New rules sought for deer farmers

By GAIL C. KECK

APTIVE whitetail deer might be the same species as their wild cousins living outside the fence, but to the farmers who raise them, captive deer are livestock. Ohio law already recognizes the difference, but deer farmers say they need better regulations to protect both the growing deer farming industry and the well-being of the state’s wild herd.

“The regulations need to catch up with the industry,” says Sam Holley, president of the White Tail Deer Farmers of Ohio and owner of Oak Ridge Whitetail Adventures, a hunting preserve near Windsor.

The Whitetail Deer Farmers of Ohio has been working with both the Ohio Department of Agriculture and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources to develop legislation that would better protect the health of both the wild and captive deer populations, Holley says.

The proposed legislation, Ohio House Bill 389, also shifts some regulatory oversight from the ODNR to the ODA, reducing some duplication of efforts. The bill, sponsored by Reps. Dave Hall and Mark Okey, has already been passed by the House and is now being considered by the Senate.

Passing the bill will give deer farms and hunting preserves a better foundation to build their industry, says Holley. Ohio is already emerging as one of the leading states in propagating captive whitetails, ranking third in the nation after Texas and Pennsylvania. Ohio currently has 684 deer propagation farms and 29 hunting preserves that include whitetails.

Big bucks

Hunting preserves rely on deer farms to supply their deer populations, Holley explains. His preserve serves hunters who like the safety of a controlled environment, those who have limited time to hunt and those who want a better chance at finding a big buck, he says. “The chances of seeing a trophy-class buck are markedly better because I know they’re in there.”

Deer farming got its start when people kept orphaned fawns or other deer captured from the wild, but now the captive and wild herds are two distinct populations, explains Scott Zody, chief of the ODNR, Division of Wildlife.

To start a deer farm, the farmer must fence out all wild deer, have the facilities inspected by the Division of Wildlife to ensure that no wild deer are trapped within the fence, and then bring in deer from the established captive herd. Breeders typically selectively breed and manage their captive deer herds to produce large bucks with big racks, Zody explains.

“Over the last 10 to 15 years, the business of raising captive deer and selling the males to hunting preserves has really taken off,” he adds.

The captive deer now managed as livestock on Ohio farms are several generations removed from the wild. Even so, Zody says, the Division of Wildlife was initially reluctant to transfer authority over deer farms to the Department of Agriculture because of fears that the farms might bring wild herds into contact with diseases, particularly chronic wasting disease.

“Propagators might not agree with this, but if chronic wasting disease comes to Ohio, it’s going to be because a sick deer is transported into the state and not because a sick deer wanders across the state line,” Zody says. However, the proposed legislation includes stricter health rules, including mandatory chronic wasting disease testing through the ODA. Under current law, testing is voluntary.

If the proposed legislation passes, the Division of Wildlife will still have responsibility for inspecting new facilities and for regulating hunting preserves. It will also have the authority over criminal investigations regarding deer. For instance, if a deer were illegally taken from the wild into a captive herd, the division would have authority to investigate.

Shifting day-to-day oversight for deer farms to the ODA sets the groundwork with his family. “I feel that’s the agency that promotes the best interest of what we do—farming,” he explains.

The Millers started their deer farm in 2003 with three deer and have expanded to a herd of about 80. They use artificial insemination to selectively breed deer for large antlers with typical structure. They sell their males to hunting preserves for further development of deer farming as an agricultural enterprise, according to Mervin Miller, who runs Marsh Valley Whitetails farm. Holley buys deer from the farm to populate his hunting preserve, Oak Ridge Whitetail Adventures.