

Blazing new deer trails on Sunnyside Station

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BRITTANY PICKETT/FAIRFAX NZ

Monowai farmer Richard Greer at Sunnyside Station.

For Richard Greer changing the systems on his Monowai station has proved to be a game changer. Brittany Pickett reports.

With a view out onto snowcapped mountains and a sparkling lake nearby Sunnyside Station could be a tourist destination, but for Richard Greer it's his office.

When Greer bought the 1200 hectare station at Monowai, near Fiordland National Park, five years ago, he saw it as a store stock farm.

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Red deer at Sunnyside Station, Monowai.

Greer also owns a 600ha property in Happy Valley, and initially did not think of the station as his main farming property.

But over the years, and with the help of the Southland Advance Party that has all changed.

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Red deer at Sunnyside Station, Monowai.

Sunnyside runs deer, ewes and cattle, while at Happy Valley there are sheep, hoggets and fattening cattle.

The first few years at Sunnyside Greer was running 1500 hinds and selling his fawns as store stock - which are sold to other farmers to finish.

With the encouragement of the advance party, a deer industry initiative to improve deer productivity and profits, he decided to give finishing his fawns a go.

The previous farm owners had also sold their fawns as stores and on a reasonably new farm Greer had not wanted to jump in and make too many changes too fast, he says.

But the opportunity to make more money from finishing the fawns was too good to ignore.

"We're finishing all the lambs well so there shouldn't be any reason we won't try our deer."

At an average of 19 kilograms per lamb, Sunnyside was proving itself with its sheep production, but the deer weren't bringing in the level of revenue sought by Greer.

So last year he tried finishing his fawns for the first time.

"That's been the biggest thing, that's made a huge difference to our bottom line."

Greer saw his gross margin rise from \$355,978 to \$530,253 before costs were added.

He dropped hind numbers to 1300 to accommodate the demand for feed and this year he plans to drop it again to 1100 hinds after scanning.

While finishing them off has made a big impact to both the operation of the farm and the bottom line, Sunnyside has also been engaging in trials to improve deer production.

Greer wanted to know what effect the relatively new and hugely popular fodder beet varieties would have on fawns.

To say they flourished would be an understatement in his eyes.

A mob of 600 stag fawns averaged a growth rate of 121 grams per day on fodder beet, compared with 77 grams per day on chow.

"They got shifted every day, that's to make sure they're getting enough protein off the leaf."

They were also provided with baleage on the side to balance their diet.

The new systems at Sunnyside have Greer joining the chorus of farmers praising the production gains from using fodder beet as a feed source.

The "game changer" crop makes it possible for Greer to have all of his stag fawns sent for processing before Christmas, he says.

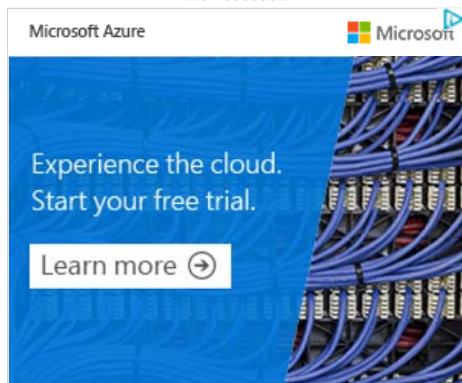
But he wants to find a way to extend how long the fawns can spend on fodder beet before their growth rates slow. At between 60 to 80 they stop putting on as much weight, he says.

"If we could extend it out, it would be nice. That's why we're giving them daily breaks."

He's even thinking of ways to improve the fodder beet for his hinds next year. He wants to know if different fodder beet varieties will have different outcomes.

Greer focussed on beet with a high dry matter this year, but says the hinds struggled because it was too low to the ground for them to graze easily.

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He's also toying with the idea of trying his sheep on it as only cattle and deer have been privy to the fodder beet so far.

Other systems have also changed on the farm. This year Greer has done away with using deer feed pads to reduce wastage.

Instead, the hinds are being fed on fodder beet. The 30ha of paddocks usually reserved for silage, goes to the fawns.

"Not putting it into silage meant we could feed that grass to the fawns and that 30ha was all it took to fatten the stag fawns."

While there has been a lot of insular thinking at Sunnyside Station with a focus on improving production levels in deer, Greer is also thinking about the industry as a whole.

The biggest problem has always been the huge schedule drop once the chilled market closes, he says.

While this year venison prices look steady, his biggest worry is an eventual shortage of supply.

"There's not enough numbers out there. When you over-sell something it's not that easy."

But he says he can't crystal ball gaze about whether the deer industry would have an influx of more stock.

Greer joined the Southland Advance Party at its inception in 2014. The system developed by Deer Industry NZ to help farmers increase the profitability of their farms, has been popular for Southland deer farmers and even includes Landcorp farms.

When Greer joined he didn't have the experience with deer he believed he needed for the station.

"I'd always had deer before but never on a large scale so I just wanted to upskill a wee bit."

Being around deer farmers who are passionate about the industry keeps him motivated, he says.

The inclusion of Landcorp farms is helpful because it is usually a closed book operation, but as part of the advance party they openly share figures with the group, he says.

"It just takes away a bit of the mystery of what's going on with Landcorp."

Being able to compare and contrast and learn from other farm trials keeps Greer thinking about what more he can do on his farm.

Tracking growth rates each year continues to be important.

"By tracking what you're doing it gives you a goal. It gives you something to strive towards."

He still has to finish his hill country development and he's got fodder beet trials to do, but he is always keeping his eye on what's next.

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