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VENISON AN OPPORTUNITY FOR WEST VIRGINIA

As fall arrives, many West Virginians have waited in anticipation for the upcoming season. No, I am not talking about Halloween, football or Thanksgiving. Deer season and the honored tradition of hunting is finally here. I would bet my best cow that most West Virginians have taken part in this season or have eaten a hunter's spoils. It is a sure bet as hunting is a pastime woven into the heritage of rural states like ours. The excitement does not stop with just hunting. The cervid industry has expanded beyond the hunter's mark into a new, innovative agricultural opportunity, an opportunity West Virginia is taking full advantage.

West Virginia "deer farmers" describe the two-year-old industry as 'thriving'. In 2015, legislation was passed to allow the processing of venison. In that same bill, authority to manage this program was transferred to the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA). All around the state, producers are excited for the potential captive cervids could have for our state. There are two types of licenses within this program. One is to breed and propagate captive cervids and create cervid byproducts for sale. The other is for a facility to breed, propagate, harvest or slaughter captive cervids, create cervid byproducts, permit hunting of captive cervids or sell venison to others.

When we say cervids, we are talking about elk, fallow, red deer and white tail. Demand for the products produced from these animals is currently at an all-time high within the United States. This demand is not being met domestically resulting in importing cervid meat from international markets. New Zealand is currently the number one producer for cervid products in the world. With how often the average West Virginian interacts with deer, it is hard to believe we have to import these products at all!

Putting aside the economic impact, why venison? Did you know it is much lower in fat and cholesterol than most meats? Venison has become a favorite of health-conscious individuals, including those on restrictive diets. Venison is also high in nutrients like B vitamins, iron and phosphorus. Meat products are not the only goods being produced from captive cervid farming. Hunting preserves are on the rise in West Virginia with around 400 acres currently under construction and more in the planning stages. The bonus to these preserves is the vast majority of these acres could not be used for traditional agriculture. Some farmers are also finding opportunity for additional business from tourism and handmade crafts and furniture.

So, where are we? Currently, the WVDA has issued 25 licenses for captive cervid producers in West Virginia and several more are pending. Even though my administration inherited this issue, we believe the WVDA is the best agency to manage the program. We have a well-equipped and well-versed staff lead by our state

veterinarian who will ensure healthy captive and wild populations. The future is promising for captive cervid farming in the Mountain State as we should continue to see a growth in production and the number of farms.

As our hunting seasons carry on, remember to shop local and/or check out a West Virginia captive cervid farm. And if you see a bald, retired Marine in the woods, don't shoot! Just say, 'Hey Commissioner.'

Semper Fi,

Kent A. Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture