

Best practice weaning management

Minimising stress and maximising growth

It is worth taking the time to plan weaning and to get it right. When it happens, how it is carried out and how the weaners (and their mums) are fed will have a big bearing on growth rates, next year's fawning rates and the overall profitability of the farm.

On easier country it is preferable to wean before the rut. This gives you the flexibility to manage the fawns and hinds independently and is particularly important during very dry summers.

On some extensive hill and high country properties it is possible to wean during late autumn after mating.

Regardless of when you decide to wean, it is vital to minimise stress and any resulting post-weaning check in growth rates.

Because your weaners are the result of a year's hard work, weaning is also a good time to reflect on how the season has gone. If the results are below expectations, ask yourself what management changes you might consider making next year.

Preparing for weaning

If practical, run the hinds and fawns through the yards a few times in the weeks before weaning so the fawns get used to yarding.

Carry out stressful procedures such as vaccination and ear tagging well before or well after weaning. Bear in mind that any handling is associated with some risk. Keep mob sizes relatively small and allow space in receiving and breakdown pens. Time and patience are key.

While they are still with their mothers, familiarise fawns with any supplements or special forages they will be eating after weaning.

Key points

- On most down country farms, wean before the rut. On extensive hill and high country farms it is an option to wean after the rut in late autumn.
- Prepare for weaning well in advance:
 - While they are still with their mothers, familiarise fawns with any supplements or summer forages they will be eating after weaning.
 - Run hinds and fawns through the yards to familiarise the fawns with yarding.
 - Carry out stressful procedures like ear tagging, vaccination or drenching well before weaning.
- Minimise stress on weaners at and after weaning.
- Avoid bad weather when weaning and return newly-weaned fawns to a familiar paddock afterwards.
- Feed newly-weaned fawns on clean, good quality pasture. If covers are low, supplement with grain or other high quality feeds.
- Body Condition Score (BCS) hinds at weaning. If their BCS is <3 feed them supplements so they are prepared for a successful and early mating.

Consider hard feeding the weaners indoors for a week or so after weaning.

Consider running dry or quiet hinds as surrogate mothers with the fawns after weaning, at a ratio of 4 or 5 per 100 weaners.

Plan to manage weaners in mobs based on weight or breed



Photo: Jamie Ward

Almost ready for weaning

On easier country it is preferable to wean before the rut. This is particularly important during very dry summers

type. Pay careful attention to paddock size and ensure weaners are kept well apart from mobs of hinds.

The process of weaning

Avoid bad weather during weaning.

Run a dozen or so hinds at a time into a central pen and slip the fawns quickly and quietly out a side door. Minimise noise and stress.

Establish several mobs of weaners, based on size or, if you are recording, on weight.

Return the fawns to a paddock they are familiar with. This paddock will have a good supply of clean water and provide good shelter. Run the hinds to a paddock some distance away.

Consider using the 'Aitken weaning method' which settles weaners quickly. This involves grazing hinds and fawns in the weaning paddock for 2-3 days before weaning. The fawns, with or without dry hinds – or quiet hinds from a different mob – are then returned to this paddock after weaning and their mothers are put in a paddock some distance away. After a minimum of two days, the fawns can be moved to fresh pasture by just opening a gate and letting them move through in their own time.

If you decide to hold fawns in indoor pens, make sure they are familiar with the hard feed they will be offered. Weaners reared this way will be much tamer when they are on pasture in the future. Make sure there is an adequate supply of clean water.

Expect a death rate of less than 1%.

Management of fawns after weaning

Avoid the excessive use of dogs and unfamiliar disturbances.

Keep a sharp eye out for distressed, injured or sick animals as they may unsettle the rest of the herd, or be an indicator that disease is present.

Target a weaner growth rate of at least 300 g/day through the autumn. To achieve this, give them the best rations you have available.

Maximum growth rates will be achieved on pasture with a high proportion of clover, chicory and/or plantain. These highly digestible forages may be up to 13 MJME/kg DM.

Feed of this quality is not available on all farms or in all seasons. But aim to provide covers of at least 2200 kg DM/ha (about 10 cm) with a green leaf content greater than 60% (feed energy greater than 10.5 MJME/kg DM).

If feed of this quality is not available, see the *Deer Fact* Drought feeding and management.

Management of hinds after weaning

At or around weaning, body condition score the hinds.

Preferentially feed hinds with a BCS of less than 3 with pasture and/or grain supplements to ensure a successful mating.

Where the BCS is <3 the mating date is likely to be delayed by about 5 days when compared with those with a BCS of >4. Conception rates are also likely to be around 10% lower.

Be aware that some of the lower BCS hinds may have



Late weaning may improve fawn performance and survival in the high country, but can result in a delay of up to 10 days in fawning following season

Photo: Kris Orange

produced some of the best fawns because of their high milk production. If you can identify the mothers of the best fawns, they should have priority access to preferential feed.

A BCS wall chart was posted to all NZ deer farmers in late 2014. Copies are available from DINZ on 04-473 4500 and can be viewed on www.deernz.org/BCS chart

If you plan to single-sire mate your hinds, establish hind mating groups soon after weaning (well ahead of putting the stag out). This will allow them time to settle into a stable social order.

The post-rut weaning option

On extensive deer farming operations it is an option to leave fawns with their mothers right through mating until late autumn. It may also be advisable on other farms when the facial eczema risk is high (see *Facial Eczema Deer Fact*).

By weaning when the fawns are older, they are likely to experience less stress than they would if they were pre-rut weaned. Pre-winter growth checks may also be avoided. On the down-side, late weaning is likely to delay conception (and therefore fawning) by 8-10 days.

Late weaning suits a 'minimal' style of deer farming where the labour input is low and animals tend to look after themselves. Many such operations are on large blocks of difficult country where mustering difficulties make pre-rut yarding impossible.

As winter approaches, there are growing risks to the unweaned fawns from yersiniosis and parasites.

Transportation of late weaned fawns in winter to new properties also poses risks. Avoid any predicted bad weather when planning to wean and make sure the weaners have good feed and shelter.

More >>

www.deernz.org/weaning

DINZ *Deer Fact*: Drought feeding and management

Understanding feed quality: Beef+Lamb NZ, FEEDSMART 2: Workshop Resource Book, www.bitly/B-L_FEEDSMART