Strength through diversity for Mid Canterbury AP

You would think a high country deer breeding operation wouldn’t have a lot to learn from an intensive fully irrigated, lowland finishing farm, or vice versa. But you’d be wrong. Deer Industry News Editor Phil Stewart joined a Passion2Profit Regional Workshop at the Ashburton property of David and Hilary Ward on 13 July, and found an Advance Party that’s energised by the diversity of its farms.

ABOUT 30 PEOPLE attended a rewarding day, which was put on in association with Canterbury West Coast DFA. Several members of the Mid Canterbury Venison Advance Party – facilitated by Lorna Humm – shared what they have got out of being in the group. And it turns out to be plenty.

A common theme was that you can learn more from looking at a deer operation that contrasts with your own, than if you were part of a homogenous group of very similar farm systems. For one thing, it gives those who exclusively breed or finish a much better insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by the person at the other end of the business relationship.

David Ward, Radfield Farm: Flying into winter

The Wards have been finishing deer for the past 20 years. The intensive, flat, fully irrigated 384 hectare farm is at Fairton, just outside Ashburton. They have two full-time and one part-time staff and do all of their own farm work except fertiliser spreading.

A “typical” deer farm, this is not. But a profitable operation it is, and it was an eye opener for visitors to see how well deer finishing can fit in with other intensive land uses. The property finishes about 6,000 lambs a year and grows commercial vegetable and grass seed crops. This year they are finishing about 950 weaner deer supplied by Canterbury breeders with whom they have a solid, long-term relationship. David said those relationships have been built up over years and each party understands the give and take that can be needed – for example in a drought year when the breeder needs to quit the weaners early.

In the first paddock we visited, weaners were filling up on pea vine silage fed out onto a ryegrass pasture. The paddock was due to be drilled with process peas in late August, for harvest in early January next year. That crop will be followed by Asset ryegrass grown for seed, but the new grass will be available for the 2019 crop of weaners to graze when they arrive in March, right through to October. At that stage the weaners make their journey to the works and the paddock is shut up for seed production. The seed will be harvested in February 2020 and then the paddock will be ready for the next crop of weaners. And so the cycle continues – this all fits in well with the weaner growth curves, Ward explained. He added that following the nitrogen-fixing peas with ryegrass works well, with weaners coming onto “rocket fuel” covers of about 2,500 kgDM/ha. “Boy can they eat!”

He’s not too worried about achieving super-high growth rates through the coldest months because he’s able to give the weaners a flying start through autumn. A lot of that is down to good health and good feeding. In addition to good pastures and supplement, the Wards also have access to plenty of reject red beet, onion and squash, which the weaners hoover up.

From August, the weaners are regularly weighed and fed accordingly.

“A key change – one that’s come about through the input from other Advance Party members – has been managing the transition for weaners from breeding property to finishing farm.”

But a key change – one that’s come about through the input from other Advance Party members – has been managing the transition for weaners from breeding property to finishing farm. Lorna Humm explained that the members recommended simplifying the system so that weaners are less stressed by the move and can make a better start. That has meant starting the animal health programme earlier, with the breeder paying for and giving the weaners their first Yersinavax shot and drench (Eweguard, a moxidectin with 5-in-1 vaccine on board, plus combination oral drench) before they are trucked to the Wards.

While it does mean they are technically being drenched onto clean pasture – not ideal because this doesn’t help provide refugia
to avoid resistance – the reduction in stress makes a big positive difference to autumn growth rates. David said they don't need to get the weaners in until 28 days after they arrive, when they get their second Yersiniavax shot and a second drench with the same combination. (Later they change to a triple combination drench before switching to a white drench closer to spring so that withholding periods are complied with.)

The Wards direct drill in most cases, with cultivation being used only for crops like spinach and radish seeds, which need it. David said they need only about 2.5 litres of Roundup and a pre-emergence spray with the direct drilling. With high organic matter and good soil structure the Lismore and Eyre stoney silt loams are not so prone to pugging by the deer through winter.

Mike Galbraith, Lilongwe Farm

This is also a finishing farm, with weaners supplied from Mendip Hills in North Canterbury. The Black family owns both Mendip Hills and Lilongwe Farm.

Mike said one challenge as a finisher was the drawn-out supply of weaners from Mendip. The first musters were arriving in February and included a range in weights with later-born fawns posing a challenge. The stragglers are not trucked down until July. He said that in contrast with the setup at Radfield, the weaners from Mendip get a fairly tough introduction to life as a finisher. They are mustered by helicopter for their first and only visit to the Mendip shed. There they are tagged, given Yersiniavax and put on the truck for a four-hour journey to the finishing property. "It's a big ask," Mike admitted.

