

ANIMAL WELFARE AND DEERQA

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Quality is an essential element of the New Zealand deer industry's approach and philosophy. To the deer industry, quality includes animal welfare, animal health, food safety, identification and traceability and environmental issues.

National Velveting Standards Body and Welfare Projects

The National Velveting Standards Body (NVS) devetvetting programme completed its 16th year of existence. Over this period, the programme has undergone continued improvement with changes implemented to strengthen and enhance the process of velvet removal.

The NVS programme continues to be a joint venture between veterinarians and deer farmers to underpin the Code of Welfare for the removal of velvet antler and latterly, the Animal Welfare Act 1999.

It was always recognised that total compliance to the programme by all constituents would take time and this has shown to be true over the years. However, with the new initiatives undertaken within the industry in recent times, the level of compliance has improved markedly. Once again, the past season's audit results showed an increase in compliance over the previous season, indicating the deer industry is nearing its goal of total compliance.

Without doubt, the majority of deer farmers who velvet their own deer in New Zealand do so in a professional manner, observing the correct procedures and ensuring the welfare of their

animals during the process. They are undoubtedly proud of their achievements and pride themselves on the way they are able to humanely remove their own velvet.

By comparison, the number of non-compliant people who attempted to remove their own velvet is relatively small and getting smaller, as industry initiatives are able to identify when this occurs and steps are taken to gather these people into the NVS programme, or at least ensure that a veterinarian is engaged to remove the velvet.

These small numbers of non-compliant people jeopardise the reputation of the whole deer industry.

The joint venture surveillance programme working in conjunction with the New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA) and the MAF Enforcement Directorate (MAFED) was very successful, in that a small number of people were identified as being non-compliant during the 2008/09 velvet season. Some of those identified were given educational guidance, while some were issued with legal warnings to comply. Because of the success and impact of the surveillance programme, it has been extended to encompass the 2009/10 velvet season.

Once again, all consignments of deer being sent to processing plants are being identified and those with animals that have been velvettted are being



tracked back to their suppliers for confirmation of who and how the velvet was removed.

It is vital for our industry to maintain its privileged position and its hard-won right to velvet its own deer. It would be sad to lose this position because of the actions of just a small number of individuals.

The number of registered certified velvetters at the end of the 2008/09 velvet season was 1,020. The number in abeyance was 201 and the number of new entrants into the programme during the season was 145.

Because of changes to the Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines Act (ACVM), the National Velvetting Standards Body Code of Practice for the Use of Prescription Animal Remedies will cease to exist from October 2010.

To ensure the continued smooth operation of the NVSB programme, the industry is working with the New Zealand Veterinary Association and the New Zealand Veterinary Council.

The requirement for humane velvet removal is clearly stated within the Animal Welfare Act.

However it is proposed that the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) will include a section on velvet removal in the Code of Welfare for Painful Procedures. This section would state that velvetting must only be performed with analgesia (pain relief). If velvet was removed without analgesia it would be an offence under the Animal Welfare Act. The status of velvet removal being a controlled surgical procedure will not change.

The Code of Practice will be reviewed jointly by all parties, in order that it can be converted into an industry guideline and continue to encourage farmers and veterinarians to operate within the current NVSB programme. It is also envisaged that the industry guideline could be used as a guideline pursuant to the Veterinarians Code of Professional Conduct.

Transport QA

The NAWAC draft *Transport within New Zealand Code of Welfare* (the Code) was awaiting approval from the Minister of Agriculture at year-end. The Code will set outcome-based standards for all

animals being transported. The current DeerQA Transport Quality Assurance Programme will be enhanced by the production of the Code. It is not expected that any of the current standards within the DeerQA programme will need to change to meet any requirements from the Code.

The Transport DeerQA committee (made up of current transport operators) decided to change the training criteria for accredited transport companies and certified drivers within the programme during the period. In the past, it was a requirement that all drivers and dispatchers attend the industry training course once only to become certified to the programme. The new requirement is that dispatchers will need to attend a refresher (more condensed) course every three years and for drivers to attend every five years to maintain accreditation.

Statistics provided by the New Zealand Food Safety Authority for deer mortality and injuries during transport to processing premises, including lairage and emergency slaughter, showed similar percentage results to that of previous years. While the percentage figures were very small against the

total number of animals transported, any deaths are an issue of concern for the industry and steps must be taken to eliminate avoidable instances of this occurring.

Sixty-five transport companies were re-audited and accreditation reconfirmed to the Transport DeerQA programme during the year. This audit system is ongoing for all transport companies carrying deer to licensed slaughter plants and is valid for three years.