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# 1. VENISON GRADING AND CLASSIFICATION

[By Sarah Mitchell. Reprinted from *Deer Farming, Journal of the British Deer Farmers Association, Winter 2002*]

Venison production is a growing industry. Many deer farmers are producing a wide range of carcass weights and conformation. Most of the farmers producing poor meat animals are unaware of the improvements available to them, or how to measure and achieve their goals.

In a consumer-driven industry, production systems must be adjusted continuously to meet customer demands. Although processors are aware that some carcasses yield more beneficial returns than others, they are unsure of the message they should be sending back to the producer as to the type of animal that should be raised.

Due to the variation of carcasses in the UK, there is a need for some form of carcass classification (grading) system which will ensure specified animals are purchased. In the long term, information can be relayed to the producer on the type of animal to produce in order to meet the specified market.

Before formulating a suitable classification system for deer, knowledge of deer production for meat is essential, along with an understanding of current classifications in use in other places. Some current classification techniques for traditional livestock may be employed to formulate new and innovative ideas on how to set up a new system.

The aim of any deer farmer is to produce venison which is superior to the quality of the meat of wild deer. Researchers have found that the requirements of most of today's sophisticated markets for meat are that it must be lean, tender, attractive, nutritious, consistent and "natural."

The market for venison is different to that of beef, lamb and pork. Venison is promoted at the high value end of the meat market. The top end of any market will take only top quality products, and demands the highest standards of quality assurance programs.

To ensure venison remains in the most appropriate markets, long-term viability is dependent on two main factors:

- knowledge of consumer demand
- ability to produce the raw material, both live animal and carcass, economically and to specification.

As with any animal intended for human consumption, quality is extremely important. Quality encompasses a wide range of attributes including yield, safety, appearance and palatability.

## **Need for a grading and classification system**

Historically, the need for some kind of carcass description with the meat industry resulted from the lengthening of the distribution chain and the decline of face-to-face purchasing. Customers were often unable to see the carcasses prior to purchase. Thus they required a system that would guarantee they received what they paid for.

The importance of such a system came to a head with the increase in the export trade from Australia, New Zealand and South America to the UK. A method of carcass description was introduced to facilitate trade at a distance. This system later took on a promotional significance – a form of export grading system to safeguard the quality of the meat in recipient countries.

### **Carcass grading**

Grading in the UK was first used for bacon pigs as part of an attempt to compete with Danish importers. Schemes for grading other pigs, sheep and beef were not promoted until the 1960s.

Grading is defined as the allocation of a grade to carcasses, i.e., best, average and worst. This means that what is deemed as an average carcass by one person could, for example, be the best for someone else. This is why grading was never that popular in the UK: meat traders did not want to purchase a carcass which had been labeled “worst” when it may have been the “best” carcass for their particular market.

The value of a carcass is of great importance at all stages of the meat marketing chain, from farm to retail sale. Both processors and retailers have to meet their customers’ requirements.

The carcass value is determined by a number of factors. The principal components are size, attractiveness, saleable meat yield and perceived quality of the meat.

The purpose of carcass grading is different to classification. Grading provides a preconceived idea of quality so that a settlement price can be determined. It is therefore important that procedures used to estimate meat yield and quality on carcasses are precise and repeatable. Grading schemes put different values on carcasses placed in uniform classes. The value is dependent on how useful the carcass is for a particular purpose and, therefore, how much someone is willing to pay for it.

### **Carcass classification**

Carcass classification in Great Britain is becoming increasingly mandatory. Current classification is mandatory in any abattoir slaughtering more than 200 pigs per week and in all beef abattoirs. It is likely that in the future it will also be mandatory to classify sheep.

Visual assessment is, and will continue to be, an essential element of beef and sheep classification. Pig classification is “objective”, whereas cattle and sheep are “subjective.” Pigs are classified using approved introsopes or reflectance-based recording probes for measuring fat and muscle thickness, and more recently sophisticated probes and yield control procedures.

