



What a difference a year can make. Just 12 months ago, the deer farming industry in West Virginia was more about regulations than opportunities. Mark and Anita Cobb, who own a herd of red deer, weren't sure what the future held for their 36-acre family farm or the deer they treat like members of the family.

The Cobbs started out with just one buck and two doe a decade ago. Their herd grew to 27 before they culled it a few years back. At the time, deer farming in West Virginia was uncertain.

"The paperwork was a nightmare," explained Mark Cobb, who serves on the Board of Directors for the North American Deer Farmers Association.

Under the WV Division of Natural Resources, deer farmers could only raise animals to sell to hunting preserves or for breeding stock. Harvesting venison for commercial sale was a no-go.

"People wanted the meat. We just couldn't sell it," said Cobb.

The main concern was Chronic Wasting Disease, or CWD, a fatal illness found in deer that impacts the nervous system. In West Virginia, it's only been located in the wild whitetail population.

"CWD has never been found at one of our deer farms in West Virginia, not one! We test every captive deer, 100 percent. We can positively say we have never had CWD in our pens," stressed Cobb.

The Cobbs took a couple years off from breeding to decide what direction they wanted to go. Then the West Virginia Legislature passed a bill in 2015 making their path crystal clear. Deer farming moved from the control of the DNR to the West Virginia Department of Agriculture.

Marcel Fortin, the WVDA Captive Cervid Specialist, said the agency is breaking ground.

"In most states, venison has not been the priority, it's been deer hunting. In West Virginia, we want to change that and diversify. We want to make deer farms profitable," explained Fortin. "We want farmers to be able to sell venison. There's potential for jobs!"

The Cobbs started doing their homework and getting the ball rolling on venison sales.

"We're trying to do two things with venison," explained Cobb. "We're looking for restaurant customers and we're putting together snack sticks that can go on the shelves of every convenience store in the state."

Currently most of the venison sold here in the United States is imported.

"You can go to a nice restaurant in Philadelphia or Baltimore and find venison on the menu. I try to talk to the chef at each establishment. Every time I've found the venison has come from New Zealand! Ninety percent of the venison consumed in the United States in a restaurant or grocery setting comes from New Zealand."

Cobb wants the meat to come from West Virginia. With the leadership of the WVDA, he's confident that can happen.

"We are leading the nation when it comes to deer farming," said West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. "We want to create a thriving industry that benefits the farmers and the purchasing public. We want West Virginia-grown venison to be served all across the country."

The Cobbs only have 12 red deer on their farm in Jackson

County. They plan to start breeding again but it will take several years to increase the herd. They don't want to wait that long to get their venison business up and running. West Virginia currently has 31 licensed deer farms, including three hunting preserves. None of the breeding farms have the quantity of deer Cobb needs to start production. He had to look outside the state.

"We've reached out mostly to the Amish community in Ohio. I'm friends with those folks," said Cobb. "I contacted them and said, 'I'll take your cull deer.' My phone is ringing off the hook. I'm up to 450-some doe. They're just waiting for us to come pick them up."

Ohio and neighboring Pennsylvania do not allow the sale of venison from captive deer. Cobb said those farmers are dealing with the issue of what to do with doe that aren't good breeding stock. With his need for venison, it's a win/win.

"Because this is so new, we have to figure out the process. We're working with the WVDA and we've found a place to butcher and process the animals here in West Virginia. First, they have to make some changes to the plant to meet our needs."

Cobb also wants to make sure he has the customer base to make his business profitable.

"It doesn't do me any good to take 20 deer to be processed and wrapped but have nowhere to sell it. We're trying to build a clientele base."

The Cobbs got their first order in December for burgers and steaks from a restaurant in West Virginia. The Greenbrier Resort has also called, interested in a future purchase.

"There are a lot of people excited about what we're doing. However, there are unknowns. It's going to take a while to get some traction," stressed Cobb.

Bob Perrine, the owner of Mountain Clean Whites, is also pleased with the changes taking place with deer farming in West Virginia. His operation in Lewis County includes 79 whitetails. He raises the animals for breeding stock or sale to hunting preserves. His most popular buck is a 3-year-old with a 300-inch rack.

"Popeye is pretty well known in West Virginia. We

have a Facebook account and the last video we posted of him was viewed by 7,000 people within a day or two," Perrine said proudly.

Popeye's two offspring, Moonshine and Hidden Highway, already span 200-plus inches.

But it's not just racks Perrine is thinking about. He believes the future of his business is in venison as well.

"At this point we're just a breeding facility. This summer and next we're planning on more than doubling our farm operation to 300 deer. We want to expand to do meat processing right here on the farm."

The first order of business is expanding the fences from 25 acres to 50 and then breeding and purchasing more animals.

"I've talked to several people in this industry. People want the product. We just have to get things up and going," said Perrine.

That will mean building their own processing facility. By the time Perrine is ready to start construction, the Cobbs should have their operation in full production.

Mark Cobb feels he has a responsibility to create a business blueprint others, like Perrine, can follow.

"The infrastructure isn't there right now. We're creating it. Each step we're figuring out from scratch because no one has ever done it here in West Virginia. We're forging the way for everyone else that wants to do it," Cobb stressed. "We will have a tried and true process and be able to tell other deer farmers what you have to do and this is how you need to do it."

The Cobbs are currently working on some products for the future line like venison dog snacks using the heart and liver. We don't add anything, just run them through a dehydrator. Friends are coming back to me saying their dogs love it! I've tried it. People can eat it. I'm not going to give a product to someone that I haven't tested first."

The Cobbs want to get their products on the shelves and in restaurants as soon as possible, but there's no set date. They say leading the herd takes time.