Once they arrive life gets better fast, however. They start on lucerne, putting on 335g/day before moving to fodder beet and ad lib lucerne baleage for the winter. Mike said they have lost only two or three out of 1,000 weaners this year. “They're looking good – bouncing around in the evenings now.”

Lorna Humm said the Advance Party group visited Mendip and worked with the manager Simon Lee on ways to get weaners off the property earlier. “They are now weaning earlier to get hind replacement hinds and getting them up to optimum weights faster so they conceive earlier.”

She said the Advance Party as a group had been able to work constructively with both Mike and Mendip Hills to iron out some of the supply issues. Mike has also changed his drench programme, also now using an injectable moxidectin for the weaners.

Lindsay Paton, Orari Station

Lindsay moved farms and Advance Parties two and a half years ago when he migrated from the Mackenzie country to Canterbury’s high country Orari Station as manager.

He said the strength of the Mid-Canterbury Advance Party is its honest discussion and willingness to share and take up new ideas. “[The ideas] don't all work, but a lot do.”

At Orari, the Advance Party members suggested simplifying the breeding, finishing and velvet operation by not trying to run half of first-fawners with a terminal sire. He said about 400 replacement hinds join the 1,550-strong herd each year. It’s an extensive system with hinds handled only twice a year (weaning and scanning).

About half the R2 replacement hinds were being mated to a terminal sire and the balance to maternals, but raising the bigger fawn had taken it out of them and only 50–60 percent of those mated to terminal sires were getting in fawn the following year. By putting all of the first fawns in the maternal mob, the in-fawn rate for second fawners jumped to the mid-90s.

Lorna Humm said the owners at Orari Station were very supportive and receptive to the input from the Advance Party.

John Bartholemew, Ruapuna

John runs elk/wapiti. They had been running about 100 cows but it wasn’t a particularly profitable operation (they also graze dairy heifers). Swinging the focus to breeding for velvet and building a velvetting herd has turned things around, however.

John said the group provides excellent networking and he's constantly surprised by how much he is absorbing and taking home to try on his property. One practical outcome has been some advice from the group on the layout of a new set of yards, he said.

Aubrey Aitken, Cairnhollow

Aubrey has been deer farming 28 years and shifted from Southland to Canterbury 13 years ago, running 200 hinds on a newly irrigated property at Ruapuna with son Lawrence. He says he is probably one of the few deer breeder/finishers on the Canterbury Plains now. “We didn’t buy in any weaners this year – they were too expensive.” (Lorna Humm noted that the fairly stable schedule now. “We didn’t buy in any weaners this year – they were too expensive.”) (Lorna Humm noted that the fairly stable schedule might relieve the supply pressure, with breeders more willing to release weaners to finishers rather than trying to finish everything themselves.)

He remains confident though, and sees good value in the Advance Party. “Gee it’s great group! I though we had everything sorted out but [with the input of the group] we’ve made changes to things like drenches, copper, genetics and using Advantage feeders – they’ve all made a big difference.”

Aubrey said that even on an intensive, irrigated Canterbury property, deer are now almost level pegging with other stock classes at the current schedule and he is hoping to increase his breeding herd.

continued on page 24
**Mid Canterbury: continued**

**Why Yersiniavax?**

Vaccination to protect against yersiniosis is commonly used by members of this Advance Party. When questioned about why they would spend the extra every year, they were adamant about the value.

David Ward said that in an intensive system, if a problem develops you will quickly see “a lot of dead deer”. He prefers to manage the risk properly by feeding his animals well and vaccinating. It usually takes only one bad experience to ram the lesson home and in David’s case, this happened about 15 years ago. “We had a mob of stressed weaners. They got their first vaccine shot but not their second. In June we lost about $5. I never want to go there again. The risk is always there – the vaccine reduces that risk.”

He said the total animal health bill, including the second Yersiniavax (the breeders pay for the first shot) is about $18/head. “That is not excessive. If I can get them up to heavier weights and 2 or 3 weeks earlier, it’s a cheap investment. Getting them away for slaughter earlier is also important to fit in with our cropping programme.”

