

**Code of Recommendations and
Minimum Standards for the Welfare of
Deer During the Removal of Antlers**

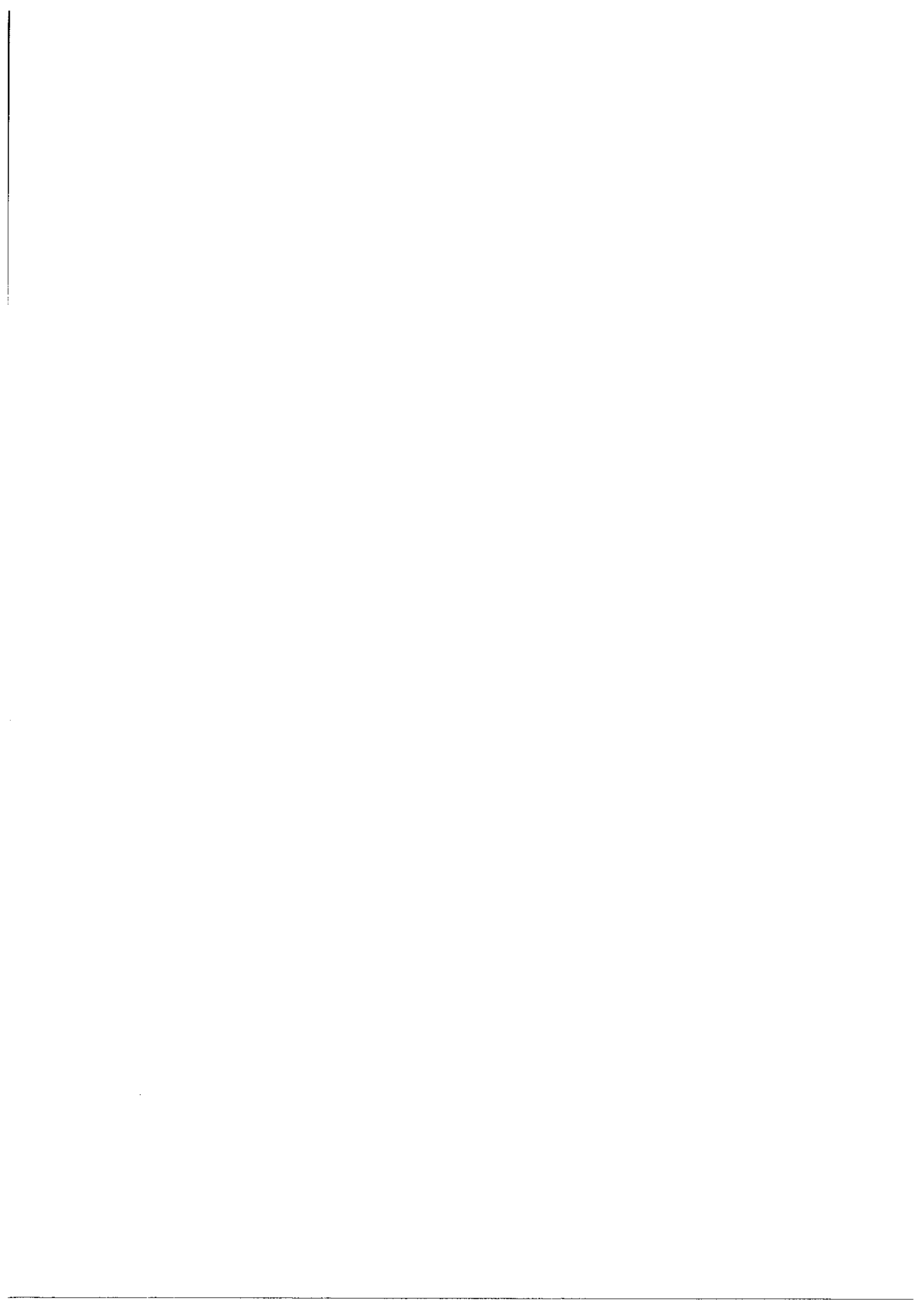
Code of Animal Welfare No.5

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Preface

The codes of recommendations and minimum standards for the welfare of animals have been prepared by the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC), which was established in 1989 by the then Minister of Agriculture to advise him on matters concerning animal welfare.

AWAC consists of members from the following backgrounds: the farming community, animal welfare groups, the veterinary profession, animal behaviour and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. It also includes the chairman of the National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee, an independent chairman and, up until February 1991, a philosopher.

Extensive consultation takes place with industry and other interested groups in the development of codes.

This *Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Deer During the Removal of Antlers* was endorsed as a national code at the committee meeting held on 5 May 1992.

The codes of recommendation and minimum standards which have been endorsed by AWAC are:

Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Circus Animals and Information for Circus Operators.

Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Sea Transport of Sheep from New Zealand.

Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Sheep.

Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Dairy Cattle.

The codes of welfare may be revised to take into account changes in practices of animal management and knowledge of animal welfare.

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1. Introduction

Animal welfare considerations are becoming increasingly important, both in New Zealand and internationally. Practices which may once have been deemed acceptable are now being reassessed and modified according to new knowledge and changing attitudes. High standards of animal welfare are not only important legally, but also have direct economic benefits and ensure international market access.

Without good stockmanship, animal welfare can never be adequately protected. This code is intended to encourage all responsible for its implementation, and especially the inexperienced, to adopt the highest standards of husbandry.

The code takes account of five basic requirements:

- freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition;
- the provision of appropriate comfort and shelter;
- the prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment of injury, disease or infection;
- freedom from distress;
- the ability to display normal patterns of behaviour.



2. Legal Responsibilities

The Animals Protection Act 1960 makes provision for the protection of animals and the prevention of cruelty to animals. Departure from a code of conduct is, in itself, not an offence under the Act. Such a departure may, however, assist in determining whether, for example, the suffering of an animal was unreasonable or unnecessary and in that way may assist in securing a conviction for an offence under the Act.

Specifically, certain sections of the Act indicate that an offence is committed if anyone:

- cruelly ill-treats any animal;
- being the owner or person in charge of any animal, omits to supply the animal with proper and sufficient food, water and shelter;
- being the owner or person in charge of any animal, wilfully or wantonly neglects the animal so that it suffers unreasonable or unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress;
- slaughters, brands, mutilates, confines, conveys, or carries any animal in such a manner or position as to cause the animal unnecessary pain, or suffering;
- keeps alive any animal which is in such a condition that it is cruel to keep it alive.

These five sections of the Act are all of direct relevance to farmed deer in relation to the inhumane removal of antlers, possible damage inflicted by deer with hard antlers to other deer during handling or transport, and possible injury to antlers in velvet during transport or handling.

3. The Nature of Deer Antler

For the purposes of this code "deer" are defined as all species of animal belonging to the family *Cervidae*.

Antlers are defined as the appendages which grow annually from the pedicle formation of the frontal bone of deer. They are therefore quite unlike the horns of cattle, sheep and goats, which do not regrow if removed correctly. Antlers also develop and mature in a manner different to horns and broadly two stages of antler development are recognised: velvet antler and hard antler.

Velvet antler is defined as growing antler which contains an abundant blood and nerve supply and which has a fully intact skin with a covering of fine soft hair. The surgical removal of velvet antler without some form of anaesthesia will cause pain and distress to the animal.

Hard antler is the antler when growth has ceased, calcification has occurred, and the skin, nerve and blood supply are no longer functional. This is when the antler has no live skin at its base. Hard antler can be removed above the pedicle without causing any pain or bleeding. Hard antlers are shed naturally just before new velvet antlers begin to develop from the pedicle. Animals with hard antlers including spikers (1-year old stags, usually with a single pointed tine), can inflict serious injuries on each other during handling, transport or during the rut. Deer in the rut with antlers can also inflict serious injury on human beings.

Generally, antlers need to be removed from farmed deer at some stage. Antlers are probably best removed when in velvet for the following reasons:

- When animals have antlers in velvet, they will not be in the rut. Handling deer during the rut can be difficult and dangerous.
- By removing antlers before the animals are in the rut, they are less likely to inflict injuries on each other.
- The sale of antlers in velvet is a significant source of income for many deer farmers, and is an important source of overseas income for New Zealand.

It is possible to prevent the annual growth of antlers (polling) in deer, either by a major surgical procedure requiring the removal of tissues from which the antlers and pedicles grow, or by non-surgical methods. The surgical process must be carried out under anaesthesia by a veterinarian. Non-surgical prevention of antler growth should be undertaken only after consultation with a veterinarian and by procedures approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer.

4. The Removal of Antlers in Velvet

4.1 Veterinary Supervision

The removal of antlers in velvet must take place under veterinary supervision, for two main reasons:

- to ensure that the welfare of animals is protected by compliance with the Act and this code;
- to ensure that restricted drugs are administered according to law.

The antlers can either be removed by a veterinarian, or by an appropriately trained and competent individual under the supervision of a veterinarian. The principles and nature of veterinary supervision of an appropriately trained and competent person are outlined in Section 5. The principles and requirements for the training, assessment and approval of a competent non-veterinarian permitted to remove antlers in velvet are outlined in Section 6.

The removal of velvet without veterinary supervision and anaesthesia is likely to be considered a contravention of the Animals Protection Act 1960.

4.2 Timing

If antlers in velvet are to be removed, it is important from an economic viewpoint to remove them at a stage when they are most valuable commercially. Readers are referred to the guidelines on velvetting published by the New Zealand Game Industry Board, which discuss in detail the best time to remove antlers in velvet.

