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Penned Hunts Panned by Coalition

By Andy Marshall

Alberta elk and deer growers have their sights set on amendments to provincial laws before winter that would allow shooting in fenced enclosures of their domestic stock by high-paying marksmen.

"We hope the changes will happen this fall," says a confident-sounding Ian Thorleifson. Owner of a ranch west of Edmonton with 600 elk and 600 bison, he's spearheading the campaign by the Alberta Elk Association and the Alberta Whitetail and Mule Deer Association to prod the government into bringing the required amendments to the next sitting of the Legislature and approving what promoters call Cervid Harvest Preserves (CHPs).

A coalition of hunting, conservationist and animal-rights interests is equally determined to bring down the proposal they believe will threaten wildlife generally, spread deadly diseases and turn once-majestic animals into commercial commodities to benefit a few ranchers with close ties to the Ralph Klein Tories.

"Domesticating wildlife to provide live targets for paid 'hunts' of animals trapped inside a fenced compound is just a new low," says Darrel Rowledge of the Alliance for Public Wildlife and an outspoken critic against game ranching ever since it was first raised in Alberta 15 years ago. "It contradicts everything we know about conservation ethics."

Vociferous opponents like Rowledge and Alberta Wilderness Association director Vivian Pharis suspect the government may regard hearings on the issue mounted around the province in June and July by the game ranchers as sufficient for the "thorough and public assessment" promised by Klein nine years ago as a condition for legalizing penned hunts.

The hearings, attracting up to 200 people at some sessions, have been "conceived, controlled and dominated by game farmers," charges Pharis. The coalition has announced its own public hearing sessions on the issue in the late fall when the public will be able to "hear the whole story," according to Pharis.

Officials from Alberta Sustainable Resource Development and Alberta Agriculture have been observers at the game rancher sessions. Changes to the Wildlife Act and the Livestock Industry Diversification Act, administered by each department respectively, would be required for the shooting preserves to go ahead. Department spokespersons have taken pains to sound neutral, although Chuck Huedepohl, a livestock diversification officer, has been quoted in the mainstream media as saying the hunting ranches are inevitable "because to deny Alberta producers the opportunity to reap the benefits of that kind of value-added processing goes against Alberta government philosophy."

He and other government officials have studied game preserves in Saskatchewan and other Canadian provinces where penned shooting is permitted. It is already legal to kill gaming birds, wild boar and domestic bison on private ranches in Alberta. "We'll take a look at what they (the game farmers) come to us with to determine what our next steps will be," says a guarded Alberta Agriculture spokeswoman, Janice Harrington.





In their hearings, the game farmers fire their best shots for their case. An audio-visual presentation by the affable Thorleifson trots out an impressive array of points. "After seeing the presentation, people have a much different impression," he says.

Game ranching is already a \$25-million-a-year operation in Alberta, producing \$200 million in capital investment. About 590 active ranches here will contain an expected 40,000 elk by the fall, double estimates of the wild population. Breeding stock is still the primary source of revenue, and officials acknowledge that high venison prices have prevented the industry from cracking the consumer market. Despite declines in the sale of velvet antler, particularly to Korea, as a health tonic, Thorleifson is bullish about ongoing prospects. While proponents attribute the drop to depressed Asian markets, opponents contend it stems from fear of disease and the development of pharmaceuticals such as Viagra. Allowing the Cervid Harvest Preserves as a "value-added" activity is just one more way for ranchers to survive, Thorleifson argues

In Saskatchewan's first year of harvesting, revenues from a handful of ranches was \$5 million. Panned hunting is a \$700-million-a-year business in the United States. Harvesting of trophy bulls could fetch as much as \$10,000 to \$20,000 per animal. Preserves would be a minimum of 600 acres and would involve only private land. Terrain would be such as to allow for a "quality experience" and a "fair chase," Thorleifson explains. Animal and trophy identification would be done through leading-edge scientific methods.

Thorleifson speaks proudly of the Alberta industry's tightly controlled, tamper-proof tag system that would prevent the bagging or selling of diseased or poached animals. There are plans for a proposed code of ethics for "humane harvesting." The hunts would relieve the pressure on wildlife hunting. Opportunities for tourism and education about wildlife would abound. And, reaching for further positive arguments, he mentions that people with handicaps would now have the chance to shoot game.

