An update on Advance Parties

RICHARD HILSON
Vet Services (HB) Ltd, PO Box 503, Waipukurau

Back ground: what are Advance Parties?

Advance Parties are a Deer Industry NZ (DINZ) initiative aiming to identify opportunities and implement focussed change on deer farms throughout New Zealand. The groups are funded by DINZ through the P2P (Passion2Profit) programme with its mission of ‘more deer, heavier, earlier and better’. The purpose of an Advance Party is to be a catalyst for change by demonstrating new or different deer farming methods and technologies to inspire change for increased profit.

Motivated deer farmers make up each group and while they learn from each other in identifying opportunity, they also pass on the knowledge and experience to other deer farmers through social contact, local Deer Farmer Association branch activity and wider industry involvement such as field days and publications. By demonstrating the gains and changes they make to the wider deer farming community it is expected that improved adoption of techniques and ideas will occur.

Each Advance Party has a facilitator appointed and the facilitators are paid a set annual fee through DINZ. To get good interaction groups have remained relatively small with maybe eight to nine farms considered a maximum. Staff and partners involved with participating properties are also included so there is potential for member numbers to be considerably higher than the number of deer farms participating.

Advance Parties are a bold industry initiative to effect change on deer farms. Deer farmers are collaborative by nature and want to learn from each other. By relating changes to their own farms it is expected that deer farmers will incorporate many of these changes themselves.

There are currently seventy five farms involved in nine Advance Parties. There are two Advance Parties in the North Island, six in the South Island and one Data Group.

Experience with Advance Parties

I have been facilitating the Hawkes Bay Advance Party (HBAP) for fifteen months and offer the following general comments.

The Advance Party concept has huge potential. It seems to operate somewhere between a one-on-one consultancy and a discussion group. Discussion groups often offer new ideas but there is little compulsion for change. The Advance Party offers the new ideas and fresh perspectives but also creates some compulsion for members.

Small groups lead to good discussion and inclusion of all members.

DINZ provides excellent support. Attendance of DINZ staff and the availability of many experts within the industry provides a plethora of information and opinion.

However, it is worth noting that the focus is on the group itself. The aim is for group-initiated change and not for a procession of experts to address the party at every opportunity.

Communication within the group needs to be driven by the facilitator. Wider communication with other Advance Parties, facilitators and DINZ is also excellent and a website allows all participants access to all documentation, meeting schedules and data.

The biggest issue is possibly ‘spreading the word’. There are a multitude of stories that can be told to the wider deer farming
community after just over a year of operation but for some reason these are not always making frontline media. Groups have been encouraged to tell their stories and it is important that facilitators communicate these.

A story can equally be success or failure – not all changes will work.

There may be some difficulty sourcing enough facilitators with appropriate experience if many more Advance Parties are established. There is definitely an opportunity for veterinarians with a deer background to get involved.

There is little to dislike about the Advance Party concept and delivery thus far.

**The Hawkes Bay Advance Party (HBAP)**

The HBAP has nine member farms totalling about 2655 deer fenced hectares and running about 25,000 deer stock units – these farms are committed to deer farming. Within those deer numbers are 5,800 hinds and 2,100 velvet stags. We have two stud operations, two farms primarily venison focussed and most incorporating increasing numbers of velvet stags.

It is worth noting that about 28,000 sheep and beef stock units are also managed within the group and that deer is not the only aspect for these businesses to concentrate on.

The group did not know each other well at the start, although most knew of other members. Only those who had expressed interest in being part of an early Advance Party were included and none were coerced to join. This is important. At least one member expressed concerns about the concept before the first meeting but was prepared to see how it went.

The outstanding aspect of the HBAP has been the cohesive group that has emerged. All members have input and all opinions matter. Age and time in the industry matter little and it has been noted that there is mutual respect amongst all members, no matter their experience or background. Fathers and sons, husbands and wives, owners and staff have all contributed strongly and on an equal footing.

All farms were visited within the first eight months so members have a good general understanding of the operational issues and layout of the farms. Many changes have occurred as a result of the farm tours when changes to facilities or fences may be suggested.

There are agendas organised for each meeting well in advance and this is organised in conjunction with the farmer involved as areas or concern or weakness are identified for group consideration. Farm maps and full stock numbers and data are included. Minutes are provided back to the participants with all topics covered and an action plan for changes as appropriate. Email is the preferred method for communication and few phone calls are required. As mentioned, all this written material is also copied to the AP website as well.

Significant changes have occurred within the year with the main focus being breeding and practical aspects of deer operations. This is seen as the Advance Party aim being easily fulfilled and change is occurring fast as the farmers learn from each other. Of note several farms are pairing fawns with hinds to improve genetic records and culling...
options, suggestions for management change (such as use of crops) have been adopted
and development of some farms has occurred with fencing and shed design to improve
feeding or management options. A considerable amount of condition score and fetal
aging data was collected from one farm that had a split weaning policy (pre and post rut)
at the behest of the group, to show the distinct benefits of pre-rut weaning.

The HBAP has not used much outside knowledge so far. A respected local agronomist
attended one day when the focus was on cropping and plantain and lucerne in particular
– his input was so valuable that the group wishes to utilise his skills further this year.
Sharon McIntyre from DeerSelect presented a very good genetics summary to all
members to outline the likely gains and increased costs associated with use of full
parentage data for offspring, in either velvet or venison herds. This was also very well
received and needs consideration on a farm by farm basis.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the professional bent of the facilitator, little animal health
discussion has occurred.

Our biggest failing would be not currently focussing on financial aspects but this is
changing as the group, driven by one farmer in particular, now wishes to present basic
financial data for further consideration.

Summary

The Advance Party project is an excellent initiative which is likely to deliver benefits
right across the deer industry. It is well funded and well organised with good levels of
technical and managerial support and it has good support from participating farmers.

The enthusiasm for the way in which the Advance Party concept is working is best
summed up by this comment from a member of the HBAP at one of the early meetings:
‘even if we don’t tell any stories or if this information never makes it into the public
arena, this is going to be well worth it’. While that does not directly help the transfer of
information into the wider deer farming community, the level of involvement suggests it
inevitably will if farmers feel so strongly about the opportunities the concept presents.
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