Cattle and sheep cannot be classified by the same method as pigs, as the fat distribution on cattle and sheep is uneven, and the fat between muscles can cause conflicting results.

Visual assessment of beef and sheep has proved to be a system of some considerable strengths and, generally, precision of estimation is high. However, the sensory nature of these assessments has over the years been the cause of much controversy and debate. Inconsistencies have resulted from different operators working at different times of the day/year.

Pig farmers have less reason to complain as currently they use a generally precise and reliable system based on objective measurements.

One of the main reasons for developing a commercial classification scheme is to provide better communication of consumer requirements to the producer by identifying carcasses of different leanness and fatness.

### **Benefits of a classification system**

Carcass classification provides a wide range of information that can be of use to everyone in the meat industry. These include:

1. Feedback to the producer about the type of animals he should be raising to meet the requirements of consumers.
2. Feedback to the abattoir by providing a means of procuring and judging carcasses from different sources, and allocating them to the most appropriate market.
3. Helping customers to specify their needs and reduce variability.
4. Providing a basis for pricing.
5. Providing data for government and the EU.

The description of carcasses in classification schemes enables people to buy and sell them unseen. It also ensures that carcasses go to the most appropriate use.

Classification also aids in marketing, since it leads to product uniformity. Grading systems may produce uniform top grades, but variation in poorer grades. This is due to different definitions of "poor." Hence classification systems use letters e.g., EUROP with UOP sub-divided into upper and lower classes.

### **Conformation and fatness**

The commercial value of a carcass depends ultimately on its size, structure and composition. The main characteristics are:

- weight
- muscle, fat, bone and distribution of these
- chemical composition
- visual appearance of tissues and meat quality.

Conformation and fatness are the main factors of a classification system. Conformation is normally defined as the thickness of muscle and fat in relation to the size of the carcass. Subcutaneous fat scores should be the principal index of carcass leanness for use in commercial classification schemes.

In the second part of this article, I will discuss how carcass grading and classification can be applied to farmed venison. In particular, we will look at how New Zealand does it, and how such a system could be set up in Britain.

## 2. NATURAL MANAGEMENT OF PARASITES

[By Av Singh, Agriculture Canada, Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada,  
mailto:asingh@nsac.ns.ca ]

Parasitic diseases are one of the more serious problems facing livestock producers, often causing economic and production losses. For those farmers interested in organic or natural production of meat, synthetic dewormers such as anthelmintics or parasiticides are restricted and, in some cases, prohibited. Also, increased resistance to dewormers, growing concerns regarding parasiticide residues in meat, and harm to non-target species such as those that help decompose manure have producers looking for alternatives.

The following are some of the innovative practices being used to limit parasite infestation.

Grazing animals are often exposed to parasites and the likelihood of being reinfected is greater than with confined animals. Internal parasites therefore pose a greater challenge for organic livestock producers because of a higher reliance on pastures.

For most organic or natural producers, a “zero tolerance” approach to internal parasites is not a desirable goal. Preventative practices may not be economically feasible and many producers want their animals to have controlled exposure to parasites to help build immunity. Ideally, the objective is to develop an animal production system where parasites may be present in small numbers, but do not affect animals’ health or performance.

### **Herd management**

An animal can resist or tolerate internal parasites better when its living condition are good. In barns, animals should be fed from feeders rather than from the ground to avoid contamination.

Vitamins and minerals can play a key role in affecting ruminant susceptibility. Vitamins A, D and B complex are integral in developing immunity to parasites, while iron and cobalt, which are used to synthesize vitamin B12, are essential minerals.

### **Pasture management**

High stocking rates have a direct correlation with increased parasite load. If parasite infestation is a problem, lower stocking densities are recommended. This reduces the amount of manure in a given area and the residual grazing height is often higher.

