

WHAT IS DEER FARMING?

Gerald W. Evers

Deer and elk farming refers to the raising of non-native deer and elk for venison, velvet antler, and stock for game ranchers. There is also a market for the antlers and hides. In the eastern US, this usually occurs on small acreages of improved pastures. Game ranching is the management of deer and elk for recreational hunting and/or venison production on large acreages of rangeland and forest.

Deer farming is not new. Archaeological digs indicate Phoenicians used domesticated deer around 4000 B.C. and the Chinese have a history of deer use that dates back 5000 years. Reports on domestication of deer in North America occurred over 100 years ago. USDA published farmer bulletins on deer farming in 1908 and 1910. Interest in deer farming decreased until the mid-1970's when the modern deer farming industry began to develop because of the surge of activity in New Zealand and Europe in marketing venison and deer by-products. In 1993, the estimated sale of deer and deer products produced in the US was \$3.8 million.

The population of non-native deer in Texas increased over 300% from 27,538 in 1974 to 90,112 in 1994. The most recent survey in 1996 of exotic hoof stock operations in Texas reported 106,000 non-native deer of which 91,000 were under high fence. The predominant deer breeds were axis - 55,400, fallow - 27,200, sika - 12,000 and red deer - 4,800.

Elk are considered to be native to North America but they are believed to be descendants of red deer that crossed the Bering Land Bridge from Asia to North America 120,000 years ago. Elk developed larger body size and antlers than red deer because of the abundant high-quality forage in the previously unoccupied habitat of North America. Some of the earliest reports on domesticating and farming elk in the United States were from Oregon in 1849, Illinois in 1877, and Montana in 1896. Beginning in the twentieth century, surplus elk from Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks were given or sold to private land owners and ranchers. Elk farming has increased dramatically during the last twenty years. A 1999 census in Canada reports 53,535 elk on 1,879 farms.

The North American Elk Breeders Association estimates the number of elk farmed and ranches in the United States at over 100,000. Inability of native white-tailed deer to utilize warm-season perennial grasses does not

allow them to be farmed as readily as the introduced deer species and elk.

Farming of deer and elk has many advantages. Because grasslands are used to meet most of the nutrient requirements of the deer, it is an environmentally friendly agricultural system that protects both soil and water. Deer farming is well suited for small land owners or larger farms or ranches that desire to diversify. Five acres of improved pasture in East Texas are sufficient for a one-buck herd of 25 to 30 fallow, sika, or axis does and to carry the weaned fawns to slaughter weight. Venison is a lean meat, low in fat and cholesterol, which is an attractive alternative to chicken and fish for health conscious Americans. At the present time, from 80 to 90% of the venison marketed in the US is imported from New Zealand. Deer numbers are not large enough to support the infrastructure for regional marketing of venison at this time. Most venison is sold by the individual deer farmers. There are several small slaughter plants capable of handling deer. A marketing survey of Texas restaurants reported that approximately 20% of the hotel, country club, and German-theme restaurants served exotic game meat. Because non-native deer can reach slaughter weight on well managed pastures, grain feeding in concentrated feeding operations such as is required for production of poultry, swine, dairy, and beef is not necessary.

However, deer and elk farming is not without risk. As with other agricultural enterprises, good management is necessary along with an understanding of pasture production and animal nutrition, growth, reproduction, and health as well as economics. Deer and elk are more difficult to handle than other livestock and require special fencing and handling facilities. Individuals interested in deer farming should visit deer and elk farming operations in their area.

Other information sources are the North American Deer Farmers Association (9301 Annapolis Road #206, Lanham, Maryland 20706-3115; Phone 301-459-7708; <http://www.nadefa.org>) and the North American Elk Breeders Association (1708 N. Prairie View Road, PO Box 1640, Platte City, Missouri 64079; Phone 816-431-3605; <http://www.naelk.org>).