

DEER FACTS

VELVET ANTLER REMOVAL

SAFE, HUMANE, HYGIENIC HARVEST OF A PRIZED HEALTH INGREDIENT

KEY POINTS

- The welfare of velvetting stags is critically important at all times. This means complying with the legal obligations and meeting societal expectations around animal welfare.
- By law, velvetting must be carried out under veterinary supervision, safely, with pain relief and with minimal stress to the stag.
- The premises used for removing velvet must comply with MPI hygiene and food safety standards.
- Deer farm owners or deer farm employees may velvet deer under veterinary supervision if they meet the requirements of a certification programme run by the National Velvetting Standards Body (NVSB).
- To become certified, you must pass an exam that shows you have a good understanding of all aspects of velvet growth and removal. You must also demonstrate you can remove velvet safely, hygienically and with effective pain relief.
- As a certified velvetter, you must pay an annual fee and have a formal NVSB contract with a supervising veterinarian.
- NVSB and MPI carry out random audits each year to ensure that everyone is complying with the NVSB and RCS rules.

Looking after our animals and an amazing product

Velvet has great cultural importance in Korea, China and elsewhere in Asia. It is a highly prized traditional medicine ingredient, with health-giving properties that are today being confirmed by a growing body of research.

Health food products based on NZ velvet enjoy strong demand among consumers of all ages in South Korea, New Zealand's largest velvet market. There is also growing demand from China for NZ velvet, for use in herbal medicines and modern health products.

Many modern velvet-based products are marketed under major consumer brands by highly reputable companies. These companies prefer to buy NZ velvet because of its quality and the integrity of all aspects of its supply: our free-range farms, high standards of animal welfare and environmental care, food hygiene and safety, as well as electronic traceability.

Because of the concerns of customers and the wider public, it is critical that every deer farm meets the highest animal welfare and food hygiene standards. This maintains the industry's social licence to produce and market velvet for human consumption.

To this end, the National Velvetting Standards Body (NVSB) operates a farmer velvetter training and certification programme. It also assesses facilities on deer farms to ensure they comply with MPI's Regulated Control Scheme (RCS) for Deer Velvet Harvest, that focuses on hygiene and food safety.

Animal welfare is critical

Velvet is removed from stags at a stage of growth when it contains nerves and a blood supply. Because of this, NZ law requires that velvetting must be carried out under veterinary supervision, safely, with pain relief and with minimal stress to the stag.

These legal requirements are taken extremely seriously by the deer industry, the veterinary profession, MPI and the courts.

Understandably, the rules are strict, but we need to treat them as a minimum standards, in order to retain the right to remove velvet. Look at each aspect of your stag management and ask yourself if you are providing the best welfare for your stags and how it might be perceived by the non-farming public.

Blood loss following antler removal is a good example. The loss of a small amount of blood is not a welfare concern, but it can look alarming. To minimise blood loss, adopt best practice techniques, as advised by your veterinarian.

Photo credit: Tony Roberts



NZ deer velvet is in high demand in Asia for its quality and – equally importantly – for our free-range farming systems, and high standards of animal welfare, food hygiene and safety.

Minimising blood loss

Low pressure tourniquets are very effective at reducing blood loss following velvetting, according to research studies at Massey University and AgResearch.

In the same studies, kaolin clay and chitosan powder – treatments used by many farmers – were shown to be ineffective.

To get the benefit of the tourniquets and to ensure there is no damage to the pedicle, they need to be removed after a few hours. In the studies, 4 hours was effective and safe; 24 hours was too long.

Prototypes of delayed release tourniquets were developed for the trials, to avoid the need to bring the stags back into the yards for their removal, but the release times proved to be highly variable, risking damage to the pedicle when too long.

Until a proven commercial slow-release product is developed, use standard rubber bands, such as the No. 88 sized bands manufactured by Waugh Rubber Bands, www.waughbands.co.nz.

Attach the bands after the standard tourniquets used during velvetting have been removed. Remove the bands after 4-6 hours.

Clean areas for a premium food product

In order to ensure our velvet is safe for human consumption, it must be removed and handled in a clean area. Then – within 2 hours of harvest – it must be moved into a freezer and kept frozen during storage and transport.

How well do you cope with the unexpected?

“If something doesn’t go 100% right during training or assessment, don’t panic”, says Southland deer vet Samantha Elder.



