

Welfare of Farmed Deer in NZ – A Veterinarian's Perspective

AC Campbell*

Abstract

The historic and current state of welfare of New Zealand (NZ) farmed deer is a product of a unique blend of events. The broad areas of influence largely responsible for the welfare of NZ farmed deer are:

- Recent emergence of a Deer Farming Industry over the last 35 years.
- Development of the NZ Veterinary Profession and involvement with the emerging deer industry.
- Attitudes and values of New Zealand society, both urban and rural.

The target level for achievement of welfare for the farming and associated activities of NZ deer must be gold standard. The achievement of welfare for NZ farmed deer has been and is currently very positive. Individual compliance varies between farms and circumstances but there is a process of constant awareness and improvement. The industry has structures in place to ensure continuous improvement and that future welfare issues are handled adequately.

NZ Veterinarians have participated with the deer industry as partners to address welfare issues. Presenting the veterinary perspective has not always been easy. At times it has been extremely unpleasant, demanding and unrewarding due to conflicting and at times uninformed position taking by other sectors of the deer industry. While the profession supports the welfare achievements the NZ deer industry, a survey of veterinary attitudes toward the Deer Industry's welfare issues and programmes has recently been conducted to provide guidance. Key outcomes will be discussed.

Introduction

This paper firstly presents the author's personal views and opinions about welfare of New Zealand farmed deer, and secondly, presents some of the responses to a recent survey of veterinarians regarding welfare issues for New Zealand farmed deer, conducted under the auspices of the Deer Branch of the New Zealand Veterinary Association.

A personal perspective on deer welfare

Defining animal welfare

An animal's welfare has been achieved when the five freedoms have been fulfilled. These relate to provision of food & water, provision of shelter, the opportunity to express normal behaviour, appropriate physical handling and management without fear, stress or distress, and avoidance of or treatment of disease and injury.

The authors' experience is that welfare decisions are frequently extremely complicated, influenced by many factors, and which change with time.

The approach to welfare issues by individuals varies considerably and can include the following:

- Can be perception and not always reality.
- Can be opinion and not always fact.
- Subjectivity over-rides objectivity on occasions.
- Components of welfare status are tradable within the whole.
- A temptation to pragmatically "resolve" welfare decisions with expediency when economics are involved.
- Welfare is not always a precise science to be decided ultimately by proof, as some individuals need.
- Borrowed dogma from other experiences or industries.

Ultimately, one is often left wondering which approach is right?

Factors involved with current welfare standards of NZ deer

The historic and current state of welfare of New Zealand (NZ) farmed deer is a product of a unique set/blend of events. Three broad areas of influence that are largely responsible for the welfare in NZ farmed deer as we know it today, are:

- The emergence of an intensive NZ (& international) deer farming industry over the last 35 years.
- Relatively recent formation of the NZ Veterinary Association deer special interest group, and concurrent involvement with the emerging deer industry.
- Prevailing attitudes and values of New Zealand society, both urban and rural.

Welfare and the NZ deer industry

Scope

Welfare standards are pan-industry. Every sector of the NZ deer industry must and does consider welfare. On-farm practices including environment, nutrition, disease status, and more applied intervention such as velvetting, through to transport and even slaughter have welfare implications.

Process

Welfare for farmed deer must be gold standard. The correlation between welfare and positive production statistics for deer is strong. The input from groups such as the NZVA has resulted in thorough consideration of many issues. The deer industry has historically enjoyed a welfare-orientated leadership, partly as a function of market sensitivities but also as a NZ cultural expression.

Achievement

Welfare of NZ farmed deer has been and is currently at very high standard. NZ has an independent governmental body, the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, "NAWAC", which is charged with coordinating opinion and establishing welfare standards for animals in NZ. These standards are contained within Codes that are supported by NZ law. The deer industry currently has a long established Code for velvetting and is in the process of finalising a Code for deer farming as a whole.

Other sectors of the industry have their own voluntary standards such as the deer transporters code.

* South & Mid Canterbury Vet Service Ltd - Timaru, 41 Grasmere Street, Timaru. Email: ourvet@smcvs.co.nz

Individual compliance

This varies but there is a process of constant awareness and improvement. QA schemes, industry audits, recurrent deer industry news espousing welfare standards and industry supported law enforcement agencies are factors which encourage improvement and compliance with welfare standards.

Future

In the future welfare issues are likely to be handled adequately, based on current activities and systems in place to address welfare.