Leaving a residue greater than four inches will lower the probability of parasite infection significantly, considering 80 percent of parasites live in the first two inches above the ground.

The risk of infection is also lowered by waiting to put animals out to pasture after the dew has lifted, or until the grass has dried after a rain. Drier conditions force parasites to stay at the base of plants where they are less likely to be eaten.

Pastures that have been harvested for hay, silage or small grain crops can generally be considered safe. Pastures grazed by other species for a season or longer are considered safe because only a small amount of cross infection occurs between the species.

The type of forage growing in a pasture may also determine parasite loads. Generally, grass-dominant pastures contain more parasite larvae than pastures containing forbs such as chicory, or legumes such as alfalfa and birdsfoot trefoil, mainly because of the increased levels of condensed tannins.

The common practice of harrowing pastures to break dung pats is not recommended. Dragging manure pats across pastures may scatter parasite eggs and larvae, making it difficult for animals to selectively graze away from infected areas. Harrowing may be beneficial just before a dry period, or when a pasture will be rested for a long time.

Alternatively, dung-burying beetles and free-ranging chickens help break down dung pats, reducing the environment for parasite infestation.

### **Alternative dewormers**

As a last resort, organic livestock producers can carry out deworming treatments. All treatments involving natural products should ideally be preceded by a fasting period and followed by a laxative period. Many of these natural dewormers can be considered poisons. Therefore, it is essential to follow indicated dosages.

Most botanical dewormers can be also found as homeopathic preparations, which are free of side effects and do not require a fasting or laxative period.

Common botanical dewormers include garlic in pills or powders, fresh tinctures such as wormwood or *Aretnisia* spp., wild ginger or snakeroot, goosefoot, conifers, mustard, squash or pumpkin seeds, carrot and fennel seeds, and pyrethrum, a plant extract from chrysanthemum.

Other products used as dewormers include diatomaceous earth and charcoal, which are often added to the ration, and peroxide, copper sulfate and Shakelee's Basic H surfactant, which are added to water. (Certain organic certifying bodies may not accept Shakelee's Basic H surfactant).

Despite access to synthetic parasitides, organic farmers continue to rely on fine-tuning their nutrition regimes, herd and pasture management, and field and soil practices so they can learn to coexist with parasites.

## **3. BROCHURES**

Do you have effective brochures for your deer/elk business, products and services? If you don't, you should add brochures to your marketing toolbox!

Brochures should be considered "throwaways" because most people generally don't keep them. Hopefully, people do read the brochure, but most often it ends up in the garbage. As a result, be careful not to spend too much money on developing and printing them.

So why should you even bother having brochures? A brochure supports the information on your business card and increases its effectiveness. In addition, it is a professional way to put testimonials in the hands of all prospective customers.

The goal is to create a throwaway that is attractive and interesting enough to read, but not too expensive. You do not want to spend a lot of money on something that will ultimately become trash.

Here are some tips on creating an effective brochure:

1. Your brochure should be an expansion of your business card. Keep it short and concise, and ensure that it builds credibility. You must choose carefully what information is important to your customers. Most companies put so much material into their brochure that readers become overwhelmed and lose interest. Size does matter! A small, compact, concisely-written brochure can be a strong marketing tool. It is more apt to be read because it is easy and quick to digest. The function of a throwaway is not to divulge every detail about your product or service, but to stimulate interest and encourage customers to contact you for more information.
2. Always include testimonials. People are skeptical – use solid, legitimate testimonials that prospects can easily check.
3. Give a brief overview of your products and services. Highlight the benefits before you talk about features. For example, our bucks or bulls have proven pass-down genetics.
4. Include information that shows you are a reputable and reliable company. This includes such things as number of years in business, awards, endorsements, education, partial client list, money-back guarantees and memberships such as NADeFA, NAEBA, Better Business Bureau, Chamber of Commerce and other industry associations.
5. Do not make exaggerated claims or you will set your customers up for disappointment. Use honest facts and figures to back up your claims. Remember, the number one reason people buy from you is trust. Earn it!
6. The word “free” is one of the strongest words in the English language. Try to use it in your business card and brochure. For example, some variations include free initial consultation, free sample, free trial, free with purchase, etc.
7. Make it easy for customers to contact you. Provide your full address, website, fax, e-mail, 1-800 number, cell phone and even directions if necessary. Accommodate your customers’ preferred method of communication.
8. Get your brochures out! Having brochures sitting in boxes in your barn or storage room does NOT do much for your marketing. Make your brochures easily available at your farm, include them in your mailings, distribute them at deer/elk conferences, and drop them off in prospects’ mailboxes.

