

Arva - 1990 - Deer Farming at Weldon's Prospect Farm - new ways to use land!

Red deer farming a growing industry

Poor profits are making farmers look for new ways to use their land.

WHEN YOU THINK of farming, a mob of red deer behind two-metre high cyclone fencing usually isn't what comes to mind.

But that's what some farmers are staking their future on as the market for venison and antler velvet soars while most food commodity prices plunge.

"There has to be something new that people can do with farms. There are so many farming operations that are just not profitable any more," says Sandy Sparling, whose 40-hect-

are Birr area property was too small to make traditional farming practical.

He wanted to keep his farm's 15 hectares of bush in its natural state so he bought 27 exposed hinds (impregnated female deer) to make use of it.

Traditional farmers face bad weather, expensive equipment and low prices for what they do produce. Red deer don't even need a barn. In the winter the bush provides them with adequate shelter, says Sparling.

"There has to be something in the future to make the land worthwhile, especially if you have small acreages," Sparling says.

The red-deer farming industry started in New Zealand after international demand began out-

stripping the supply of venison from deer caught in the wild.

Canada's first red-deer farms began in the fall of 1988 with stock imported from New Zealand.

New Zealand continues to be the largest producer of farm-raised venison but Sparling says it can't meet all the demand for venison in Europe and the U.S.

With seasons here being opposite to New Zealand, Sparling says Canada has an opportunity to provide venison when New Zealand can't.

Doug Weldon, whose Prospect Farms in Arva is highly regarded for its standardbred horses and purebred Anguses, thinks red deer may be the answer for some who are looking for an alternative to traditional farming. He's bought 50 red deer and 50 elk while reducing his horse and cattle populations.

"I've always been interested in meat production," he says, noting that venison, the best cuts of which go for \$50 or more a kilogram, is a more appropriate meat for the 1990s.

LOWER IN FAT: He quotes the New Zealand Farm Raised Venison Council charts that say venison is lower in fat, cholesterol and calories than all other red meats, poultry and even some

fish such as salmon.

"I love beef but I've got to cut back because my doctor says my cholesterol level is too high."

Weldon predicts that raising deer will be a growth industry with farmers who want to try something new.

Venison will probably never be a regular item on the average dining room table, he adds.

"It'll always be a premium meat."

Just as important are the stags' antlers which are surgically removed each year and sold as an ingredient for health concoctions in Asia, Weldon says.

Top quality red deer antlers go for more than \$175 a kilogram and elk about \$225 a kilogram.

"It's such a price that there's not an incentive to kill your males," he says.