Mike Galbraith is also cautious and vaccinates every year. “Back in the 1980s you’d see truckloads of dead deer [from yersiniosis outbreaks]. We’ve been using the vaccine since it came out.” He said the vaccine reduces, but doesn’t completely eliminate, the risk. “We lost some last year because the weaners were too stressed and thin when we vaccinated – but we won’t stop vaccinating.”

Duncan Humm said a yersiniosis storm in a herd was a reflection on your own management. “Why take the risk?”

Tom Macfarlane said you can’t control things like the weather, but you can control other risk factors like feeding and shelter. He had also lost vaccinated bought-in weaners to yersiniosis, but like the others, put that down to the animals being stressed and light – another illustration of why managing this disease risk is down to much more than just the vaccine.

Lorna Humm noted that the organism that causes the disease is always present in the animal’s gut but when the animal is stressed and stops eating, the bug quickly grows out of control, causing dehydration and death. “Older, fitter, unstressed and better fed animals can resist infection better.”

**Workshop session**

Consultant and Advance Party facilitator Wayne Allan ran a workshop focused on setting measurable and achievable targets, using a cycle of continuous improvement to get there.

He said targets needed to focus on things that make a difference and provide a significant potential benefit. To set targets you need to know where you are now, which will involve some measurement (e.g. weights or pasture covers at key times), he explained.

Once targets had been identified, you can identify the steps needed to get there and put things in place to get started. Wayne said lead indicators such as profit per stock unit or per hectare, income: expenditure ratios or carcass weights per hectare would need to be monitored to track progress.

He recommended a “cycle of continuous improvement”, which allows some flexibility to monitor progress and adjust a plan along the way so any issues can be managed.

A simple example for a finisher’s target was a lift in carcass weights by $5kg over 3 years, with weaning weights or weights on 1 June, acting as lead indicators, he said.

Wayne noted that there were big differences between high-cost and low-cost farm systems. “It’s important not to get caught in the middle.”

Working groups identified key drivers for velvetting, breeding and finishing systems. They identified key drivers for their areas and individuals thought about opportunities within their own farm business. Finally they looked at actions they might take to meet targets and what indicators they would use.

**Velvet**

- Get genetics and nutrition for replacement stags up to speed quickly so that true performance potential can be identified early.
- Quantify your objectives, e.g. $/head, kg/head, grading percentages (e.g. 80 percent of spiker velvet graded Spiker 1).
- Link observed outcomes to inputs such as nutrition.
- Decide what to feed and when.
- Velvetting stags do better if they are fed well all year.
- Consider stocking rate: sometimes lowering this can actually result in an overall increase in velvet production per hectare.
- Use the advice of others (e.g. other Advance Party members) to help identify weaknesses in your system.

**Finishing**

- Feed quality (or lack of) is the biggest influence on success.
- Consider short rotation ryegrasses, plantain, clovers, etc.
- Transition fawns to new feeds well before weaning (e.g. 2–3 weeks).
- Talk to your breeders about the genetics you want to suit your system best.
- Fewer, bigger animals can be more productive and profitable than a lot of smaller ones. It’s easier to put more weight on a larger animal from the start.
- Keep animal health front of mind and keep up with developments in things like drenches and withholding periods.
- Farm systems will vary, but at present with a flatter, high schedule, there is more flexibility and less pressure to catch the traditional “spring peak”.

**Vaccine reduces yersiniosis risk.**

*Image of deer.*
Breeders (and breeder/finishers)

- Key targets include fawning percentage, weaning weights, conception rates in R2 hinds, conception dates and growth rates
- Weaning weight is a big target for breeders: don’t over-reach goals, e.g., aim for a 6kg improvement, but spread over several years.
- Break it down to key actions, e.g. novel forages, more red clover to improve hind lactation, more weighing.

Environment Award

David and Hilary Ward were formally presented with the 2017 Gallagher Technology and Innovation Award at the workshop. The award is for excellent utilisation of farming technologies to improve on farm productivity and manage resources.

NZ Landcare Trust’s Janet Gregory said the judges were impressed by the Wards’ no-tillage system, excellent knowledge of their soils, steps to improve moisture retention, native plantings and appreciation of the local natural environment.

David Ward said the whole industry is innovative and after 20 years he still loves being involved.

- Venison for the after-workshop barbecue was kindly supplied by Alliance Group Ltd.

Hilary and David Ward receive the Gallagher Technology and Innovation Award from judges Lindsay Fung, DINZ Environmental Stewardship Manager (left) and Janet Gregory, NZ Landcare Trust (right).