With ranches elsewhere developing ancillary facilities from swimming pools to golf courses, the preserves are depicted as a major potential boost for Alberta's agricultural economy. Because they would more likely be in the forest fringes of remote areas, the rural economy would also enjoy a shot-in-the-arm. The term "world class" peppers the presentation, as in: "We want this to be a model for the world."

Supporters line up at the microphone after the presentation. "I harvest my wheat . . . harvesting is a natural thing," says Simon Elgersma, a third generation farmer from just north of Edmonton. "This is no big deal, we're just harvesting animals we bought."

Corinne Alm from near Olds pleads for a chance to keep the family farm through diversification into private game hunting. "We're looking for an opportunity to get a return on our investment," she says. Besides, in comparison with the way other livestock are slaughtered, "a hunter's bullet is not an inhumane way of dying."

Rob Dunham, whose ranch straddles the provincial border near Lloydminster, notes the irony of raising his herd in Alberta and then taking them across the border for the legal Saskatchewan hunts.

Most of those speaking against the penned killing are hunters, fearing loss of habitat and the spread of disease. A tuberculosis scare in the early 1990s, which caused Canada to lose its TB-free status and in which thousands of domestic elk had to be slaughtered, was linked to domestic animals imported from the U.S.

The latest disease scare results from the confirmation of spongiform encephalopathy, or chronic wasting disease, similar to the dreaded mad cow disease, on Saskatchewan game farms. More than 5,500





domestic animals have been killed to try and halt its spread. Hundreds of wild elk have also been slaughtered on both sides of the border to determine whether it is in the wild. Although there's no evidence of the disease yet among wild Alberta animals, it was found within a Saskatchewan herd of wild deer that opponents say contracted it from game ranch elk. Contaminated U.S. imports are being blamed for the origins of the disease in Canada.

Responding to sharp questions about the disease question, Norm Moore, head of the elk association and brother to former cabinet minister Marvin Moore who led Klein's election campaign, says the TB outbreak was dealt with. A "vigorous" response to the chronic wasting disease has resulted in no cases here, he notes. He calmly defends the Alberta industry's escape record, pointing out just 20 have escaped out of the tens of thousands of elk properly contained. "We have the ability to control disease on our farms," says Terry Church, a veterinarian and manager of a game farm south of Calgary.

Officials say the amount of land that would be set aside for preserves is infinitesimally small when compared with the amount of public land still available for hunting. Opponents point to the referendum in Montana that led to a reversal of the laws allowing penned hunting. But Moore believes a court challenge may lead to yet another change and notes game ranching there was much more poorly handled than in Alberta. And so the debate rages on, a torrent of point, counter-point.

Creation of the shooting preserves "will bring shame on the tourism industry," says activist Madeleine Oldershaw of the Alberta Green Party, one of the few non-hunters who have so far locked horns with the industry promoters. "The vast majority of tourists to Alberta will be disgusted to learn of the practice."

Alberta groups in the coalition opposed to penned hunting have teamed up with the Toronto-based International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). They plan to launch an international campaign against penned hunting similar to that for the seal hunt. "You can dance all you want to but the average person who sees tame animals inside fenced compounds says it's wrong," says Rob Sinclair of IFAW. "My belief is Albertans have a strong tradition of ethical hunting. In the case of Canada, this is not a difficult campaign to win."

Author, conservationist and hunter Kevin Van Tighem is confident the public reaction will harden if details about the hunts become better known. He worries, though, the controversy could hurt the public's view of legitimate hunting. Non-hunters may fail to draw a distinction between the captive shoots and wilderness, conservation-based hunting.

Van Tighem takes aim at other significant societal values the proposal threatens. Turning revered, wild animals into livestock whose only value is economic undermines our relationship with the world around us, he suggests. "This is an example of an uneconomic industry doing increasingly more perverse things to try and make itself economic, and, in doing so, compromising things we value about who we are," he says. "People need to see beyond the surface of this issue and look at its deep implications."

Coalition Opposed to Penned Hunts

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Alberta Wilderness Association (Vivian Pharis (403) 283-2025)

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Southern Alberta Bowhunters Association (Dennis Meyer (403) 380-2626)





See www.albertaoutdoorsmen.org for a copy of the brochure "REAL Hunters Don't Shoot Pets" and fill in an email form with your comments on penned hunts. It will be sent to Al Cook, Fish and Wildlife Service.

