

Trophy deer can mean big money for area agriculture

By DAVID LOWE
Staff Writer

Deer hunting has provided a significant boost to Lampasas County's economy for decades. Now, as a growing number of Central Texas ranchers shift their focus to deer production, landowners are reaping benefits both in deer genetics and in improved agricultural economics.

Vicki McLean, a Lometa native, has been breeding deer since 1998 and has built up a herd of more than 200 whitetails. She started with just 10 two-day-old buck fawns and 10 two-day-old does she purchased from South Texas breeder Tommy Dugger.

In place of -- or in some cases, along with -- cattle, some Lampasas County ranchers are turning to deer for extra income. Breeders sell to other deer raisers or provide "stocker" deer to landowners who have built high fences around their property and hope to improve the gene pool of their wildlife.

Mrs. McLean has sold breeder bucks and does across the state. Wesley Crow, who tends about 100 whitetails on his ranch near Rumley, started with yearlings he bought from Mrs. McLean and from ranches in Brownwood, Brady and East Texas. Crow said he knows of at least eight breeders within a 50-mile radius of Lampasas.

Deer breeding contributes about \$620 million annually to the Texas economy, said Richard Cain, who helped Texas A&M University prepare an economic study on the industry for the Texas Legislature. Much of that spending directly benefits rural areas, Mrs. McLean added, in everything from tractor purchases to the sale of goat milk for bottle feeding doe fawns to fence building and other labor.

"All of that is right here in this local area," she said.

Deer operations also provide employment opportunities for young agricultural workers. Texas deer ranches have created nearly 5,200 jobs, according to Cain's estimates.

Mrs. McLean and her sister-in-law, Kathy Duncan -- who operates Duncan Ranch Whitetails outside of Lometa with her husband, Keith -- both have hired summer feeders to help with fawns. Crow, the McLeans and the Duncans all employ a ranch manager at their properties, as well.

Mrs. McLean estimated as many as one thousand Texas landowners may be breeding deer -- many of them hoping for a more lucrative use of their land than traditional cattle operations allow.

"It has allowed a lot of people to hold on to the family property," she said of the deer breeding industry.

The Duncans, who have managed deer since 1993, consider whitetail breeding a hobby that provides some supporting income. The couple still use their property primarily for

cattle.

Crow, however, shifted completely from cattle ranching to deer breeding three years ago. Working with a small herd of livestock was taking too much time with too little financial return, he said.

"You can't run 25 or 30 cattle and make money off them," said Crow. "I think the income (from deer) on a longer-term basis will be better than with cattle."

Entering the whitetail breeding field, though, requires a substantial investment. Along with the cost of building fences and the long networks of alleyways used to move deer from pens to breeding and vaccinating areas, ranchers can spend thousands of dollars for the deer themselves.

Reproductive costs vary, depending on whether ranchers artificially inseminate does and on the quality of the semen they purchase. Mrs. McLean has bred deer from "Maxbo" a trophy buck whose semen commands more than \$10,000 per straw -- about the amount used to inseminate a doe. Mrs. McLean artificially inseminated 67 does last year, a task that took about five hours.

She and Mrs. Duncan bottle-feed their does with goat milk, making them calmer and easier to handle during breeding and vaccinations. Alleyways and chutes also are designed to calm and protect the deer.

Black netting blocks the deer's view of outside distractions that could frighten them and cause them to run into the alley walls. Chutes laid with gravel and containing short ramps also slow down the deer as they move through, which helps avoid injuries.

"We try to handle these animals humanely and with as much dignity as they deserve," Mrs. McLean said.

Although does remain fairly docile, even supposedly "tame" bucks can injure humans if the owners get too close. As a result, Mrs. McLean throws them their feed and checks on them from an all-terrain vehicle.

"People have gotten hurt from tame bucks," she said. "Their personalities change during breeding season. They can be the nicest deer, but they get very aggressive during breeding season."

Even if kept in a pen for several years, deer retain their natural instincts. "A buck reverts back to the wild almost immediately" when sold and released from a pen, Keith Duncan said.

Numerous state regulations of deer breeding enterprises ensure wildlife remain healthy, Duncan and Mrs. McLean said.

Deer ranchers have to renew a state license annually and provide herd inventory reports each year. In addition, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department requires owners to tag each animal and tattoo a specialized identification number -- which stays with the deer its entire life -- into the



PHOTO BY DAVID LOWE

Treats in hand, Vicki McLean checks on a doe inside a pen at her ranch west of Lometa. She and her husband, Jim, breed whitetail deer that they sell to other breeders and landowners trying to stock their property with additional wildlife. A doe's bloodline, even more than a buck's, determines the size and antler development of male offspring, Mrs. McLean said.

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Texans cannot buy live deer from out of state, although they can purchase semen from bucks raised outside of Texas. Ranchers also have to obtain transfer permits to sell within the state. Once they finalize a sale, breeders have 48 hours to move the deer before notifying TPWD the transfer has been completed.

Breeders and state officials also work closely together to promote herd health. Ranchers participate in a chronic wasting disease monitoring program and receive Texas Animal Health Commission oversight of their herd.

Whenever a deer dies, owners must send the head to a laboratory for testing for the disease, which causes deer

to become listless and lose weight.

TAHC performs a yearly inspection of every licensed deer breeding facility.

"I welcome that," Mrs. McLean said, "because that makes my deer more valuable to have their stamp of approval."

Breeders also watch closely for blue tongue -- which can cause lameness, facial swelling and the tongue discoloration that earned the disease its name -- and for respiratory ailments, the top killer of both wild and penned deer, Crow said. Respiratory drugs have improved in recent years, he added.

"The more people who get in it and get experience, the better our

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