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FARMING PROFILE – ARDNO DEER PARK

By **Andy Cowan**

Marika and Andrew McKinnon have a 325 Ha property in south-west Victoria. Their farm, "Ardno Deer Park", near Strathdownie, is situated 26km from Mount Gambier and 45km from Casterton which is the nearest Victorian town.

At present, approximately 70% of the farm is fenced for deer. The McKinnons plan to fence off the entire farm for deer. As sheep and cattle can be run successfully together with deer, having the whole farm fenced with deer fencing allows a lot more flexibility for stock and pasture management.

At present Ardno Deer Park runs approximately 1100 deer - red, elk and various crosses. They have about 450 2yr and older velvetting stags, 100 spikers, 285 breeding hinds and 260 fawns. They also run about 600 sheep, comprising 120 pure white Suffolk and Dorset ewes which are sold for breeding stock. The remainder are Border Leicester cross Merino ewes for meat lambs. On the farm there is also a small herd of pure bred Limousine cattle, a couple of sows, poultry and game birds. Also, their three young children keep Andrew and Marika on their toes.

Like many family farms, Andrew does the bulk of the work but Marika and the children help out when needed - mainly during velvetting, drafting and drenching of all stock. Contractors are only used when major works are attempted - building dams and clearing old trees etc. Andrew normally puts in a 60-70 hour week but this increases during velvetting in the summer. Andrew is also a shearing contractor and Marika works off farm one day per week and undertakes the secretarial work for DIAA.

According to the Victorian Resources Online website- "the Strathdownie land-system is a poorly-drained part of the Coastal Plains, with many shallow swamps and some small sandy rises, and where solodic soils of the Follett family predominate. The vegetation, apart from that of the swamps, is red gum and swamp gum woodlands, and heaths with scattered gums. With the application of fertilizers, and drainage in parts, the potential for meat and wool production is high and the erosion hazard low." The McKinnons have verified this by saying that there are some swampy areas where the heavier soils over clay makes most of the place very wet and boggy in winter.

Considering that Ardno Deer Park may run up to 4,000 DSE at any particular time, they have to be careful with their pasture management. The basic pasture is various rye grasses, clovers, fescue and cocksfoot. The pastures are mainly fertilised with lime and single super. To boost hay production, hay booster is applied on the hay paddocks. Every now and again a rape and turnip mix is grown for the summer months, mainly to finish lambs. Roughly 2Ha are leased every year to GM canola for seed production



ET Procedure

to be sent back to Canada. The majority of paddocks have a small number of trees for shelter – cypress and red gum. Generally speaking, there are not too many trees or windbreaks.

The annual average rainfall is around 600-700ml, with wettest months being July/August and driest being January/February. They have a 324 mega-litre water licence of which only a small amount is used. A major asset is their 35 acre towable centre pivot which is able to irrigate 2 circles. This is mainly utilised to provide better feed for hinds and calves in the summer. There are a number of bores around the property which can be set up for irrigation at a later date if required. The ground-water is about 5m down through limestone. Some troughs are windmill fed while the rest are connected to a tank and electric pump at the house.

Pasture hay and silage are made every year for the summer feeding of hinds, fawns and the younger stags (less than 2 yo). Supplementary feeding is based on the season. If it is necessary to bring feed from off the farm, it will usually be a grain of some sort. Depending on price and availability lupins and/or barley are usually bought in for when the fawns are weaned. The hind's diet is similarly supplemented in the lead up to and during mating. Occasionally a mineral drench is given to stock that look a bit "down".

Marika and Andrew feel that, at the moment, they are a little overstocked. They plan to fence off more land this winter and, in the meantime, the stock are rotated on a "need and availability" basis. One of the big problems when doing AI/ET programs, as the McKinnons do, is the number of extra paddocks needed to make sure everything goes according to plan – keeping unwanted stags at safe distances etc.

The Ardno Deer Park AI program usually happens every second year. There is an argument that every third year would be better as this would allow the female progeny from the previous programs to be AI'd. In the past, ET programs were used to bring genetics from a quarantine farm to the main herd. The animals they have on their quarantine block were purchased from Maradene Deer Stud many years ago but had tested positive for Johne's. The genetics they use for their herd's improvement are based mainly on the stag's velvet performance.

Record keeping is a major work load – especially with the "stud" stock. It appears that every animal has its history recorded in some way or another.

All the hinds are single sire mated with hind/stag ratio ranging from 15 to 80:1. This ratio will depend on the age of the stag and paddock room available. Backup stags are only used on AI'd hinds. All pedigrees are recorded on the old "Bloodlines" software package. All velvet records are manually punched into an excel spreadsheet showing the age, cuts, averages and NVAS numbers. Mothered up hind and fawns are recorded in an access database. A "hind evaluation" spreadsheet was used to assess the hind value (ie. number of



Mature Velvet Stags



Yearling Stag



Yearlings

male/female fawns, their sires and male offspring velvet cuts) and this is used to determine which hinds should be culled.

Last season the weaning percentage was 82% which is higher than normal. In early March their calves are weaned into a specially built timber yard in order to prevent escapees. The long term average weaning percentage is more likely to be around the 75% mark. Considering their involvement with AI and ET, this would be quite acceptable. It is important not to leave stags in with the hinds too long as late calves can be a little awkward to manage – the equivalent of two cycles is generally long enough.

A rule of thumb is used when deciding which velvet stags are to be culled. The aim, for all stags, is to set the velvet target where they cut their age or more in weight each year. Currently the cull mark for 2 year olds is 1.8kg. This will need to be increased to improve the overall kg/head cut and help with the overstocking situation. At present Andrew and Marika are trying out “industry” software packages from NZ in order to record and collate all the information. Not having much luck here and it looks like they will be setting up their own database which will do most of the work and enable them to quickly check an animal’s history.

In order to work/move the stock easily, a laneway systems that leads to the yards has been built out of most paddocks. The original deer yards are made from 8ft, 6x1 treated pine boards (placed vertically) with a 2 inch gap between them. When working with a larger number of stags, the adjoining steel cattle yards are used. These have been converted into deer yards and are working well. Most of their fences are the standard griplock 17x190x30 wire with green posts. Some of the fencing includes an electric wire. This is a work in progress, as many posts that have been rubbed away need to be replaced before hot wires can be run.

Most of the stock work is done by Andrew herding the deer into the laneway with an ATV 4WD bike and they just follow the laneway all the way to the yards. In some paddocks, a second vehicle needs to be used, especially with the velvetting stags. However, once the routine has been established, the stock are pretty good and know where they need to go. Once in the yards, the gates are set up in such a way that there is no need to get in with them. Any stock can be pushed all the way into the crush by using a series of gates that protect the handler and make it easier to move the stock.

In the long term, Andrew would like to run 1000 stags.....not sure whether Marika is totally convinced about this as yet. They realise that this may be a bit ambitious as they would need more land to achieve this. Affordable land is incredibly hard to come by in their area! Also, 1000 stags being cut twice a year is a lot of work and a lot of time on the computer!!



Feeding Weaners



Holding Pens



Entrance to Yards

Marika and Andrew's two tips which will make deer farming safe and easy –

1. Start with the best possible hind genetics available and
2. Have a strong set of yards with a well designed working shed.



Rubbed Fence Posts



Mature Hinds



Farm Walk

References:

Marika and Andrew McKinnon – Personal communications.
Victorian Resources Online - Strathdownie Land System.