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Deer hunters suffer reversal of fortune

By Bill Conners
Outdoors columnist

For several years, deer hunters in some areas (Wildlife Management Units or WMUs) of the Catskills lobbied the Department of Environmental Conservation to impose antler restrictions for bucks harvested during the state's annual deer season. When shooting bucks, hunters would be limited to shooting only those animals that have at least three points on one antler.

In 2005, the lobbying effort bore fruit. A program was put in place, in WMUs 3C and 3J. And in 2006, it was expanded into WMUs 3H and 3K - all in the southern Catskills. The new restrictions were implemented after advocates were able to demonstrate strong support for the restrictions.

So far, the program seems to be successful. It was never expected to be an overnight success, and it was fully expected to take several years to assess its full impact on the quality of deer hunting. From the start the DEC has cautioned that "people should have realistic expectations on what they may see accomplished (from such a program)."

As would be expected, there were hunters who opposed such regulations. They preferred and probably continue to prefer to be able to harvest deer - bucks or does - without having to worry about antler size. Throughout the state, a legal buck is one with at least one antler that measures at least three inches from its base to the tip - commonly referred to as a spike horn. However, the DEC had assured advocates that they would move forward with the program if they could demonstrate strong hunter support.

A coalition of deer hunters has been advocating expansion of the antler restriction program into about eight additional WMUs - again, in the Catskill Region - I believe largely to the west of the original units. The model used to develop the original program was to be repeated and again strong hunter support had to be demonstrated. The DEC also added the need for a more formal hunter survey to test the level of support.

Responding to the original effort, the DEC took the position that "antler restrictions can be part of a viable deer management program and DEC supports voluntary programs of this type. However, DEC does not see a critical biological need or compelling management advantage to mandate such restrictions. Thus, changing buck harvest standards would be primarily a response to strong interest among hunters."

The DEC insisted that because it is a fundamental change to deer hunting traditions in the state, (strong) grassroots support among hunters must be demonstrated by (any) group presenting a proposal.

In a letter to Conservation Fund Advisory Board Chairman Charlie Hancock last week, DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis said that the department had withdrawn its proposal to impose antler restrictions in the additional units because "it is apparent that most people on either side of this issue have very strongly held feelings." That is not a news flash.

Grannis also said: "Hunters opposing the change are mostly interested in 'meat, not antlers,' and are concerned about decreased harvest opportunity." That too, is not a news flash.

The letter also reinforces the DEC's long-held position that there is no urgency to implement mandatory antler restrictions. The DEC's position is it is an issue of hunter preference, not biological necessity.

So there is opposition: Some hunters want the restriction, some don't. And many on both side of the argument have strongly held beliefs.

What I find disturbing is the DEC again abandoning its stakeholders. Unlike the proposed game farm closure, at least this time they notified CFAB before the information trickled down to the masses.

The results of the current survey in the expanded area are not appreciably different from the results of the survey used in the original four WMUs, yet this time the DEC chose to back away from the survey results. I suggest that the problem is deeper than a number on a ledger sheet.

This smacks of a willingness to acquiesce to a vocal minority rather than to stand firm and support a majority of the stakeholders. This might not be as disturbing as it is had I attended an Albany meeting with the commissioner and the Director of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources, Patricia Riexinger, where the latest proposal was discussed. At that time, the survey results suggested strong support. Why now are they bent on ignoring them? If the numbers changed, I'd like to know who skewed them.

Albany belt-tightening continues to take its toll and creditably counts a lot at times like this. The DEC can ill afford to pull the rug out from under its stakeholders, especially at a time when the DEC has to turn to that same constituency with repeated frequency to accomplish its mission. I think the commissioner would do well to pull his letter of June 18 and revisit the issue. There is more at stake here than just a horde of agitated deer hunters.