

Deer keeping - Guidelines

Introduction-

In every European country, the commercial keeping of animals by man is regulated by national law. In theory, as far as the European Union is concerned, these national level laws should be in harmony, in line with EU directives. In practice, in the case of deer, because these animals can figure as wild, domesticated or even as wild “kept by man within an enclosure”, the EU directives are interpreted differently at individual member state level. The result is often unclear and may be confusing. In some countries, liberal interpretation promotes deer breeding, whereas in others, unnecessary overregulation hinders development of this agricultural segment. One of the objectives of FEDFA is to ensure a closer harmonization of law across the EU and to reduce the bureaucratic burden on the deer breeder. Please see FEDFA Guidelines in this section for more details.

Why be a deer farmer?

Deer are fascinating animals. Whether big, statuesque red deer or lithe, much smaller fallow deer, their profile, colour and stance make them the most attractive of the animals kept by man. When they live in an extensive environment in parks or park-farms, the combination of open fields, trees and shrubs and watercourses blends with the dappled coats of the herd to form a perfect, harmonious portrayal of nature.

Although most of us deer breeders are sensitive to the beauty of these animals, few can afford to keep deer only for that reason. The deer have to earn their keep! And there are many ways in which they can do so:

- a) appearance only – as decorative features in tourist parks, or for agro-tourism;
- b) hunting – some countries allow animals kept by man to be hunted on private ground, others do not;
- c) restocking of forests – sale of live animals for rebuilding of wild populations;
- d) live sales – for sale to other deer breeders;
- e) meat – for sale for slaughter or for on-farm slaughter;

In addition to the above, part of the bills might be paid by the sale of by-products, such as the sale of antlers, which are dropped by the males every year in early spring, the sale of skins from slaughtered animals, or even the most controversial, the cropping and sale of velvet (skin covering the antlers).

At a time when increasing attention is being paid to the ecological impact of agriculture and the need for “greening” and nature protection (eg Natura 2000 programme), deer breeding constitutes a viable and socially acceptable use of waste land, while at the same time enhancing its amenity value.

It is worth saying that venison purchases by consumers in Western Europe have seen record growth over the last few years. The consumer has recognized that this meat has the highest protein and the lowest cholesterol and fat content of any major meat available in the shops. Furthermore, not only is it healthy – it also has a fantastic taste (try a fillet steak from a 1.5 year old fallow deer buck). Personally, I prefer meat from the extensive park-farm environment, wild animals have a more “gamey” taste and their provenance is unknown. Unfortunately, against this background of increasing acceptance by European markets, we see that most of the demand is met by imports from New Zealand. There has to be a major

opportunity here for the European deer breeder, once the legislation is simplified and harmonized in line with the objectives of the European Union,

Deer keeping in Europe and Worldwide-

Deer husbandry is an agricultural sector which is relatively new in Europe. Although the keeping of deer for food was practiced in antiquity, during more recent times, the animals were largely kept for purposes of hunting. However, the recent increase in consumer health consciousness has resulted in a search for better quality foodstuffs, and in particular, for lean, tasty and cholesterol-free meat. As noted above, this market trend has seen a revival of consumer interest in venison. In recent years, market growth in the U.S.A. and in Europe has been reported as reaching 20-30% compound annual increase per annum. Initially available only in premium restaurants, in many countries, venison cuts can now be bought in supermarkets.

New Zealand is the prime example of a country where the government has moved quickly and effectively to support this new and growing sector. According to statistics published on www.deernz.org, deer breeding, from a zero base in 1970, has now grown to 1 million farmed deer. In 2016, the sector generated NZ\$246 million of export revenue. Over 60% of exports were made to Europe.

In the European environment, at a political level, deer breeding appears to be regarded as an unimportant novelty. It hardly earns a mention in the Common Agricultural Policy (“CAP”). Although much is said about nature conservancy, historically, no consideration has been given to the contribution that can be made to this important and currently topical area by low intensity deer farms and parks. Although much is said about shortening the food chain, nothing has been done at EU level to ensure the full application by member states of existing EU directives allowing small producers to sell to end consumers. Above all, despite nominal EU harmonization, legislation at member state national level is inconsistent and in many cases, fails to reflect the unique characteristics of deer husbandry. Similarly, CAP support for deer breeders differs enormously from member state to member state. The result is that European deer breeders are disadvantaged, new entrants to the sector are discouraged, and consumers are forced to pay high prices for predominantly imported venison.

The role of FEDFA-

FEDFA’s slogan, present throughout this website is “The deer breeder’s voice in Europe”. Our objective as an organization is to be heard at EU level, and to equip national associations with information which may be used to reform legislation at member State level, in order to enable deer breeder to conduct their business effectively with a minimum of administrative burden, and so to make our excellent product more widely available to consumers.