The value of large animal veterinary technicians in the deer industry

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Abstract

New Zealand leads the world in deer farming, a sector that contributes significantly to the nation's economy through velvet and venison production. As the global demand for sustainable and ethically sourced animal products rises, there is an increasing need to ensure high standards of animal health and welfare. Large Animal Veterinary Technicians (LAVTs) are uniquely positioned to support these goals. Their specialized skills in health monitoring, disease prevention, reproductive assistance, and emergency care can have a transformative impact on deer farm operations. This paper explores the untapped potential of LAVTs in the deer industry and emphasizes the need for targeted training and professional development to support their integration into this vital sector.

Introduction

New Zealand has held the position as the world's most advanced and largest deer farming industry since the 1970s. Beyond venison and velvet production, deer farming supports rural employment, regional development, and sustainable agriculture. As the industry continues to grow domestically and globally, there is increased pressure to ensure ethical practices and high animal welfare standards.

This paper highlights the essential role of LAVTs in supporting deer health and farm productivity. Through improved disease management, preventative care, and support services, LAVTs can reduce the burden on veterinarians and contribute significantly to the sustainability of the deer industry. Increased recognition, education, and integration of LAVTs will be vital for the industry's continued success.

The role of LAVTs in deer health and management

LAVTs are equipped to assist with many critical tasks that support herd health and farm operations. Their contributions can be grouped into several areas:

Routine health management

Technicians can perform body condition scoring, monitor for signs of illness, assess parasite burden, and undertake regular health checks. These activities ensure early disease detection and reduce the risk of health issues becoming widespread.

Disease prevention and emergency care

LAVTs can assist with vaccination programs for diseases such as Leptospirosis and Yersiniosis and provide ongoing support in cases of injury or illness under veterinary supervision. Post-treatment care, including wound management and hoof trimming, can also be carried out by trained technicians, improving animal welfare and recovery outcomes.

Reproductive support

Technicians are valuable contributors to breeding programs through services like reproductive monitoring, artificial insemination assistance, pregnancy scanning, and trace element testing. These interventions improve reproductive efficiency and support farmer decision-making.

Nutritional and seasonal management

With seasonal knowledge and training, LAVTs can assist in developing nutrition plans that support growth, fertility, and antler development. For example, planning supplemental feeding in spring can ensure optimal weight gain and health outcomes.

Herd data and strategic insights

Technicians can collect and interpret farm data, assisting with decisions around disease trends, reproductive performance, and mob health. These insights can directly influence farm productivity and profitability.

Efficiency, workforce balance, and industry impact

LAVTs have already made a significant impact in the dairy and sheep sectors in New Zealand. Delegating appropriate tasks to technicians frees up veterinarians to focus on complex cases, reducing burnout and improving quality of care.

Dr Francesca Brown's 2023 study on optimal veterinary team utilisation concluded that many clinical tasks currently performed by veterinarians could be reallocated to technicians. These include pregnancy scanning, wound management, and sample analysis. The study illustrated that there were three pages of technician-performable tasks compared to one page of veterinarian-only tasks (Brown 2023). This redistribution enhances efficiency and supports better outcomes across the veterinary and farming sectors.

By applying these same principles in deer farming, the sector stands to benefit from improved welfare, enhanced productivity, and reduced veterinary burnout.

Training gaps and barriers to technician integration

Despite the potential benefits, most veterinary technician training programs in New Zealand are focused on cattle and sheep. Deer health and management are underrepresented, leaving technicians underprepared and reliant on on-the-job learning or informal mentorship.

This gap limits technician involvement and contributes to missed opportunities for disease detection, reproductive management, and nutritional planning. Without dedicated education pathways or professional development in deer care, the industry cannot fully leverage the skills that LAVTs can offer.

In addition, a shortage of veterinarians specialising in deer further restricts technician training and mentorship opportunities. This compounds the skills gap and reinforces the need for structured, deer-specific technician training in formal curricula or through CPD courses.

Addressing workforce needs for the future

Deer farming faces a growing need for qualified animal health professionals. By increasing the availability of deer-specific technician training and encouraging collaborative care models, the industry can address both the veterinary shortage and technician under-utilisation.

Providing a clear pathway for technicians to specialise in deer health will enhance farm productivity, improve job satisfaction, and support animal welfare. In rural areas with limited access to veterinary services, LAVTs can act as a crucial extension of veterinary care, ensuring high-quality health management remains consistent and accessible.

Conclusion

Large animal veterinary technicians offer immense value to the deer farming industry in New Zealand. By expanding their role across health, reproduction, nutrition, and emergency care, LAVTs can improve animal outcomes, boost farm profitability, and support the wellbeing of veterinarians.

However, to realise these benefits, there must be a systemic shift in education, recognition, and professional development. Introducing deer-specific content into technician training programs and investing in ongoing learning opportunities will equip technicians to meet the sector's growing demands.

Through better integration of LAVTs into deer farming operations, the industry can ensure its long-term sustainability, ethical standards, and global leadership in deer farming practices.

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