Throwaways like brochures should get customers interested in your products and services when they see that the benefits match their needs and wants. The features should be impressive and your company’s image or philosophy should appeal to the customer’s thinking. An effective brochure should educate your clients and entice them to do business with you.

## **4. CARE OF REINDEER CALVES**

*[Reprinted from The ROBA Review, March/April 2003, Reindeer Owners and Breeders Association, <http://www.reindeer.ws> ]*

Perhaps the most troublesome time for the reindeer farmer occurs during calving time. Every effort must be made to ensure that calves obtain the first milk or colostrums which is rich in antibodies.

If a calf is orphaned and unable to receive colostrums within the first few hours of life, then antibodies should be administered intravenously. This is done by collecting one pint of blood from a donor reindeer (preferably from the same farm), then separating and administering 50 to 100ml of plasma by the intravenous route. This is a common procedure in equine medicine and most veterinarians are familiar with the procedure. Plasma may be harvested and stored frozen for immediate availability in the future.

The immune system of young reindeer is not fully functional until approximately three months of age. Vaccines administered before that time do little good. Antisera and anti-toxins providing passive immunity are effective at any time.

Both infectious and non-infectious diseases must be dealt with and many are specific to individual farms. One of the most common infectious diseases encountered by reindeer calves is caused by pathogenic *Escherichia coli* bacteria (colibacillosis). The most common symptom in calves one to five days of age is weakness rapidly progressing to death. It is also seen in slightly older calves. Prevention includes the use of a killed K99 E Colivaccine in pregnant females administered in late fall.

There are also oral antisera available for newborn calves of mothers that were not vaccinated in the fall. Reindeer calves may also be infected by several other disease agents including bovine respiratory viruses. Vaccination programs should be tailored to specific farms and diseases known to be present in the general area. Immediate veterinary care should be obtained for any calf that appears to be ill.

Clean calving areas are very important. In most cases a minimum of intrusion is best to prevent calf rejections by the mother. Use of iodine on the navel, administration of oral antibodies, etc. to healthy calves may cause more harm than good if bonding of the mother to the newborn has not occurred. This is not as much of a problem for farm raised reindeer as it is for animals off the tundra.

Use common sense and good judgment, and you will have a successful reindeer calving season.

## **5. INDUSTRY NEWS**

### **Correction regarding Colin Maxwell and CWF**

In the last edition of the Digest, we erroneously reported that Mr. Maxwell of the Canadian Wildlife Federation declined to appear and cancelled his participation in an open-line show on Saskatchewan's Talk Radio to talk about issues related to deer farming.



In fact, Mr. Maxwell was never informed, nor directly invited, by the radio station to participate in the talk show. Therefore, he knew nothing about the show, and had neither motive nor opportunity to decline or accept participation, much less cancel an appearance he knew nothing about.

The Deer Farmers' Digest apologizes for any embarrassment we may have caused Mr. Maxwell and the Canadian Wildlife Federation as a result of these statements.

