

Southland Elk/Wapiti Regional Workshop

by Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* Editor

About 60 people gathered at Murray and Bev Hagen's Connemara Wapiti near Manapouri on 11 October for a P2P Regional Workshop. The day was also sponsored by BNZ and Duncan New Zealand and was coordinated by Andrew Roe, facilitator of the Southland Elk/Wapiti Advance Party.



Murray Hagen (right, with microphone) and Jim Cameron (centre, checked shirt), explain the advantages of using feed pads at Connemara.

THE HAGENS STARTED deer farming in the 1980s and moved to their current property 18 years ago, converting the run-down sheep and beef operation to deer. After this they took up the opportunity to buy an existing Wapiti stud in 2005. They sold bulls by private treaty until 2011, when Jim and Jacinta Cameron came to work for the Hagens and advance the stud. The stud's first one-day sale seven years ago was "quite successful" and they have been building on that ever since.

Murray said he has always been interested in innovation and puts his money where his mouth is, joining Deer Select and then the Elk/Wapiti Advance Party. One of Connemara's bulls tops the Deer Select Elk/Wapiti tables on 12-month weights and Terminal index. Three years ago the Hagens and Jim Cameron won the Gallagher Technology and Innovation Award as part of the Deer Farmers' Environmental Awards. The judges at the time commended Connemara as an "extremely tidy operation ... managed by a passionate team who are willing to adopt new technologies and give things a go".

On the farm tour during the workshop Murray and Jim spoke at length about their wintering systems and use of feed pads. These are carefully managed to control any leachate and keep it well clear of the nearby Waiau River. In fact they have moved away from short-chop silage in favour of baleage – both grass and lucerne – which also manages the environmental risk.

Murray explained that the second and third calvers had been struggling on silage during winter, but are doing much better on baleage. He said there is less waste with baleage than there had been with silage, and the per-head wintering costs on baleage were

nearly \$8 less. He said they make their own baleage and have more flexibility about timing. Making pasture silage had also required a lot of land to be closed up.

The baleage is tested, with the best-quality being given to the stock classes that will benefit the most. Feed analysis figures shared by Murray bore out the contrast between silage and baleage: Crude protein for the silage was 9.9% compared with 12.0% for pasture baleage. ME for the silage was just 8.8 compared with 10.3 for the baleage – even some baleage made from seven-year-old pasture still had an ME of over 10.

Jim said the cows feed quietly on the baleage over winter, with only a handful going to grab a bite at any one time. "They'll take a mouthful and then wander off to finish it while the rest of the mob sun themselves. There's not any stress or competition."

They take three cuts a year off the lucerne for baleage and also graze it down hard with 2-year-old bulls. They are completely sold on lucerne which, for them, works better than supplements such as nuts. It's especially good for quickly getting condition on in autumn and spring.

As well as the baleage, swedes, kale and rape are grown. Strategic use of deer nuts, at a cost of \$38 per head, generates a 50–100% return on investment.



Lucerne is well liked. This stand is now in its 12th season.

Table 1: Connemara Wapiti farm data.

Effective area	300ha (280ha deer fenced)
Stock units wintered	5,073 (18SU/ha)
Mixed age (MA) cows	720
R2 cows	100
Cows culled/sold	70
R2 velvet bulls	80
R3 velvet bulls	70
MA velvet bulls	200
Breeding bulls	22
Bulls sold as sires	40+
Bulls culled	40
Weaners reared (incl. about 300 bought in)	1,000
R1 deer slaughtered	800
Average weaner weight (stud)	77kg
Average weaner weight (commercial)	74kg
Average carcass weight (ave. age 340 days)	66kg (M), 63kg (F)
Average MA cow liveweight	170kg

The pasture mix includes Sextet, a multi-stage ryegrass, with red and white clover.

Connemara is a mixed venison and velvet operation, also selling sires each year (see Table 1). Murray is a strong supporter of Deer Select (his 300 stud cows are on the programme) and makes good use of the estimated breeding values to help highlight the most meritorious sires. He focuses especially on 12 month weight, eye muscle area and the Terminal index.

Reproductive performance is strong. First calvers this year scanned 80%, but the rest of the cows ranged from 92% (second calvers and mixed age stud AI), up to 97% (mixed age naturally mated stud herd). First calvers are joined with top BV spikers by 15 February with the rest of the sires going out with the other cows on 1 March. All sires come out on 25 April.

Genetic selection has seen velvet weights steadily ticking upwards, with average 2-year-old weights lifting by 1.25kg over the past five years. Total harvest for 2016/17 was 2.2 tonnes.



Jim Cameron demonstrates feeding out baleage directly into a feed rack.

