

Venison market report – ADMG meeting – 20 January 2021

Dick Playfair, Scottish Venison Association

As we all know it has been a difficult and unprecedented time for venison supply. There has been some progress, but also knockbacks.

The retail sector has continued to perform well. We know from Kantar's research in September that venison retail sales grew during the first six months of the pandemic and feedback suggests that that growth has continued through Christmas. This has been achieved, and venison's position on the shelves supported, by significant discounting and promotion by processors,

There will also have been some improvement in sales through Christmas through mail order and click and collect and we know of at least a couple of smaller businesses that have sold well through the Christmas period and continue to do so with Burns Night as the hook.

But on the downside following the partial reopening of restaurants, catering and foodservice through late summer and autumn last year and some trade these were then shut down completely before Christmas right across the UK. This is a major blow. The closure of the hospitality and events sector too has meant that certain parts the carcass, eg saddles, have been difficult, if not impossible, to shift. The venison holding in cold storage has increased and that is going to impact on future sales for the next year or more as normality returns.

The closure of restaurants, catering and food service forced us, after careful thought and discussion with Scotland Food & Drink and the Scottish Government, to postpone the online campaign that has been funded through the industry recovery programme. It was due to break in December and we are now holding off until March as the funds have to be spent this financial year. The campaign will run for a month. Incidentally Scottish Venison was the first to receive funding through the recovery programme. The campaign fits with the industry strategy to 2030, and the whole sector should come out of this stronger with the profile of Scottish Venison raised considerably across UK markets as a result.

There has been some negative publicity recently regarding closure of the restaurant trade nationally and how this has impacted on the cull and stalkers going about their work, or not, with predicted widespread environmental damage as a result. This story which broke in the Observer and the Guardian has been driven by what is happening south of the border, I think, where the sector was possibly less prepared and from a producer perspective less structured. Whilst retaining our separate identity we should work with partners in England and Wales (and the British Wild Venison 'label') to maximise on opportunities as the Covid crisis recedes.

The export season has past and has not been without issues either. Stories this week of thousands of pounds worth of British meat rotting on quaysides in European ports because of incomplete paperwork is a situation that we hope will have been well resolved when those channels of trade are once again needed. It will be difficult however for Scottish venison exporters to retain their customers and European

markets and to encourage European buyers to 'want and value' our product. FSS has an important role in making sure that the sector is well briefed on what is required for export, and Scotland Food and Drink is clearly on the case with regard to other Scottish food interests and keeping the European door ajar.

Alternative routes to market and reducing food miles are areas where the Scottish Government is especially keen and a small group is currently working on how to further develop the safe and legal short supply chain from stalker/estate into local markets.

A number of estates were already doing this pre-Covid and the pandemic has encouraged others to invest in this approach. This should compliment existing channels of volume supply to wider markets through AGHEs. It is an exercise in identifying the bottlenecks and whether that for example is processing and butchery, skills, chill facilities, funding or a combination of all of these. What is certain is we have product in abundance, we have a ready market, and there are some excellent examples of where the short supply chain is working and working well so that is a good place from which to start.

There are a lot of people and businesses involved in the Scottish venison sector who have made a lot of additional commitment and effort to work through this crisis, and we are not out of the woods yet. They have invested in their businesses, made changes to comply with Covid rules, upped their marketing and promotional activity, explored new channels of trade, sacrificed margin to discount and generally have done their utmost to keep supply chains moving.

Covid is not the only issue. Non-lead ammunition is another crucial consideration for those who have not yet switched. This requirement is coming fast, and soon, and the market will dictate what it wants and deems safe. We are told and agree that lead free will be a pre-requisite to continue to have access to certain important channels of trade. No lead, full stop, will ultimately be the default across the board regardless of the stand by some organisations for a voluntary 5 year transition away from lead.

Overall, however, and returning to Covid, if we use the current situation and resources that we have wisely we can, I think, come out of this stronger and in a better position to build on Scottish venison's profile and success as and when the markets that are closed re-open and the feelgood factor returns, as it will, in time.