Venison Report

Dick Playfair, Secretary, Scottish Venison Association

I'm going to talk a little about research and sales, the wild venison sector and greenhouse gas emissions, expanding routes to market, and the SVA review.

The market
The latest data that we have is from The Knowledge Bank in their report published earlier this year but based on numbers to February 2022. Also, it only covers GB retail. Retail market growth for venison was surprisingly good through Covid. At end 2019, pre-Covid, it was reported that retail sales were up 20% in volume and 12% in value over the previous year. Follow up research in May last year showed retail sales continuing to rise in London and SE England and in Scotland, but by February this year that had slowed dramatically. Volume retail growth remained slightly up, but just 1.3% and value down by almost 2%.

Of course, through the same period trade through other channels, restaurants, catering and food service, events etc came back on stream so it is not all bad news, particularly since these channels had dried to a trickle or less through the pandemic.

What venison is doing is tracking the rest of the red meat sector where sales, particularly at the premium end, remain challenging, although at the discounter end are more buoyant. We can probably expect that to continue as costs of living continue to rise. Incidentally a drop of 4% is forecast across red meat sales through 2022 and I don't doubt that venison is likely to fall by the same mark also.

Greenhouse gas emissions project
The SVA published a Statement of Intent in July this year, its bottom line to have net zero emissions by 2035 across the whole wild deer management and venison processing sectors. If you have not seen that statement – which is quite detailed and was included in the summer issue of Scope – I commend it to you. It is on the SVA and ADMG websites. It was drawn up by a group comprising ADMG, BASC, LDNS, NatureScot, Scottish Environment LINK, and the major processors.

The next step is commissioning work across the sector – this may be research, or we may undertake limited research and go straight to an action plan – that will show clear guidance of where remedial action can be taken and how that can be delivered. Our small GHG sector steering group meets again next month to plot that course.

Meeting with the Minister
SVA was fortunate to piggy back an ADMG meeting with the Minister Lorna Slater where we managed a few moments to talk to her and her officials about venison and venison marketing. That meeting – both the run up to it and its aftermath – demanded some focussed thinking, particularly about where the pinch points in the supply chain are, and whether we have capacity to increase venison processing and production, and routes to market at national and local levels. We don't.

We have raw product in abundance, but the issue lies in getting it processed and to market in certain areas and in volume. To this end we set up, with Government support, a pilot project to pump-prime demonstrator local processor units – private enterprise led but community driven. We went through a selection process, three projects were identified, all of which were looking to develop such facilities.

With partial funding secured from the Scottish Government Scotland Food & Drink Partnership Recovery Plan, the scheme was launched in 2021, three applications (in Moray, Argyll and SW Scotland) were successful in their application. The scheme aims to enable more local processing and venison to be available for local consumption and as collection points to supply national game dealers and to demonstrate to others how to develop such a facility.

However, all three projects are currently under review as inflation has drastically increased the costs of materials and this has had a knock-on impact on the financial viability of each project.

We are looking at other ways to make this project fly but the dichotomy we face is that financially it is unlikely that any one of these units would be feasible for some considerable period, if at all, given development cost, running costs, and anticipated returns.

We are considering a further geographically based review of the existing provision of sector infrastructure, AGHEs, collection centres/larders, retail outlets etc., to fully understand the network of new facilities required. This would ensure that venison can enter the local food chain through a coherent network of community chills that reduce transport and increase local market supply.

In addition, we think that developing the butchery skills base of both stalker and butchers will enable and encourage more local supply. Whilst the pilot project has already shown that serious constraints exist – not least funding and planning - in terms of developing a medium sized community based processor business, we also know that at estate level, with the right skills, limited investment, and supply of raw material, a viable local unit can be established to service local markets and beyond and the law and hygiene regulations permit this.

<u>SVA review</u>
Earlier this year we commissioned SAOS to undertake a review of SVA, its structure and governance, its role and remit, and its funding. We have just seen their report in draft form and what is evident is that we have a developing sector that is significantly underfunded and if it is to make progress in delivering the ambitions of the Scottish Venison Strategy then change is needed.

After a number of years of decline the levy dropped significantly in 2021/22 to its lowest level in 10 years. Given that SVA has unlocked around £160K of Government and agency funding for the sector it may be surprising to hear that the organisation exists on a shoestring budget of less than £20K per annum. That doesn't give us much leeway to do a great deal.

To do the sector justice, to develop it, to afford it the time, energy and input it deserves it needs, in our estimation, a budget of around £120K per annum. Otherwise we can only pay lip service to what we want to do. There are new threats too, not least venison from England which is getting its act together and which could easily, as it becomes better structured and resourced, challenge established and valuable markets particularly in London and SE. More on that review imminently. So, what are our immediate priorities.

To complete the SAOS review and set SVA on a firmer financial footing, able to deliver more effectively on the Venison Strategy.

Given the situation going forward – ie an expectation that more deer will be culled - that will result in an increase in production and supply volumes in the short term, and we must find solutions for how additional product can be promoted and reach the market. Public sector procurement (schools, hospitals, prisons etc and where Highland Game has already taken a lead with Forestry England venison) and supply to combat food poverty and to charities such as the Country Food Trust and Empty Kitchens should also play a part.

Welcome support from the Scottish Government has provided short-term post-Covid relief but ideally a level of exposure annually through generic marketing has to be maintained to increase Scottish venison's profile across the whole UK and underpin promotional effort by AGHEs, butchers and through other channels eg direct estate sales and mail order.

Considerable progress has been made by the Scottish wild venison sector over recent years, not least in promoting attitudinal change whereby venison is no longer regarded as a by-product of sport stalking and largely exported. There has also been a culture change in recognition that what you do on the hill that results in a carcase in the larder means that you are in the food business. That's worth remembering too.

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