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STATE SENATOR

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Preserving Our Hunting Heritage By Senator Kathleen Vinehout

Opening weekend of gun deer season, conditions were nearly perfect. The weather was cool, but not too cold. The sun came out and warmed us. A light dusting of snow made it easy to see critters' tracks from the night before.

I saw nine deer opening morning. What an abundance!

By 7:30 a.m., my hunting partner Lisa and I bagged deer. Lisa shot a nice six-point buck and me a tender doe. My husband will be happy with new meat in the freezer. I recalled my husband said we served up the final helpings of last year's stash of venison.

Time for the sportswoman of the family to deliver. No pressure there.

In my family, the woman brings home the harvest. The guys package it and eventually fry it up in the pan. Both my husband and son are awesome cooks.

Out on a nearly perfect Monday morning. Deer were again grazing on our organic alfalfa fields. The weather was cloudy and mild. No new snow, but predicted snow fall was showing up on the radar.

"I got out there and it was just beautiful," Lisa said. "Suddenly, it was like a blanket came over the area. Humid but chilly. Then sleety stuff started falling." In just a few moments, conditions totally changed.

Change happens. All around us. All the time. A skilled outdoors woman interprets the signs nature provides. Just like being mindful of the signs of nature, there are signs of change in our state Capitol that hunters should heed.

"We have a problem. A big problem. Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), a sister to BSE or "mad cow" disease, is threatening our deer and elk," wrote the Alliance for Public Wildlife, over a year ago. "Without immediate action, we are heading for worst case outcomes that include severe population impacts, extinctions, crashing economies, and, although unlikely, potential transfers of CWD to people."

CWD is spread through animals' body fluids. The disease can be spread from animal to animal or through a contaminated environment. Wild animals can contract the disease from captive animals kept on deer farms. They could also contract the disease when landowners set up baiting and feeding stations on private lands.

While landowners are restricted to two gallons of bait or feed per 40 acres, too often landowners violate the law. For example, in my neighborhood, rumors swirl about out-of-the-area landowners baiting deer with hundreds of pounds of shelled corn. For years, every deer we harvested on our farm had a belly full of corn even though we don't grow corn.

In response to the problem of CWD positive deer, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) banned any baiting and feeding in 43 of 72 counties. This summer, the DNR wanted to go further, requiring increased fencing at deer farms and restricting movement of deer carcasses unless the meat was sent for CWD testing, deboned and quartered, or taken to a licensed processor within three days of moving out of the county in which the deer was shot.

The rules were approved by the DNR board and sent to the Legislature's Joint Committee on Administrative Rules. The Committee approved the rule on fencing. However, just weeks before the opening of gun season, the Committee stopped the plan to restrict the movement of harvested deer meat.

Hunters are encouraged to submit their deer for testing. CWD testing collection sites are operating around the state including new sites in Buffalo County.

To fund these sites, and dozens of other programs protecting wildlife, the DNR uses money from fees and licenses. A recent study by the Wisconsin Policy Forum (formerly the Wisconsin Taxpayer Alliance) reported nearly 9 of every 10 dollars of the fish and wildlife budget comes from fees for licenses and federal excise taxes paid by sporting women and men. Total deer hunting licenses dropped almost 6% over the past 18 years. With a shrinking population of hunters, heavy reliance on fees and deep budget cuts, the DNR eliminated important positions.

Passing the abundance we have on to the coming generations is a desire I share with many folks. To accomplish this goal means paying attention to the health of our wildlife and to the health of the funds that support wildlife management and staff.

Wishing all of you a Happy Thanksgiving and a safe and successful hunt.