



November (Spring) 2012, 4 pages

FARMING PROFILE - ROCKLANDS

By **Andy Cowan**

Sophie and Tim Hansen run a deer farm, *Rocklands*, situated near Orange in New South Wales. Their property is approximately 380Ha in total, of which 248ha is effective for deer. The remaining 132Ha of the property is remnant vegetation that they have fenced off. In conjunction with their local Catchment Management Authority, Sophie and Tim are monitoring this area.

Rocklands ranges from 760 metres to 940 metres above sea level, with an average rainfall of around 800mm. Growth occurs all year round but the slow months are from June to August. April is always their driest month. Unfortunately, it is probably one of their most critical months as it is normally followed by a long cool winter.

This young and enterprising couple work very closely with their neighbours (Tim's parents) whose property *Cockatoo* is approximately 160ha, fully effective for deer. All the stock handling facilities are located at *Cockatoo*.

Approximately 80% of their property has been improved using perennial species. Native grasses make up the rest. The property is undulating to very undulating - some people may say it is steep. A mix of native trees is spread evenly over the property - namely box, stringy bark and different species of gums. There are very few introduced species of trees although blackberries feature prominently from time to time!

Rocklands runs the terminal herd and *Cockatoo* has the replacement herd. The replacement animals are mainly Easterns that have been bred on the properties. The majority of the original stock came from John Andrews' property, Lantec Red Deer at Eugowra, some time ago. Although most of the original Lantec animals have gone now, Sophie and Tim are very happy with the progeny and the base that they have provided. The replacements are all joined back to Eastern stags that have either been purchased or bred on the farm. With pregnancy testing being carried out in July, the conception rate has averaged 98% over the past four years. Weaning rates are sitting at 92%.



The terminal herd in general terms is just that. These animals range from straight reds to $\frac{3}{4}$ hybrids hinds, all mated to hybrid stags. Over the past four years, the Hansens have grown this herd dramatically. Fertility suffered as a result of going too far down the hybrid path with scanning rates at 92% and weaning rates at 85%. The older cows in this mob have become non productive. Although they scan in calf and present well, their milk production and mothering is poor and inconsistent.

During a herd rebuilding stage, non-scanned females are disappointing but to be expected. However, for the Hansens, the rates of rising two-year-olds (first calvers) scanned in calf have been much lower than in the replacement mob. As an example, 85% of the replacement herd was in calf versus 70% for the hybrid herd. Tim's concern with the larger animals is that their DSE rating is just so high. Their consumption of available feed during a non-growing season is much higher than a lighter hind. It should be taken into consideration that the lighter hind has the potential, over her total lifespan, to produce, on average, more kilograms of venison. Hence Tim's long-term aim is to get the majority of their hinds back to the 110kg live-weight mark with improved genetics for early maturing animals.

In relation to grazing techniques, Tim states that his approach is not for everyone. His approach came about for a number of reasons - mainly financial. He hopes to move their property up the ecological succession chain. That is to say, he would like to build the diversity of the grass species that they have on their farm.

Sophie and Tim have always had a strong interest in implementing farming practices that are sustainable in terms of animal production and soil health. Three years ago this led them to adopt holistic farming principles. One section of the holistic approach uses cell (or controlled) grazing, having one large mob, which moves, through a system of small paddocks every few days. To give some perspective, the terminal herd detailed above (comprising 880 hinds plus fawns) graze in cells of approximately 2-5ha. The largest of these cells is 10ha.

The herd stays in these paddocks for a specified number of days according to the paddock rating (productivity) and whether it is in the growing or non-growing season. During the growing season, the animals are moved more quickly and during the non-growing season the rotations are slower so that the required number of rest days is achieved. Tim works on a 75-day recovery during the growing season and a 150-day period during the non-growing season with a drought buffer of 20%.

In just two years, the Hansens have seen changes on the farm with an increase in summer active native species. Under the approach, there have been significant financial savings as a result of the reduction in fertiliser



usage (ad hoc top dressing). They still use artificial fertilisers but it is more planned and more strategic. A big advantage is that they can actually measure the return on the fertiliser usage as they have detailed records of the grazing performance of each paddock per season. The records include days grazed, stock density and dry matter remaining.

