

Venison donation program: Now an all-volunteer effort for state

By Don Lehman
Contributing Writer

Bath, N.Y. — Twenty years ago, a group of sportsmen and women in the Southern Tier banded together to start an organized effort to get unwanted venison into the hands of the needy.

It hasn't been easy for those who have made the Venison Donation Coalition (VDC) work during those two decades, and their mission has gotten more difficult in recent years because of funding cuts.

But with grassroots efforts by sportsmen and women, the coalition is gearing up for another hunting season, and hoping that the benevolence of New York residents will help get good, lean venison to the hungry.

The loss of funding has caused the coalition to no longer be able to pay a coordinator, so organization now falls on the backs of those willing to help out for free.

"The VDC at this point is an all-volunteer organization," VDC Vice President Lindsay Wickham said.

Started two decades ago by members of sportsman's federations in Chemung and Steuben counties, VDC has grown into a statewide organization that brings in 35 to 38 tons of venison a year, processed for free or at discounted rates by butchers. The meat then goes to food banks around the state, feeding an estimated five million people over the years at no cost to those receiving the meat.

The coalition has historically been supported financially by the state Department of Environmental Conservation and Feeding New York, formerly known as the Food Bank Association of New York. But it

has been getting less funding in recent years.

That has resulted in a need for more fundraising efforts by volunteers and supporters to keep the venison coming in and going out.

Hunters have been good about donating meat, and whitetail culling efforts in municipalities where nuisance deer populations are addressed have helped bring in more venison, Wickham said. And processor numbers have grown to 92 statewide, but more are always needed, she added.

Getting funding donations from hunters and the general public has not been as easy.

VDC President Greg Heffner said many believe the program is run by the state, instead of the sportsmen- and volunteer-run operation that it is. Dislike for New York's conservation policies seems to hinder donations among those who don't understand how the program works. Just \$3,500 or so typically comes in through the state's DECALS licensing program, where those buying licenses can donate.

"A lot of guys think it's an Albany money grab," Heffner said.

Those wishing to donate can go to venisondonation.com, and click on the website's front page link to donate, or go to the Quality Deer Management Association's online fundraiser at www.gofundme.com/f/2019-grst-qdma-feeding-those-in-need.

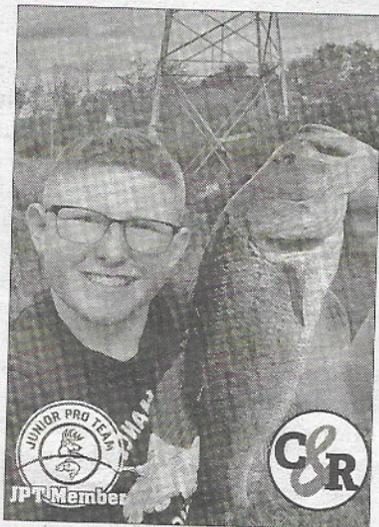
QDMA members around the state have been stepping up, as well.

The Greater Rochester Southern Tier QDMA chapter and state QDMA last year raised over \$6,000, with the Rochester/

Southern Tier branch responsible for over \$3,200 of it. The money was from a combination of the Go Fund Me drive and a \$1,000 branch donation, and the Rochester area branch planned to match donations up to \$1,000 again this year.

Donors can also help out through the DECALS license program when buying a license, or mail donations to Venison Donation Coalition, Inc., 3 East Pulteney Sq., Bath, NY 14810.

Butchers who would like to help out as processors can also connect with VDC through the website – venisondonation.com.



Liam Scott, of Highland Mills, caught and released this 3-pound largemouth bass while fishing in Orange County Aug. 16.

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