

# SAVING OUR BACON: DECLINES IN VENISON PROCESSORS HURT HUNTERS

**For many hunters, the appeal of hunting goes beyond the thrill of the hunt—it's about securing a sustainable source of protein, a connection from field to fork. Yet, while many hunters enjoy processing their own game, the reality is that many simply don't have the time, space, or ability to handle the job all on their own. Professional meat processors provide all three and fill an important void.**

It's easy to idealize a world where every deer harvested, be it by hunters or culled to prevent agricultural damage, is fully utilized and transformed into lean, healthy protein—one of the most local, sustainable products out there. But the reality is far more complicated.

In many areas of the country, deer are overabundant, taking a toll on the habitat of all wildlife while facilitating the spread of diseases like chronic wasting disease. At the same time, the USDA reports that nearly 14 percent of American households are food insecure, and in some areas of the country, the situation is more dire. One of the common reasons hunters give for not shooting more deer is their freezer is already full, and they don't have a convenient way of processing or donating additional venison.

Unfortunately, wild game processors are becoming increasingly difficult to find, creating a bottleneck that impacts hunters and wildlife managers alike. Where processors are scarce, some hunters may opt to kill fewer deer than necessary,

leading to population growth that strains local ecosystems.

For generations, meat-cutting businesses have been small, family businesses on Main Street, U.S.A. Every small town had one or two places where anything from chickens and ducks to Holsteins would be processed. However, market conditions change. In 1990, there were 1,200 federally inspected livestock slaughterhouses in the U.S., but by 2010 that number had dropped to 800. State-licensed operations are also on the decline. In Iowa, for example, there are less than 140 small meat processors, relative to 450 in the 1960s.

The decline in venison processors is part of a broader trend affecting many small businesses in the U.S. As our country has seen a steady decline in the number of skilled laborers in all trades, meat processing has been similarly impacted. As more people move away from rural areas where these businesses typically thrive, generational family-owned processors are closing their doors as younger generations pursue different careers, leaving fewer facilities available.

Large-scale slaughterhouses, which operate with greater economies of scale, outcompete small processors and make it harder for them to stay afloat. It's far easier for a processor to handle a farmer bringing in 20 cows than a hunter with one deer, especially when that deer isn't always presented in the best condition. Hunters, while passionate, sometimes deliver dirty, stinky, and otherwise less-than-wholesome

carcasses that require more work and space, which can be hard for a small operation to manage.

Hunters who enjoy processing their own game may need occasional help from a professional. But without enough processors, even those willing to take on the task are limited by time and resources, compounding the issue of overpopulation.

## SOLUTIONS

This is an extraordinary example of the Boone and Crockett Club—and our members—doing exactly what we have always done: recognizing problems in our community, developing innovative solutions, and pursuing them doggedly. Further, work on these issues benefits from the work of the Club over the last two decades in establishing and maintaining the American Wildlife Conservation Partners.

As Professional Members of the Club, we recognize the critical role processors play in wildlife management and are working hard to address the problem. Our efforts have naturally focused

## CONSERVATION POLICY COLUMN



**Charlie R. Booher**  
BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB  
POLICY CONSULTANT  
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER



**Nick Pinizzotto**  
NATIONAL DEER ASSOCIATION  
PRESIDENT & CEO  
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER

on getting more local meat processors on the landscape, helping existing livestock processors bring venison into their business model, and ensuring processors are fairly compensated, especially when their work supports food banks.

The best way to expand venison processing is to encourage and enable existing beef, pork, lamb, and poultry processing plants to process venison. While venison processing is custom-exempt from USDA inspection (as long as it's not sold), it still requires

**In 1990, there were 1,200 federally inspected livestock slaughterhouses in the U.S., but by 2010 that number had dropped to 800. State-licensed operations are also on the decline. In Iowa, for example, there are less than 140 small meat processors, relative to 450 in the 1960s.**

The professional membership of the Boone and Crockett Club provides substantive strength to the efforts of this organization. Often, these individuals lead other organizations in our conservation community. This article highlights one such example of the expertise of our professional membership in identifying an issue, developing solutions, and working with the entire conservation community to solve the problem.

compliance with state regulations. Existing processors may hesitate to take on venison because of the need for facility retrofitting and the seasonal nature of demand. To overcome this, we are working to ensure technical assistance is available to these plants and make sure they have the support needed to take on game processing without disrupting their other operations.

This technical assistance, funded by the American Rescue Plan Act and implemented by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, is currently unavailable for custom-exempt game processing, but efforts are underway to change that. We have engaged congressional appropriators to ensure that processing plants have access to the resources and training they need to handle venison alongside other meats.

One of the most successful initiatives involves working with state-based hunger relief programs to tap into USDA funds from The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Through this program, wild game processors are reimbursed for their work, ensuring that they are compensated for their efforts, and venison can be donated to food banks. This approach of utilizing TEFAP benefits both processors and communities in need, creating a win-win situation. Several states, including Pennsylvania, Maine, Illinois, and Louisiana, have already received checks or commitments through these efforts, with more states pursuing funding as well.

While supporting existing processors is crucial, increasing the overall number of venison processors is equally important. We are exploring ways to engage in public-private financing for new processors, working with organizations like the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the American Sheep Industry Association, and the National Pork Producers Council. These collaborations recognize that the challenges facing venison processors are part of a larger issue affecting the entire meat processing industry. By joining forces, these organizations can leverage their collective influence to address the complex financing structures that limit small-scale processors.

The future of venison processing depends on strong partnerships within the hunting and meat processing industries. From those who manufacture firearms and ammunition to those who research wildlife management, and especially those who help us process our harvests, everyone plays an essential role in ensuring the success of hunters and the conservation of wildlife.

By supporting local processors, adapting technical assistance for venison processing, and pursuing new financing opportunities, we are working to keep venison processors on the landscape. These efforts are vital to ensuring that hunters have the resources they need to turn their harvests into freezer-ready meat and to maintain healthy deer populations across the country.



Many individuals choose to process their own wild game.



A full freezer of wild game meat continues to be a primary motivation for many hunters.

The efforts to keep venison processors operational aren't just about convenience—they are about the future of hunting and conservation itself. Without these processors, hunters face new barriers, and the delicate balance of wildlife management could be thrown off, leading to greater ecological challenges down the road.

In a world where people have become detached from their food, hunters have remained resolved, grounded, and deeply connected. And with the right support, venison processors can remain a vital part of that connection, ensuring that every deer harvested is fully utilized in the most sustainable and impactful way possible. ■