Although their cell-grazing plan still requires tweaking to suit deer (e.g. incorporating the stags during the rut, allowing for longer stays in certain paddocks during calving and supplementing the lactating hind' diet with trace elements), Tim and Sophie feel very confident that this approach has moved them forward. As the animals are being handled so regularly, their behaviour has improved. Moving the larger terminal herd takes Tim around five minutes. He lays down the four or five line portable electric fence (see photos), secures it down and the herd "walks" over the wire into the fresh paddock. Tim uses a back fence for the cell to prevent the overgrazing that can occur. Animals tend to only want to go forward as they quickly learn to understand the system that fresh paddocks are ahead of them rather than going backwards into previously grazed areas.

The electric fence hardware that the Hansens use was sourced from Kiwi Tech in New Zealand. They are running an energiser that gives them around 8000 volts through the portable fence. It is very rare for animals to not respect the electric fencing. Obviously electric fences are not used in pressure areas, just for internal stock movement management. Tim has a system (see photo) mounted on the front of his 4-wheeler, which allows the construction and pull down of the fencing in quick time. The dairy industry suppliers that make this product in New Zealand say that you can erect a 400m fence in 3 minutes. At this stage, however, Tim takes about 30 mins to do 400m and around 10 minutes to pull down and remove the poly posts. Initially Tim was really unsure about how well the deer would adapt to electric fencing, but he has only ever been pleased with their response. In Tim's experience, electric fences need to be constantly checked and maintained to be effective. Assuming everything is in good shape, Tim is extremely confident that this type of fencing is the way forward for their operation.

During calving, Tim does set stock in a paddock of around 30ha for the 90-day period. This will be their third calving using this method and they are happy with the results.

Over the past three years, Tim has kept things simple by not weaning until September. By the end of September, Tim would have usually moved all rising one-year-old males and only have left the females from that year. Last year they had moved 50% of males by the end of



August, with an average carcase weight of 48kg. The Hansens were really happy about that. The other ones went during September. Obviously, any males that are sensational are kept. They see how they grow out depending on the year.

To improve running capacity across their farm, two years ago the Hansens introduced pasture cropping (running oats or other cereal crops into existing pastures to increase productivity) but Tim admits that he is yet to master this in their climate. The difference between pasture cropping and non-kill cropping is the use of a knockdown. The use of a spray-seed style chemical allows the young plant to germinate and get going, which places the seed in a good position to compete with the existing grass species on their return. Tim has been using mainly oats (trialing a range of varieties) and putting about 80kg/HA of DAP underneath. It is a timing issue and he had better results when sowing into natives during the autumn and into perennials during late summer. Opportunistic summer fodder cropping is undertaken when conditions, both seasonally and economic, align.

Tim's approach to supplementary feeding can be summed up by his statement that he "hates feeding stock". He changed his production system from a set stocking one so that good planning would reduce the likelihood of having to feed out animals every year. He appreciates that the deer industry is such that you can't just de-stock and re-enter as the season allows. He knows that supplementary feeding may be required during drought times but it is the annual feeding out during winter, which makes his blood boil. Over the past four years, he has been conserving fodder and stockpiling it for drier times. Timing did not enable them to plan for the most recent drought, which had a substantial effect on the profitability of what they are doing.

The Hansens have used a few techniques to store silage. The photo shows what works best in their situation. Whereas it is certainly not as cost effective as bulk silage in pits, at this stage in their operation it works well for them. The bales are placed in sections of 50 or so, covered in plastic and then with soil about 1 foot deep. Then it is rolled for compaction to ensure that it is airtight. They have not opened these pits for the past two years (and they hope they do not need to do so for another two). When they did check, the results were really positive. "Thank goodness" says Tim, "as there is a considerable cost involved". They have approximately 1000 bales underground and are looking to increase this when the seasons allow. Their long-term aim would be to strategically place some pits around the property rather than in a centralised area as they currently use. The advantage of doing this would be that they could potentially set up some gates and allow the animals to "self feed", a system which seems to be effectively employed in New Zealand.



As if this was not enough to keep Tim and Sophie busy they both have "other" lives. Tim and Sophie are partners in Mandagery Creek Venison, probably the largest venison processor in Australia. Their web page www.mandagerycreek.com.au outlines some of their activities (farmers markets etc.) and it is also interesting to read Sophie's blog "Local is Lovely" which shows off Sophie's skills as a writer, editor and chef.

My thanks to Tim Hansen for making his thoughts and management philosophies available and supplying me with all the information necessary to include this article in the magazine.