The veterinary profession and deer welfare

NZ Veterinarians have been actively involved with the deer industry as industry partners to contribute the veterinary perspective to welfare issues. The profession has invariably responded and been involved at key decision-making steps. The NZ veterinary profession must accept that it is the "gatekeeper" for the standard of welfare for NZ deer. This role therefore is a responsible role, where issues must be carefully considered, yet on the other hand not so considered that there is paralysis through analysis. Without veterinary sanction of welfare practices, either actual or proposed, the industry does not have agreement and will not be in a defensible position.

The role of presenting the veterinary perspective has not always been easy. At times it has been extremely unpleasant, demanding and unrewarding due to conflicting and at times uninformed position taking within the profession or by other sectors of the deer industry. However, the profession can rest comfortably with the welfare achievements that the NZ deer industry has made, and its part in those achievements.

Survey of veterinary attitudes to welfare issues for NZ farmed deer

Background

A survey was sent to approximately 700 NZ resident veterinarians who had veterinary interests in deer, cattle, sheep, food safety or agricultural industry in general as a function of their membership of special interest branches of the NZ Veterinary Association.

The purposes of this survey were:

- To provide guidance to the Deer Branch NZVA for present and future direction.
- To provide direction for the up coming review of the Velveting Code.
- To provide input for a general deer farming welfare code currently being developed.

The survey covered the background of the veterinarian's career status, and then went on to canvas opinion on welfare issues relating to velveting and the deer industry in general as separate topics. Recipients were asked to discard the survey if they felt that they were not sufficiently informed about the deer industry.

When attempting to analyse the 92 responses, the nature of the responses demonstrated they were clearly from those informed about the deer industry and motivated, many with strong feelings and beliefs. Veterinarians were invited to make written comments to many of the 30 questions in the survey and most responded in detail.

Survey Results

What % of your workload does Deer comprise?

0%	6%
0-20%	66%
21-40%	18%
41-60%	6%
61-80%	1%
81-100%	1%
100%	2%

What actions must be taken to ensure that the velveting industry is sustainable over the next decade?

34%	Use regulation compliance monitoring
10%	Abandon velveting or make it vet only
8%	Clarify existing markets and break into new markets
3%	Introduce penalties / accountability for non-compliance
5%	Better education for farmers and communication between farmers, vets and MAF
6%	Cost reduction on drugs
5%	Lower standards / raise residue threshold
10%	More research and development on better drugs / less residue or on drug free techniques
19%	No response

What level of compliance do you believe exists among all your deer clients in your area for the removal of spiker antler using a humane approved process?

13%	Not applicable
5%	All clients
32%	High %
36%	Moderate %
12%	Small %
2%	None

If you have contracts with deer farmer clients for velvet removal under the NVSB programme, indicate your assessment as to what % of your contracted clients remove velvet antler in a competent and humane manner throughout the velvet season.

35%	Not Applicable or not completed
24%	All
31%	High %
7%	Moderate %
2%	Small %
1%	None

What significant changes would you like to see made to the National Velveting Standards Body Programme and or the NAWAC Code for Velvet Removal relating to welfare?

10%	Vet only or licenced vet technicians to velvet
10%	No change
1%	Do away with NVSB programme
1%	No rubber rings
3%	Some sedation required
3%	Exclude spiker velvet or stop velveting

- 19% System change:
- 3 Publish non-compliance
 - 4 More and earlier visits
 - 5 Simplify rules or give very detailed guidelines
 - 1 Make velvet rings more obtainable with vet consult
 - 5 Prosecute or remove non-compliers license

53% Not completed

Does the current National Velvet Standards Body provide a balanced and protective standard for the welfare of velvet stags?

- 74% Yes
- 8% No
- 1% Don't know
- 17% Not completed

Please list the reasons that first come to mind as to why NZ's practice of velvet antler removal is defensible.

- 36% Risk of injury to animals & handlers if hard antler allowed to develop
- 41% Can be done humanely with current standards
- 2% Medicinal benefits of velvet
- 2% The practice is not defensible
- 17% Not completed

Apart from Welfare or Residue risks, please list any other current or future/potential areas of risk that could jeopardise the NZ Deer Velvet Industry

- 14% Economic viability
- 7% Poor Hygiene – food safety
- 1% Process too complicated
- 26% Adverse market perceptions
- 8% Disease
- 4% Non-compliance
- 40% Not completed

Are there areas of the velvet removal process that are worthy of further investigation and research with regard to welfare?

- 14% No
- 48% Yes
 - 14 Drug free analgesia
 - 12 Different sedatives and analgesics
 - 11 Post-op pain and stress
 - 1 Operator & animal safety
 - 1 Non NVSB members able to receive local
 - 2 Scheme effectiveness
 - 1 Effects of drugs on food safety
- 38% Not completed

The results listed above are only part of the total survey and preliminary analysis and are raw numerical data. A comprehensive analysis will be carried out and published elsewhere.