

Should TN legalize commercial farming of whitetail?

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By JOHN L. SLOAN

That is a question before Tennessee state legislators. Introduced by Rep. Frank Niceley (R) Knoxville, HB 1112 would make it legal to raise and import whitetail deer into Tennessee for commercial purposes.

Let me make it simple for you. What this bill would do is allow Tennessee residents to enclose deer in pens and raise them as they would cattle and then sell the live animals, the body parts for food consumption, allow the killing of them by individuals and sell the various by products.

Why is this of concern? The major concern would be the importation of deer into Tennessee . This could possibly increase the risk of diseases among which, chronic wasting disease (CWD) is of the most concern.

“In view of the numerous past problems associated with live captive Cervid movement, it has been recognized that activities that increase live animal movement, such as construction of new facilities that require stocking with live Cervids and restocking of existing facilities increases the risk of CWD introduction,” said Dr. John Fischer, DVM, PhD. Director of the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study at the University of Georgia.

CWD is a sneaky disease in the same family as mad cow disease in cattle, scrapies in sheep and Creutzfeldt-Jacobs disease in humans. It is terminal and has an incubation period that may last as long as five years before it is visible. The only way to diagnose CWD is by examining the brain of a dead animal. To date, no cases have been reported in Tennessee however, one Wyoming county has lost an estimated 50% of their mule deer to CWD. Although it has been reported in wild populations, it is most prevalent in terms of detection, in penned animals. However, consider what economic blow it would be to loose 50% of the wild deer in one Tennessee county.

The possibility of disease is my main objection to the bill. Also of concern would be the result of allowing the killing of these animals under the guise of sport hunting. It is quite common in some states to grow extremely large antlered bucks then sell them for slaughter by "hunters".

I personally do not care but the ancillary result of this is the painting of all hunters with the same tarred brush. It provides ammunition to anti-hunting and animal rights groups to say this is what hunting is about. Of course, that is false but anti-hunters wallow in falsehoods in their misguided effort to abolish hunting.

The deer farms would be administered by the Department of Agriculture. This would create more work for them and it is to me, a question of are they capable of sufficiently doing so. Their plate is already full.

Since CWD has not been found in common farm animals, one would assume the DOA has little or no experience in recognizing the symptoms should they see them. It is not currently known with certainty if CWD can be transmitted to livestock. It is not even known with certainty how it is transmitted. Therein lies much of the problem.

I have no problem with Tennessee residents creating an enterprise that may provide them with a source of income. This is especially true when done on their own property and at their own expense.

I have no idea how much money the sale of farm-raised venison would generate and I do not know how many killers would pay high-dollars to come here to kill a pet deer. The other source of income would be the sale of collected urine to hunters for use as an attractant to wild deer. That is already a huge industry.

However, I wonder if Tennessee wants to risk the importation of animals that are carrying a certainly fatal, potentially dangerous disease.

The bill provides for the importation of animals only from areas where no CWD has been found. However, as stated, the only way it can be found is to examine the brain of a dead animal.

CWD cannot be diagnosed until the animal is dead. You could not import a dead deer.

Therefore, there is no measure to prevent against the import of an animal with CWD because you do not know if the animal is carrying the disease or not.

To date, there is no proof that CWD can be transmitted to humans. There is also no proof it cannot. To date, there is no proof it can be transmitted to any animals other than Cervidae-deer. That would mean whitetails, mule deer, elk, moose and other members of the deer family.

Is it much ado about nothing? Possibly. But possibly not.

When elk were first reintroduced to Tennessee , not a great deal was known about the transmission of CWD. Given what we know today, it is quite unlikely elk would be imported from the famed Elk Island in Canada even though that area is CWD free.

Those elk were held in quarantine at Land Between the Lakes for a considerable period of time and closely monitored for any sign of disease before being released into the wild here in Tennessee. To date, there is no record of any animal having CWD.

True, the legalization of deer farming might produce added tax revenue. Just how much would be anyone's guess. That revenue is certainly needed. However, on the downside, it could cost far more should CWD become rampant in Tennessee. Just ask Wyoming, Wisconsin, or any state where it has become prevalent.

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