

# Data focus for Central North Island Regional Workshop

by Jill Galloway, *Deer Industry News* contributor

Understanding the role and value of data was the subject of a Central North Island P2P Regional Workshop held in Taupo on 13 July. About 30 people attended.

**ATTENDEES WERE ASKED** four main questions:

- What data is important to them, what do they use now and how?
- What data is not important to them?
- What data would they like to use more and what is stopping that?
- How do they compare/analyse how their operation is going?

Attendees brainstormed in groups on the data they most use, such as accurate stock tallies, financials, animal performance (hind conception dates, how replacement yearlings were growing and mating rates) as well as scanning for in-fawn percentages and annual kill weights.

The list grew quickly and was still growing when it came time to move on to the next section of the workshop.

Many already used targets for finishing weights and replacement weights, while schedule levels helped them decide when to sell. DeerPRO reports, performance of progeny (when single-sire mating), use of EID tags, breeding values and feed budgets were all part of the data mix discussed.

Then farmers were asked what data they were *not* interested in.

While no-one wanted “useless information” in relation to their production system, there was not much they didn’t want. Most said all data was valuable.

When asked what data they would like to use more, the group mentioned FarmIQ, individual growth and performance data, product produced per hind, pasture performance, growth rates, parentage and the use of satellite technology to measure pasture covers, particularly in steep country where accurate covers were a challenge to measure.

Most said time and work load stopped them using such information and when it came to parentage testing, cost was a big issue.

The last question was about how farmers compared their properties with other farms (on a national basis). Financial information, DeerPRO data and year-on-year animal performance were cited as examples.

Talking with other farmers “over the fence” about their deer operations was said to be often invaluable, in addition to simply looking at their own data on its own.

Improving velvet quality and quantity year on year or making environmental gains (e.g. deciding to plant 500 trees a year) were cited as good ways to set targets. Target setting based on last year’s performance was an important concept. Picking the right performance indicators to target, that take the farm in the direction the farmers want, was also an important discussion.

Peter Keeling, one of two Perrin Ag consultants helping run



Peter Keeling (left) and Matthew Carroll from Perrin Ag, who ran the Central North Island regional workshop. Photo: Jill Galloway

the workshop, said deer farmers use a whole range of data almost every day, “but there is not a lot of interest in the information that is not relevant to you”.

He said some data that farmers were interested in, such as individual fawn and hind performance, could be quite hard to get, especially on a large-scale property.

Parentage data could generate astronomical gains for a property once kill sheet and velvet production data is linked to individual maternal and paternal sires.

The group recognised that different types of data suited different situations. The things that were important for people starting out in the deer industry or for managers or owners who were not hands-on, could be quite different from the things that experienced people used to manage their operations.

“Common ways of comparing deer operations are through prices received and production per hectare,” Keeling said.

“You can relate this information to your budget. What is required are opening stock numbers, closing stock numbers, stock purchases, sales, births and deaths. You will have all this information; ease of access just depends on your filing system. There is not a great deal of information required to be able to do a year-on-year comparison.”

Perrin Ag consultant Matthew Carroll, who organised the workshop, said the right data can bring really useful detail to your mental picture of your farming operation.

“You want to know if your stag is shooting blanks or not. And you want to know about feed budgeting during mating and pregnancy. Therefore testing and monitoring will let you see if you are achieving your targets.

“An example of the usefulness of knowing the weights of animals can be used when predicting first fawners’ reproductive success. If you are underestimating the liveweight of your mature

hinds then you will potentially not be growing out your first fawners to achieve their full potential.”

He said a better understanding of what weights you should be targeting can be found using the Replacement Hind Conception Calculator on the DINZ website ([deernz.org/replacement-hind-growth-curves](http://deernz.org/replacement-hind-growth-curves)).

“Everyone agreed, regardless of their operation, the more fawns on the ground the better.”

