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## **SURGING VENISON DEMAND GOOD NEWS FOR DEER FARMERS**

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A MARKET that is at least 50 per cent undersupplied and where the demand is growing year on year with double-digit growth may be the source of dreams to many farmers but that was the prospect thrown out to potential deer farmers this week.

Speaking in Stirling, Nigel Sampson, who operates a deer finishing unit and venison processing plant at Harrogate, said his main problem was in sourcing sufficient deer to supply the market.

Consumers were now getting the message that venison is a very healthy form of red meat and are prepared to buy it. As a result, all the major supermarkets wanted venison on their shelves.

Not being able to supply deer from sources in the UK, Sampson said he was now importing venison from Europe and New Zealand to meet demand.

"It has been a long marketing campaign to get to this stage where people are wanting to buy venison and it is frustrating that there is not sufficient meat being produced in this country," he said.

Sampson was speaking after one of the pioneers of deer farming in this country, Dr John Fletcher, from Reedehill farm, Auchtermuchty, had complained about the poor treatment the sector had had from successive governments.

He stated that deer farmers had been excluded from all the main support programmes in the past 20 to 30 years and this had not only disheartened those who had started farming deer at that time but it had also discouraged others from coming into the industry.

"It is all very well to say to farmers to diversify but where is the incentive?" asked Fletcher. "Home-produced farm venison is in decline. We need a new generation to come in and take up the challenge."

Looking at the marketing side of the business, Fletcher agreed with Sampson that there was now increased public recognition of the health benefits from eating venison after seeing it being cooked by celebrity chefs and increasingly on restaurant menus.

"It has now reached a 'tipping point'," he said, "where people want to buy it and where supermarkets need to have it in the stores."

However, he was concerned that venison prices would have to rise to reflect increased production costs.

Fletcher commented that on a recent visit to Poland, he found that consumers in that country were prepared to pay a premium for venison.