About 1,000 weaners a year are raised, including 300 bought-in. The weaners are put onto crops in June, with lucerne baleage used to help boost growth during autumn and early spring. The first drafts at 130kg liveweight are away by 1 October and the last by 10 January. About 100 stag weaners are taken through to 135kg with about 300g of spiker velvet taken off.

High growth sires = more profit

Deer Select Manager **Sharon McIntyre** spoke to workshop visitors about choosing terminal sires and what criteria were important. She said that while buyers had a good eye for visible attributes such as size, muscling and temperament, some of the attributes that make you money aren't apparent when looking at a two- or three-year-old terminal sire.



Connemara wapiti Deer Select cows finishing on rape.

Connemara Wapiti

VENISON VELVET TEMPERAMENT

7th ANNUAL SIRE BULL AUCTION

Sunday 14th January 2018 at 2.00pm

Welcome for inspection from 1.00pm

On the property at MI & BM Hagen

415 Weir Road, Manapouri

On offer: Approx 30 NZ & Fiordland Wap x bulls

Enquiries: Murray Hagen 021 220 7889

Jim Cameron 021 220 7871

Auctioneers: Craig North 027 473 0864

(Rural Livestock) Adam Whaanga 027 418 3438

See flyer with BVs inserted in this Deer Industry News

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Elk-Wap workshop: continued



Connemara commercial cows.

“It’s what their progeny will be doing when you are killing them at 10–12 months that counts – not what they look like as a three-year-old. The breeding values will tell you what those sires were like at that younger age.”

She said most buyers wanted good traits for growth rate, carcass yield, eye muscle area and so on. While companies weren’t rewarding farmers directly for those as yet, there was scope for being prepared to take advantage. “Breeding is a slow game, so we want to be ahead of the game when [financial reward for these traits] comes.”

Looking at Deer Select breeding values (BVs), Sharon said the W12 Deer Select BV covered liveweight and carcass weight. If you were also after good yield, the eye muscle area (EMA) or lean yield (LEANY) BVs came into play. “But if you are interested in both growth rates and yields, we’ve turned these into a Terminal index that gives the value in terms of dollars per hind mated,” she explained.

But do these numbers really translate into dollars and cents? They certainly do, and Sharon showed how this works with the “real world” performance of four wapiti sires that all looked

similar but had varying BVs for weight at 10 months (see Figure 1). The sires were part of the Deer Progeny Test programme and all birth and slaughter dates were the same.

4 Wapiti Sires – look similar

Sires	Prediction	Actual W10	\$/Head
1	+9.7kg	123kg	\$632
2	+4.2kg	118kg	\$605
3	+11.4kg	124kg	\$639
4	+16kg	128kg	\$659

Figure 1: Differences predicted by BVs and actual performance in kg and dollar terms for four sires.

The BVs for the four sires predicted a difference of 11.8kg between the best and worst of them. The actual difference was 10kg, not far off. And the difference in dollar terms was an impressive \$54 a head. “They were killed in mid-October, so there was the potential to take these progeny through to heavier weights. When you consider that \$54 advantage was per animal, that adds up to quite a bit when you multiply it by 30 or 40 progeny.”

Sharon said breeders often put quite a few measurements into sale catalogues, such as liveweights, EMA and so on, but she warned that this information wasn’t corrected for birth date. EMA was not much use as raw data. “A big animal will have a bigger EMA than a small animal. But what’s important is whether that EMA is above or below average for an animal of that size. That’s what a BV can do and it shows how BVs add accuracy to what you are looking at.”

Elk & Wapiti Society velvet and hard antler competition

A VIDEO SALE of elite bulls and cows is a new addition to the Elk & Wapiti Society’s annual velvet and hard antler competition on 27 January 2018.

The initiative is a way of showcasing, in a central location, society members’ top elk and wapiti genetics, says EWS president Paul Waller.

“We hope it will attract some attention. We’ve already had significant interest and see it as something new and different.”

In another change, the competition is being held in south Canterbury at the Morgan family’s Raincliff station rather than at Wanaka. The event will include a farm tour, a BBQ lunch generously provided by Mountain River Venison, and clay target shooting. The PGG Wrightson video sale planned for mid-afternoon will precede the velvet viewing. The prize-giving, a spit-roast BBQ dinner and auction will be held at the nearby scout camp where accommodation is available.

“After last year’s formal 30th anniversary celebrations, we’ve decided to keep this year’s competition more informal and think the new location will be ideal,” Paul says.

For more information about the event and the video sale contact Paul Waller: 027 292 4424; pwallerelk@gmail.com ■



Elk & Wapiti Society President, Paul Waller: Significant interest in new format event.