Carroll recommended the Feed Cost Comparer (available online through [www.deernz.org/deerapp](http://www.deernz.org/deerapp)), which checked the dry matter content of each feed and compared costs of many feed types such as barley, palm kernel and maize.

“If you don’t measure it, you can’t monitor it; knowledge is power.”

Solis Norton from DeerPRO also attended the workshop. He said nationwide slaughter data originally collected as part of the Johne’s disease management programme had far more use beyond just Johne’s.

“Our database has slaughter weights and dates, gender and age group, plus the farm of origin for 4.5 million deer. We saw an opportunity to feed benchmarked production information from it back to farmers.”

He said the DeerPRO farm report gave a five-year performance summary for any farm.

“Compare venison production from your farm over the past five years and compare yourself to industry benchmarks. It’s ideal for measuring the impact of management changes you’ve made, or for setting goals for next season.”

Norton said the information was free to farmers on request (email [info@deerpro.org.nz](mailto:info@deerpro.org.nz)).

“One request will put you on our list; we’ll email you an updated report each season. I am conscious of not filling up your inbox with rubbish. We keep the report short but robust. Then it is up to you to use it.”

He said the DeerPRO information was free and would be sent automatically once the request had been made.

“As always, the information is never distributed to another party without your personal consent. We take privacy very seriously.”

He said more than 400 deer farmers, accounting for 60 percent of the deer, receive a DeerPRO report.

Carroll said farmers were already using a lot of data such as animal growth rates and pasture growth, but could use more from DeerPRO.

He said people at the workshop were concerned about the time factor for the use of extra data.



Some of the almost 30 people at the Central North Island regional workshop debating which data they used and what was useful. Photo: Jill Galloway

“Data by itself is one thing, but farmers need the useful information that can be drawn from it,” Norton said. “The DeerPRO report is specific, helpful information for your farm, so why not use it?”

He said people didn’t want what they didn’t need, and what they needed depended on their system.

Carroll said Advance Parties were getting people to start sharing more information, a good thing for the industry.

“The first few meetings we had, people were reserved. But now they know everyone and talk more openly about their businesses. They are not so much challenging others, but talk more about why someone does something.” ■

## Pairing hinds and fawns to identify best genetics

Sharing of more information helped her family set up a deer breeding unit, said Dorothy Young. She and her family have a breeding unit at Kaharoa near Rotorua and a velvetting farm near Taupo.

The velvetting farm was visited by the Central North Island Advance Party, of which the Youngs are members.

Most experienced people rely on their knowledge and some data to run their operation, but newer people to the industry need data to help run their deer units, she said.

Kevin Morley has almost 30 years’ deer farming experience, with Young describing him as the “grandfather of the deer industry”.

She said Morley’s knowledge helped them a lot when they were getting started. “He imparted his knowledge graciously. We wouldn’t be where we are without his help.”

Morley pairs fawns and their mothers so he can identify the dams of the best velvetting deer. To do this he gets about five fawns in the shed, separated from the hinds, and marks each.

“I keep the fawns in the shed for at least four hours. Mum is outside calling, as she is full of milk. That’s how I know.”

After that he watches each hind and fawn get together using a good “\$2000 to \$3000” pair of binoculars. The technique is about 95 percent accurate, he says.

“I have followed the offspring of hinds and done thousands this way. There were perhaps 15 that had the goodies [that bred stags with good quality and quantity of velvet].”

Morley said antler is a highly heritable trait, and while the older hinds might have gone, their daughters continued producing stags with good velvet.

“By the time I know she can [keep producing superior velvetting stags], the hind might be 10 years old, but her daughters carry the same genes.”

## Central North Island Advance Party fact file

- First meeting: 17 August 2016
- Number of farms: 9
- Meeting frequency: Aim for every two months
- Range of deer farm sizes: From 130 hectares to more than 3,700 hectares deer fenced
- Production systems: breeders, breeder/finshers and breeder/velvetters
- Aims: Look more in-depth at farm systems and financial drivers for businesses