



Conversations

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Local possum operations reshaped

STU HUTCHINGS

OPINION: TBfree's aerial possum control operations in high-country native forests near Taupō have been reshaped to give deer hunters access to a range of country in all seasons, while confirming the necessity of TB eradication.

Talks between deer hunters and TBfree programme managers about aerial operations in the North Island demonstrated that OSPRI is able to accommodate a wide range of views about its aerial possum control activities.

The central North Island plateau and the mountainous forest terrain surrounding Lake Taupō offer ideal habitat for possums and deer, and has a history of harbouring TB in wildlife in some areas.

It's also home range for nationally important herds of sika and red deer, prize game for New Zealand and international deerstalkers.

OSPRI's focus on knocking down possum populations is occasionally at odds with deerstalkers' focus on hunting game and trophy animals. Sometimes it's about terrain and boundaries, more often about timing.

Through a robust process of consultation around aerial and other operations, information about proposed boundaries and timing is publicised to enable submissions from interested and affected hunters, recreational and commercial land users.

Because of the ruggedness of the terrain and the unsuitability of ground-based operations, the aerial distribution of 1080 toxin is the most appropriate and cost-effective means of achieving the

rapid knockdown of possums required to eradicate TB.

Many landowners – including farmers and forest owners, conservationists and recreational groups – recognise the value of the TBfree programme and support the possum control work needed to eradicate this disease.

Other land users, including the hunting fraternity represented by the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association and the specialist Sika Foundation, suggested changes to the proposed timing of the operation and inclusion of deer repellent on 1080 cereal baits.

The submissions made it clear that planned expansion of operations in this area would have major impacts on commercial and recreational hunting.

Changes would allow them access to traditional hunting terrain during the most popular times of the season.

After careful consideration of the submissions, and meetings with hunting organisations, OSPRI managers suggested a solution – an arrangement that acknowledged the hunters' views while enabling the important TBfree work to be completed.

OSPRI decided to continue its investment in the use of deer-repellent treated 1080 bait across all sika deer habitat in highly valued hunting areas. Also, it undertook to use deer repellent bait across more than 130,000ha of other operations on public land in North and South Island high-country deer habitat during upcoming operations.

Operations were redesigned to split the Kaipo operation into two. One half was deferred for control this (2017) winter. The Kaweka

East operation was deferred by a year to allow for further consultation, and reconfigured into three blocks to be treated across three years.

This gives hunters access to large untreated areas of front and back country during each hunting season. Timing of some operations was changed to avoid the roar season and other popular hunting periods.

Stu Hutchings is a former Taupō vet, now Group Manager of Programme Design at OSPRI.



A red stag in early season velvet.

SUPPLIED