Elk-Wap workshop: continued

Advance Party projects

Second calver pregnancy rates

John Hamilton, who runs an integrated sheep and deer operation at Winton, described work done to get better pregnancy rates in second calvers. They have a breeding herd of 310 mixed age hybrid hinds and 60 first calvers.

First, second and third calvers are mated separately in single sire mobs, with sires removed in the first week of May. They scan the mixed age hinds twice.

In the past couple of years they have worked hard to get condition back onto the hinds in time for mating and this has been rewarded. They've achieved good conception rates with relatively few lates compared with the national average and their own performance in earlier years.

Part of the strategy with the second calvers, which need to recover quickly after raising their first calf, has been to start supplementing with barley in January and drench them in February. This year the second calvers matched the mixed age hinds, both groups conceiving more than 90 percent early, with only about 2 percent dry.

A cost benefit analysis on the barley fed to the second calvers showed that every \$1 spent returned about \$3.40 in additional and earlier-born calves. Specific management measures to support the improved performance included:

- culling hinds that had lost a pregnancy
- set stocking early-calving hinds and rotating from the second week of December to improve access to better feed
- optimising pasture quality for lactating hinds
- better utilising late spring pasture.

Poor baleage affects pedicle development

Dave Lawrence described an experience in his own herd that graphically illustrated why good genetics is only part of the equation – you need to give the right quality tucker to reap the benefits.

He houses weaner males indoors over winter and the poor performance of the 2014-born cohort as velvet producers piqued his curiosity. Why had these animals done so poorly when those born a year earlier and a year later had done much better?

What it came down to, Lawrence discovered, was the impact of a particularly bad batch of baleage. The crude protein level, he later found, was 9.4 percent, about half the norm for baleage used in winter, and well short of what was needed to initiate pedicle development. The metabolisable energy of the baleage was only 8.3 megajoules/kg dry matter, below the 9–12 ME range considered necessary for growth over winter.

As a result of the poor feed, this otherwise genetically well-endowed mob grew at only 70g/day over winter compared with the norm of at least 200g/day. In addition, their spiker velvet was, on average, 230g lighter than that of their 2013 and 2015-born herd mates. This poor start flowed through to the following year, when the 2-year-old velvet weight for this group was 1.4kg less than the average for this age on the farm.

Dave said the offending baleage “looked and smelled okay”, but clearly fell short of what it should be. “We now test baleage before

we buy it,” he said. Weighing regularly through winter could also help pinpoint feeding or health issues early, he added.

Reducing calf losses

Geoff and Sam Pullar run wapiti at Littlebourne Farm, Winton. Geoff said they were losing a lot of later-born calves to cryptosporidium. A major risk factor was the young animals drinking from stagnant puddles, a breeding ground for the parasite. Earlier-born animals were not so exposed to these conditions, which develop in summer.

Geoff described several management changes that have helped them get on top of the problem:

- reduced stocking density for calving mobs
- earlier scanning to allow fetal ageing so late calvers can be managed in their own mob
- no longer taking a cut of baleage off part of each calving paddock (less stress, more cover, better feed)
- improved and completed water scheme so calves are less likely to drink from puddles.

Geoff said they now lose only two or three calves each season – much better than the 20–30 they had been losing in the worst years.

Farmers helping farmers

Dave and Jackie Stodart have two farms, a finishing, vetting and sheep block at Te Anau and a cattle and deer breeding property at Dunrobin. Andrew Roe presented on their behalf.

He said the Stodarts wanted to improve reproductive performance, growth rates in young stock and velvet production. They had picked up a range of ideas from others in the Advance Party, showing yet again what a great vehicle for practice change these groups are. Changes included:

- mating a greater proportion of their hinds to terminal sires while cutting down overall hind numbers to allow for the extra feed required
- bringing weaning forward by 10 days
- weighing young stock more frequently
- break feeding weaners on winter crop rather than block grazing
- reducing target slaughter weights from 100kg to 95kg to ensure all yearlings were killed by the end of March
- increasing the cut-off weight for retention of 2-year-old velvetting stags from 2.5 to 2.8kg.

Andrew said the Stodarts had improved scanning percentages for first calvers from 83 to 88 percent over the past two years. Weaner growth rates had also improved. While carcass weights had dropped by 1.5kg to 53.5kg this year, that was more than offset by having got 37 percent killed by Christmas (21 percent last year), and all killed by the end of March (10 percent left last season). At the same time, less feed was required for the deer, making more available for other stock classes.

Two other farm reports from this workshop have been covered in previous issues of *Deer Industry News*:

- Economic benefits of delaying kill date: *Deer Industry News*, August/September 2016, page 16
- Benefits of leptospirosis vaccination: *Deer Industry News*, June/July 2017, page 16. ■