From a welfare viewpoint, it must be remembered that all antlers in velvet have a well developed nerve and blood supply, and wounds associated with their removal can become infected.

4.3 Mustering and Handling

Before the removal of antlers in velvet, animals should be mustered and the stags drafted out. This should be done carefully and quietly and not in extremes of temperature, to avoid undue stress to animals and to avoid damage to the velvet. Apart from reducing the value of the product, damage to such sensitive organs will cause pain and distress to the animals.

The animals selected for antler removal should be then run into properly designed yards, where they will not be overcrowded, or alarmed by noise or unusual visual stimuli.

Culling excitable animals and the selection of quiet stock is an important factor in

improving the welfare of farmed deer.

4.4 The Operation

1. The animals must be restrained during the velvetting procedure. This can be achieved by either properly-designed physical restraining devices or by the use of chemical agents. It must be remembered that chemical restraint does not necessarily produce concurrent anaesthesia.
2. The velvet antler must be fully desensitised before velvet harvesting, using only those forms of anaesthesia approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer. The forms of anaesthesia currently approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer include:
 - local anaesthesia using a nerve block of the two major nerves supplying the antler;
 - local anaesthesia using a ring block around the base of the pedicles;
 - general anaesthesia administered by a veterinarian.
3. It must be remembered that the removal of antlers is a surgical procedure and basic principles of surgery must apply. To avoid unnecessary trauma, suitable instruments must be used in a correct manner. To avoid infection, reasonable standards of hygiene must be maintained (instruments must be kept disinfected). Excessive bleeding must be controlled, usually by a tourniquet applied temporarily around the base of the pedicles.
4. Velvet must be removed at a site above the pedicle.

4.5 Aftercare

Although few problems are likely to be encountered, if any problems occur which cannot be corrected by the owner or supervisor of the animals, veterinary advice must be sought. Animals should be kept under observation in accordance with good stockmanship.

5. Veterinary Supervision of Velvet Harvesting

5.1 Principles

The veterinarian must be given the supervisory role by the farmer owner or manager of the animals. A written contract between the veterinarian and the farmer owner or manager must be made.

Supervision can be undertaken only after an individual has been trained and assessed for both theoretical and practical competence to the satisfaction of the veterinarian and in compliance with the objective examination criteria approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer.

Supervision as outlined here applies to the welfare of stags. The control of prescription drugs is a matter for the Animal Remedies Board.

The veterinarian is responsible for the welfare of the animals.

The veterinarian must record his actions in relation to the supervision of velvet harvesting.

5.2 The Nature of Supervision: Veterinary Responsibilities

After initial training and veterinary approval, the approved person must be reassessed annually for both theoretical and practical competence at the start of the velvet harvest season using similar criteria to the initial training and approval. This would include the veterinarian observing a minimum of number of deer being velvettted using the objective criteria of assessment approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer.

The supervising veterinarian must be satisfied that the equipment and facilities used are sufficient to achieve compliance with this code of practice.

Approved persons may only remove velvet from stags under their direct care. The veterinarian must record the size of the herd and permit only animals from that herd to be velvettted.

The veterinarian must be present on a minimum of one further occasion during the velvet harvest season. The veterinarian must reserve the right to visit more frequently if this is considered necessary for the welfare of the animals.

The veterinarian must document supervisory procedures and the person supervised must sign a statement that they have been carried out.

The veterinarian must be prepared to certify that to the best of his knowledge all stags were velvettted by a supervised person who had been trained to meet the standard of this code of conduct.

The veterinarian and farmer must document any problems observed, including deaths and any other untoward events.

6. Training, Assessment and Approval of Competence

6.1 Principles

The layman wishing to harvest velvet from stags must possess an adequate knowledge of all issues of welfare relating to velvet harvest and be competent to an agreed standard in performing the practical procedures.

Both theoretical knowledge and practical ability must be assessed by objective criteria, the former being a written examination and the latter a practical assessment requiring compliance with standards approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer.

Proof of competence involving both of the above will require veterinary certification.

Assessment will be by one or more veterinarians nominated by the Chief Veterinary Officer.

6.2 Theoretical Knowledge

Legal Requirements: The candidate must have a knowledge of animal welfare legislation of relevance to velvet antler harvest and a full knowledge of the contents of this code of conduct.

Veterinary Supervision: The candidate must demonstrate a knowledge of the definition and requirements of veterinary supervision as laid down in this code.

Principles of Animal Welfare: The candidate must demonstrate an understanding of animal welfare and the need for codes of animal welfare.

Principles of Stress and Wellbeing: The candidate must possess a knowledge of the influence of stress on the wellbeing of animals, including its influence on behaviour and the consequences of failure to alleviate stress.

