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**Venison markets diversify**

**bySteph Holloway**

The venison industry has invested significant resources in diversifying export markets and February data reveals its success, AgriHQ analyst Rachel Agnew says.

Latest export statistics to February show the United States market outpaced the German one as New Zealand’s top venison export destination.

NZ venison exports traditionally relied on the German game trade that peaked in the northern hemisphere autumn and winter but in recent years the industry had diversified away from that market.

February export data showed shipments to the US market were up 27% year-on-year while exports to Germany were down 41%.

“Market diversification has been an industry objective for venison exporters as both a means to mitigate risk and achieve a longer window of premium returns for both exporters and farmers,” Agnew said.

The North American market had become increasingly important in recent years, being NZ’s largest year-round chilled venison destination.

“Increased sales activity into the US market has created an opportunity for increased chilled exports. Chilled volumes to the US increased 29% by volume on year-ago levels,” Agnew said.

Chilled exports made up 19% of total export volume and 34% by value.

A challenge for the industry was the current period of low slaughter volumes affecting export volumes.

“Total venison exports for the 12 months ending February 2017 are 19% down on year-ago levels, driven by low deer slaughter.

“Hind slaughter for the period was down 26% on year-ago levels, indicating farmers are focusing on herd rebuilding,” Agnew said.

But the low slaughter volume environment, which was met by good demand, had driven a 5% lift in export prices.

The low slaughter volumes were expected to challenge the industry for at least another season but marketing initiatives had been gearing up for stronger numbers in the future.

Deer Industry NZ venison marketing manager Marianne Wilson said initiatives to explore new export market opportunities were focused on driving exports of chilled venison out of the traditional German game trade.

“What we are doing is laying the groundwork for the future. The industry is going through a herd-rebuilding phase at present and when venison production inevitably increases we want to have more year-round markets offering premium prices primed and ready to go,” she said.