that Advance Parties are providing in ensuring a social connection as well as sharing the experience of successful new practices to improve overall on-farm productivity. This confirms the approach taken through using Advance Parties as a means of encouraging practice change. However, to date very few Advance Parties have identified animal health as an explicit project at this point in time.