Pain and Recognition of Pain: The candidate must possess a general knowledge of the effects and transmission of pain and the response of the animal to pain in different physiological states, e.g. stressed or non-stressed.

Antler Physiology and Anatomy: The candidate must possess a general knowledge of the growth of antlers and the tissues involved, and know the anatomical location of the nerve and blood supply to the antler.

Principles of Surgery: The candidate must know the basic principles of surgery, including asepsis, haemostasis and healing by first intent.

Principles of Hygiene: The candidate must have a knowledge of the principles of hygiene required to prevent the infection of wounds associated with velvet antler removal.

Disease Conditions Affecting Velvet: The candidate must be aware of the manifestations of the diseases which may affect the antler and the welfare of the animals.

Handling of Emergencies: The candidate must demonstrate a knowledge of how to deal with adverse situations and emergencies associated with velvetting procedures which could prejudice the welfare of animals.

Global Implications of Velvet Harvesting: The candidate must demonstrate an awareness of the permissibility of velvet harvesting in other countries, particularly our trading partners, and an awareness of the implications of failure of the New Zealand deer industry to comply with animal welfare requirements from an international trading perspective for deer and other New Zealand agricultural products.

6.3 Instruction on Velvet Harvesting Procedures

The veterinarian instructing the candidate must demonstrate to the candidate appropriate techniques used for the anaesthesia and removal of antlers.

The veterinarian must supervise the antler harvest by the candidate of a number of stags sufficient for the purpose of training.

6.4 Veterinary Approval

The veterinarian must then observe without participation a minimum number of stags being velvetted by the candidate as determined by the Chief Veterinary Officer. A check list of compliance with methods and standards approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer will be used for each stag and a minimum standards of compliance must be met before approval can be given.

After compliance with the minimum standards the approving veterinarian will issue a certificate of approval.

The supervising veterinarians must review annually the official approval of the person (see Section 5).

7. Removal of Hard Antlers

This procedure does not require anaesthesia, as the antlers are calcified, with no nerve or blood supply. However, to avoid unnecessary stress, the deer need to be restrained properly. The use of sedatives is considered advisable as stags at this stage of antler development are often very aggressive and difficult to handle. Care must be taken to use a sharp instrument and to remove the antlers above the pedicle. Removal below the pedicle will result in pain and haemorrhage, and may cause permanent polling with no further annual growth of antlers.

8. Transport of Stags With Antlers

No deer with antlers in velvet at a stage of growth which could be damaged easily should be transported where there is a risk of injury.

As already discussed, in addition to the welfare of the animals, damage from hard antlers can cause severe wounds to other animals. In addition to the welfare of the animals, damage from hard antlers can result in extensive bruising and down-grading of deer carcasses and hides, and less income.

AMENDMENT TO THE
CODE OF RECOMMENDATIONS AND MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR THE
WELFARE OF DEER DURING REMOVAL OF ANTLERS

Section 5.2 of the above code of welfare has been amended. References to the number of visits required by a veterinarian following certification have been altered. In addition, a clause concerned with an annual audit of certificated deer farmers has been introduced. The new *Section 5.2* reads as follows (with the new wording in **bold type**):

“After initial training and veterinary approval, the approved person must be reassessed annually for both theoretical and practical competence at the start of the velvet harvest season using similar criteria to the initial training and approval. This would include the veterinarian observing a minimum of number of deer being velvettted using the objective criteria of assessment approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer. **The veterinarian has a duty to visit more frequently during the velvet season if he/she considers this necessary for the welfare of the animals.**

The supervising veterinarian must be satisfied that the equipment and facilities used are sufficient to achieve compliance with this code of practice.

Approved persons may only remove velvet from stags under their direct care. The veterinarian must record the size of the herd and permit only animals from that herd to be velvettted.

The veterinarian must be prepared to certify that to the best of his or her knowledge all stags were velvettted by a supervised person who had been trained to meet the standard of this code of conduct.

The veterinarian and farmer must document any problems observed, including deaths and any other untoward events.

There will be an annual audit of certificated deer farmers and participating veterinarians by appropriately qualified persons approved by the CVO using standard audit principles at a level required to maintain the integrity and credibility of the scheme. The minimum audit level should be determined by independent statistical advice.”

The above amendments were endorsed by the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee at their meeting of 11 August 1994. These changes are effective immediately.

4.4 The Operation

A new paragraph is added after paragraph 1 on page 5 as follows:

Any device that immobilises the animal by the use of an electric current, such as the Stock-Still Electro-immobiliser, is not a device approved by the Chief Veterinary Officer and must not be used.

The above amendment was endorsed by the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee at their meeting of 29 August 1997. This amendment is effective immediately.

