ESTABLISHING A DEER FARM

Always ask a farmer why!!

Farm Design

This subject, even as important as it is, is only mentioned in passing. It would be naive to think that anyone could offer specific advice on this topic without seeing the farm concerned. The fundamental question is how many hectares of land do you wish to fence off. This will depend on the quality of the land, the species of deer you wish to farm and the number of deer you intend to run in order to make a certain income.

The farm layout is influenced mainly by the topography of the land.

You may have to consider at least some of the following:

- whether you will be irrigating (by flood or spray);
- should you fence off irrigation channels;
- natural water courses;
- position of trees and "rough" scrub areas;
- most effective position of yards and laneways;
- size of mobs you wish to run;
- electric fencing;
- separation of animals during the rut;
- hay/silage paddocks;
- shelter in both winter and summer;
- water supply for stock.
- supplementary feeding in the winter;
- ease of stock and machinery movement;
- existing facilities.

Troughs

The supply of water to any farmed animal is a top priority. Lactating females in the larger species of deer will drink over 10 litres of water each day. Fortunately they do not have a routine, such as a dairy cows, and rarely will you find the whole herd wanting a drink at the same time. Troughs for deer can be quite small and only need a slow rate of recharge.

It is important that the fittings in the trough are well protected. Fallow are not as eager to play in troughs as Reds or Elk. The Reds love to wallow in the mud. Both Reds and Elk may stand in the trough in order to cool off. Reds love to splash water out of the trough to make a wallow nearby. Sometimes, if the valve in the trough is unprotected, they will break it and all your valuable water reserves will be lost.

Most farms would use 3/4" poly pipe to feed their troughs. It is possibly easier to put the main lines to the troughs in the ground before you start fencing. The depth you bury the poly pipe will depend on your soil type and your proposed soil management practices.

Gates

It is best to hang a gate so that its normal hanging position is in line with the fence. If swung at right angles to the fence line, especially with treated pine posts, the post will move over time and the gate may eventually drag on the ground. Unless the gate has a specific purpose other than closing off a paddock, it should be swung so that it hangs flush with the fence line when open. If a deer is running along the fence, it may get caught between the fence and the gate. This situation should be avoided at all costs. The instinct of a deer tells it to go forward when it is nervous. Unless it realises that there is a problem well before it actually happens, "the best method of defence is attack". If frightened enough, the deer may blindly run along the fence and get caught behind the gate. It may simply bounce into the fence or jump around you depending on what the problem is. This situation is due, primarily, to bad management.

If the gate is to swing either way, it may be worth considering some way of keeping it in the position where you want it. The mesh of the gate offers a lot of resistance to the wind which can sometimes blow the gate where you don't want it. A piece of wood left near the gate may be very useful.

Gate latches are an important item on a deer farm. They should not protrude into the laneway or paddock. Many stories have been told about deer opening gates and wandering off to another paddock. If the latch is put in where the wire is tied at the strainer post, they should not be able to reach it. Problem solved - without any expensive spring-loaded gismos.

Trees

There seems little doubt that trees are an important asset to any farm. Their purpose may be to beautify, to provide shelter for stock or a windbreak for pasture, to provide a visual or sound barrier, to lower ground water levels, or provide future income via agroforestry. Their position and protection must be well planned.

Elk and Red deer kill trees. It is not as big a problem with Fallow deer. The natural behaviour of the larger species causes them to mark out their territory by rubbing either their scent glands or antler on the trees. In a farming situation, where there is a high concentration of stock in a restricted area, the trees are eventually ringbarked and will die.

Deer are a browsing animal. If you want proof of this, throw a branch of black or silver wattle over the fence to a mob of deer. Stand back and watch what happens. They will play with it, thrash about in it and eat the leaves and the bark.

Well designed treeguards are most important. If they are too small in height, the deer (like goats) simply use them as a step ladder to reach higher branches. It is more cost-effective to fence off larger areas for trees. It is your decision as to the size of the area you need fenced off. It is land that will be no longer available for grazing. In this light it is often best to take the least productive land and fence this off for trees. Octagonal areas are generally accepted as the best shape to fence off. The reasoning behind this is the actual strain put on the posts is a lot less, for example than square structures, and expensive strainer assemblies need not be used. Remember to take into account the afternoon sun and the prevailing wind directions when deciding which trees to plant where within the structure.

Page courtesy of VicDeer