

A New York State Conservation Council Perspective

By Eric Bratt, co-chair, NYSCC Big Game Committee

DEC Launches Pilot Project to Improve Collection of Public Input About Deer Populations

(see original release at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/press/103053.html>)

The question is, will it provide quality public input?

The CTF (Citizen Task Force) has been a tool DEC has used since the 1990's to allow stakeholders a chance to weigh in on management issues. DEC cites a change to the process addressing "shortcomings" of the old system; but as we often see in government, instead of addressing the shortcomings and fixing small problems, they change the whole system. Since some of the Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) have only been reviewed once (20+ years ago) how do you know if the process is broken?

While the premise is that DEC will take "better advantage of current electronic communication methods," one only has to look at the reporting rate for big game as an example that it may not work. Despite having phone and internet now available to report your big game harvest, the numbers continue to be a dismal 45% reporting rate. Are we our own worst enemies as sportsmen and women? Just maybe. Sportsmen and women complain that the harvest numbers are out of touch with reality and not accurate, yet they continue to disregard the requirement of filing a report. They become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. It will be interesting to know why WMUs 7H, 8J and 8S were chosen to be the study focus. While this pilot area is currently not entirely in the same DEC Region it will be part of the same Buck Management Zone once it is implemented.

The premise of including a "broader cross section of New Yorkers" might be far from the truth. It is a fact the hunting community is an aging group and many from the older generation have not latched onto all this electronic and social media hype. Is this a choice to pull more weight from a younger crowd to help tilt the SDM (Structured Decision Making) process? Are topics like AR (Antler Restrictions) a higher priority for the younger generation of hunters? While the CTF included representatives from 8 to 12 stakeholder groups it was also a process that could be easily managed. Opening the process up to the "broader cross section of New Yorkers" will be harder to manage; and with shrinking Department resources it sounds like more work for less staff. DEC has been very open, soliciting comments via its website for proposed regulation or policy changes that have provided ample opportunity to receive input on items that are currently in need of direction. In most of these cases DEC already has a plan; and this process generally leads to few (if any) changes, so it appears to be mainly window dressing.

CTF was done selectively to include what most people refer to as "home rule" stakeholders. By opening this up, the process now takes on a whole new dimension of possible influence from outside entities and those who really have no stake in the game other than to disrupt sportsmen's activities. While CTF appeared to be a well organized process, without any details on how this new pilot would work it is hard to envision what obstacles DEC may have created; but the devil is often in the details.

So -- hold on tight and we'll see which bumpy road this takes us down; but please, please, take every opportunity to get and stay involved in this process. Without you -- sportsmen and women -- staying on top of this, we are sure to lose ground to those who would see our sport outlawed.