

The right to hunt and fish in Tennessee

Voters to decide on constitutional amendment this fall

By Jay Sheridan

Since 2004, the Tennessee Wildlife Federation (TWF) has been working with the Tennessee General Assembly and the Tennessee attorney general's office to secure a public referendum on the personal right of Tennesseans to hunt and fish.

This fall, voters will elect our next governor and will have an opportunity to amend the state constitution by adding the following language:

"The citizens of this state shall have the personal right to hunt and fish, subject to reasonable regulations and restrictions prescribed by law. The recognition of this right does not abrogate any private or public property rights, nor does it limit the state's power to regulate commercial activity. Traditional manners and means may be used to take non-threatened species."

The not-for-profit TWF feels strongly that now is the time to act on such a measure to protect these time-honored traditions from the legal and legislative challenges that anti-hunting and anti-fishing activists around the nation are bringing.

"As Tennessee's population grows and becomes more urban, we're finding that people are becoming more and more disconnected from the land," says TWF Chief Executive Officer Mike Butler. "This disconnection is seen in the General Assembly where more and more elected officials simply can't relate to rural values or lifestyles. These realities are setting the stage in Tennessee for what has been witnessed in other states where animal-rights organizations are targeting hunting, fishing and agriculture interests for abolition."

Additionally, TWF says that how this right is established is just as important, noting that the current

effort will not interfere with property rights (private or otherwise) or the regulated nature of current hunting and fishing seasons.

"Folks may not realize it, but there are groups out there who want to ban all hunting and all fishing, and they've had some success in other states. These same groups are also working against agriculture interests across our nation," says Butler. "Hunters, fishermen and farmers all have one vitally important thing in common. We all have a solemn responsibility to be strong stewards of Tennessee's natural resources, and we all have a responsibility to the wildlife and livestock entrusted to us for our use."

Another important aspect of this initiative is the great importance that hunting and fishing have to rural economies across Tennessee. A 2007 Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation report showed that America's 34 million hunters spent more than \$76 billion on outdoor pursuits, and directly supported nearly 1.6 million jobs. Federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment go directly to the states to fund wildlife and fisheries management agencies that ensure we all have a place to get outdoors – not only for sportsmen, but for all citizens.

Lastly, it is important to note that this amendment does not create a "right" to increase populations of wildlife. As we know many species of wildlife are booming, and becoming more concentrated. White-tailed deer, for instance – nearly extinct a half-century ago – are a common sight these days. But when you consider the approximately 5,800 deer-car collisions each year, along with the damage to agricultural crops and residential land-

scaping, it's clear that we must retain hunting as a strong management tool to help regulate these populations.

Managing wildlife populations via the tools of hunting and fishing is also important in controlling wildlife diseases. Hunting and fishing can help reduce the density of fish and wildlife populations, which helps prevent outbreaks of disease which can appear when wildlife populations are allowed to grow unchecked.

In order to pass the amendment, more than 50 percent of voters in the state's general election must vote YES on November 2. Early voting runs from October 13-28.

"Hunting and fishing is important to our rural members," said Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation President Lacy Upchurch. "Our farms across this state are where the majority of our wildlife can be found and hunting is vital to maintaining a balance of wildlife numbers."

As it stands now, hunting or fishing could conceivably be banned through a simple bill in the state legislature, or through a misguided lawsuit. Once passed, any such initiative would require a multi-year process, and another vote of the people.

"The bottom line is that we have an opportunity to preserve and protect our traditions in perpetuity through this amendment, and we may never have the chance again," Butler says. "This issue affects all of us – not just from a wildlife standpoint, but from an agriculture standpoint and economic. I encourage every citizen of our great state to stand with us by voting YES on November 2."

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