### **Pennsylvania**

The Pennsylvania DNR has passed a ruling allowing Pennsylvania deer farmers to import deer that come from a herd in a non-endemic area that has been in a CWD program for three years, and from a herd in an endemic area that has been enrolled in a CWD program for five years. It is our understanding that this CWD program must be active and that a letter signed by a veterinarian will not suffice. At this point in time, this ruling effectively keeps the Pennsylvania borders closed, because very few states have had a program in place for that long.

### **West Virginia Deer Farmers Association**

Prior to October 2002, West Virginia deer farmers were a fairly disorganized group of people. They had very little communication among the farmers, and no idea how many deer farmers there were in the state.

On October 1, 2002 the WV DNR passed an "emergency rule" that immediately put a ban on both intrastate and interstate transport, sale and importation of all cervids. This rule brought the industry to a screeching halt. The farmers had to organize or be permanently shut down. Thus the 53 deer farmers of West Virginia joined together to form the West Virginia Deer Farmers Association.

Since the formation of the Association, members have been involved in many activities to preserve and promote deer farming in their state. WVDFA has hired a lobbyist and subsequently introduced House Bill 2396 to change the regulation of farming from the DNR to the Department of Agriculture. Senate Bill 152 was also introduced to allow the sale of venison in West Virginia restaurants. These two bills will be voted on by the WV House and Senate in the next few months.

For more information on the West Virginia deer farming situation, contact Ronn Grandia at 304-376-3232.

### **Whitetail Deer Farmers of Ohio**

Whitetail Deer Farmers of Ohio was created in March 2002 to promote the deer industry in that state. The Association has worked hard to keep their borders open for interstate movement of all cervids. Ohio is the most relaxed state for moving deer in the United States.

The Association has hired a lobbyist to be on the lookout for any proposed new laws coming that may affect deer farmers and all exotic animal owners.

For more information about what's happening in Ohio, please contact Roy Yoder, President at 330-695-4833.

*[They have a great newsletter and I thank them for sending me a copy. Ed.]*

## Iowa Whitetail Deer Association

The Iowa Whitetail Deer Association (IWDA) and the whitetail producers in the state are working hard to get H.F. 617 passed. This legislation will classify farm-raised whitetail deer as “livestock” and will move the jurisdiction of whitetail deer from the DNR to the Department of Agriculture. Iowa deer farmers are encouraged to support this initiative by contacting their representatives and senators. A copy of the proposed legislation can be found at <http://www.legis.state.ia.us>

## 6. EVENTS CALENDAR

Here is a list of upcoming events of interest to deer, elk and reindeer farmers.

SASKATCHEWAN WHITETAIL AND MULE DEER PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION will hold their annual convention on March 28 to 30, 2003 at the Travelodge in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. For more information, contact <mailto:info@saskdeer.com> or visit their website at <http://www.saskdeer.com>

REINDEER OWNER’S & BREEDER’S ASSOCIATION 2003 ANNUAL MEETING will be held in Pendleton Oregon USA on June 20-22, 2003. For more information contact Carol at [mailto:roba\\_association@hotmail.com](mailto:roba_association@hotmail.com) or visit their web site at <http://www.reindeer.ws>

NORTH AMERICAN ELK BREEDERS ASSOCIATION (NAEBA) Convention and International Antler Competition will be held July 30 – August 3, 2003 at Kansas City, Missouri USA. Contact the NAEBA office at <mailto:info@naelk.org> or visit <http://www.naelk.org> for more information.

SECOND ANTLER SCIENCE AND PRODUCT TECHNOLOGY SYMPOSIUM will be held in February 25 to 27, 2004 in Queenstown, New Zealand. For more information contact Mark O’Connor at <mailto:mark.oconnor@nzgib.org.nz> or phone +64 4 473 4500.

\*\*\*\*\* **A D** \*\*\*\*\*

If you are thinking of starting a deer or elk farm, please visit the Deerfarmer Store located at <http://store.deerfarmer.com> There you will find model business plans that you can use to plan and finance your dream farm.

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## 8. CONTACT INFORMATION

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