“Deer can be unpredictable animals and occasionally, things don’t go as planned. The important thing is how well you react and adapt to the unexpected. What we are looking for is your ability to identify and alleviate stressors on the animal quickly and effectively.”

She says learning from experience is one of the best ways to do things better in the future, but don’t be afraid to talk to your vet as well.

“Another perspective can be valuable and help you find ways of doing things differently. Use the one-on-one time with your vet to your advantage and for the deer’s benefit – after all, you are paying for it!”

Before it leaves the farm, it must be tagged with an electronic VelTrak label that enables it to meet MPI traceability requirements for animal-based food products. Velvetting drugs must be stored safely, used correctly and records kept.

The legal requirements relating to the removal, storage and transport of velvet are set down in laws, regulations and a Code of Welfare.

Who is permitted to remove velvet from deer?

The only people who may legally velvet deer are:

- Veterinarians
- Trainee veterinarians under the direct supervision of a vet
- Certified velvetters – farmers or their employees – approved by the NVSB to remove velvet under indirect veterinary supervision.

Removing velvet without valid NVSB certification or direct veterinary supervision is a criminal offence.

To become certified, velvetters must meet the requirements of the NVSB programme.

The velvet itself may enter the human food chain only if it is removed, handled, tagged and stored in facilities that comply with the RCS.

Becoming an NVSB-certified velvetter

Getting registered

To register for the NVSB certification programme, you need to sign a contract with a supervising veterinarian (see next section) and pay an annual membership fee.

You will then be supplied with the NVSB’s 98-page *Farmer Velvet Antler Removal Manual* and other course material.

Being evaluated

To become certified, you must pass three stages of evaluation:

Stage 1: A multiple choice theory test about the velvet removal methods you plan to use. The completed test is marked by the NVSB.

Stage 2: After your supervising veterinarian has trained you to be competent in velvet removal, they will ask you questions about the process, check your premises and assess you when you velvet at least three stags.

All supervising vets use the same evaluation criteria. You will be provided with a copy of their completed assessment form.

If the vet has concerns about any aspect of your velvetting practice or the welfare of the deer, they may require you to have further training and assessments at your expense.

Stage 3: An independent assessing veterinarian will ask you questions, check your facilities, and assess your velvetting practice. You must show that you meet the standards specified in the Manual. If you do not pass, more training and assessment visits may be required.

What’s involved?

The NVSB programme covers all aspects of velvetting, from the mustering of stags through to monitoring them in the paddock following velvet removal.

Farmers and farm employees can apply to be certified for any or all of the following methods of removing velvet:

- Chemical restraint (with local anaesthetic)
- Physical restraint (with local anaesthetic)
- NaturO™ ring procedures for spikers
- NaturO™ rings for fallow deer

You will need to demonstrate to a NVSB supervising veterinarian that you understand each of the steps involved in velvet removal, using the method(s) used on your farm.



Photo credit: Trevor Walton

Learning how to achieve effective pain relief before velvet removal is a critical part of becoming a NVSB-certified velvetter

Using adult red and elk-wapiti stags as an example, this includes:

- Ensuring velvetting areas are clean and meet RCS requirements
- Mustering and yarding stags so as to minimise stress
- The use of effective restraint during velvetting
- Correct application of a tourniquet
- Knowledge of the main antler nerves and their location
- Effective administration of local anaesthetic
- Drug hygiene
- Testing for analgesia in both antlers
- How to respond if full analgesia is not initially achieved
- Correct velvet removal
- Tourniquet removal
- Minimising blood loss
- Disinfecting velvetting equipment
- Reversing chemical sedation (if applicable)
- Stag release and monitoring
- RCS velvet storage and transport requirements
- Storage of drugs and recording their use
- Withholding periods for velvetting drugs

Failing to demonstrate knowledge or competence in any of these areas is a breach of NVSB programme requirements and must be rectified immediately.

Once you are certified

All certified farmer velvetters must pay an annual fee and have a formal NVSB contract with a supervising veterinarian. This contract covers the responsibility you and the vet share for the welfare of your stags during velvetting and the supply, storage and use of prescription animal remedies.

Tips for newbies



Photo credit: Trevor Walton

The role of your supervising veterinarian is to make sure you can remove velvet from stags safely, hygienically and with effective pain relief.

How much does certification cost?

Please ask the Quality Systems Administrator at DINZ. The fee is subject to change so is not published here. The annual fee must be paid before you are sent your training and reference materials.

Do I need to have a contract with a supervising vet?

Yes. The DINZ office can give you the names of supervising vets operating in your district.

To be certificated, you must show you have a good understanding of all aspects of velvet growth and removal. You must also show you can remove velvet from stags safely, hygienically and with effective pain relief.

The vet's role is to help you to do this, but bear in mind that individual vets are not obliged to take you on as a client. It is in your interest to develop a good working relationship with your vet and to fully comply with all programme requirements.

How long does certification take?

There is a lot of material to understand, so five or six months is typical.

If you apply in June or July, you will have time to pay the joining fee, organise a contract with a vet, do the course reading, discuss any questions you have with the vet, complete the theory test and get certificated all in the one season.

Read the questions carefully

All the answers to the Stage 1 theory test are in the *Farmer Velvet Antler Removal Manual*. Some candidates make errors because they rush through the test. Take your time to get it right.

Who do I call?

To enquire about NVSB training and certification, please contact:

Quality Systems Administrator

Deer Industry NZ

PO Box 10-702, Wellington

Tel: 04 471 6114

Meg.Barnes@deernz.org

These contracts are between two named individuals and apply to one property only. If you move to a new property or the supervising veterinarian changes, a new contract must be signed. If you are responsible for deer on more than one property, there must be a separate contract (and certificate) for each property.

If a contract with a supervising veterinarian is terminated, you must return all velvetting drugs and VelTrak tags to the vet.

Certified velvetters are assessed at the start of each season by their supervising veterinarian using the same criteria as the initial training. This vet may also make follow-up visits during the season if they consider it's necessary for the welfare of the animals.



Photo credit: Natwick photography, Tapanui

Certified velvetters are assessed at the start of each season by their supervising veterinarian

Record keeping

A Velvet Record Book is supplied by the NVSB to farmer velvetters each year, before the start of the season, for recording the following information:

- Stags velvetted
- Drug usage
- Deaths
- Unusual reactions
- Use of NaturO™ rings

Electronic records are also acceptable. Regardless of which method you use, at the end of each season, by 31 March, you must have sent your completed drug records, any unused drugs, including partially used containers, to your supervising veterinarian. If you fail to do this your certification may be revoked for one or more seasons, or your contract terminated.

Integrity and audit

The NVSB programme and the RCS are designed to give regulators, the general public and overseas markets confidence in the integrity of all aspects of NZ velvet production.

VelTrak, which electronically links velvet tags from the vet,

to the farm, the buyer and the packhouse, makes it very difficult for anyone working outside the NVSB programme, or in a non-compliant shed, to market their velvet.

In addition, both the NVSB and MPI carry out random audits each year to ensure that everyone is complying with the NVSB and RCS rules.

If you are selected for audit, do not take offence. Good audit reports underpin the social licence that allows us to farm deer for their velvet and to velvet our own stags under indirect veterinary supervision.

What is the NVSB?

The National Velvetting Standards Body is a partnership between the NZ Deer Farmers Association and the NZ Veterinary Association, both of which are represented on the NVSB committee. It has legal status under the Animal Welfare (Care and Procedures) Regulations 2018.

Its mission is to ensure the welfare of stags and the ability of the industry to remove velvet now and in the future.

It also assists deer farmers to comply with rules designed to ensure food safety under the RCS.

Deer Industry New Zealand administers these activities on behalf of the NVSB. The costs are recovered from the annual fees charged to certified velvetters and applicants for certification.

More >>

Deer Industry NZ

Deer Hub

- www.deernz.org.nz/deer-hub/velvet-and-antlers/velvetting/

Legal

- Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines Act, 1997 (provisions for the use and storage of restricted drugs)
- Animal Welfare (Care and Procedures) Regulations 2018
- Regulated Control Scheme for Deer Velvet Harvest
- Animal Products Act, 1999
- Animal Welfare Act, 1999
- Deer Code of Welfare, 2025



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Deer Facts are produced by Deer Industry New Zealand (DINZ), supported by the Ministry for Primary Industries, to assist farmers to run profitable farm management systems that are recognised for their high standards of animal welfare and environmental performance.

Each Deer Fact sheet has been checked for technical accuracy, but DINZ cannot take responsibility for decisions based on their content. If in doubt, seek professional advice.