

Pheasant Program cut is probably just the beginning

By Bob McNitt

I sincerely hope everyone had a wonderful Christmas, shared with family and perhaps some closet friends...It's what this special season is all about, even though it's sometimes difficult to realize, what with so many negative things swirling about the news these days.

One of the items that has concerned many avid sportsmen and women, as well as avid outdoors people, was the governor's decision to totally do away with the state's pheasant program. Especially bothersome because he made it as an executive decision, which meant neither the legislature nor statewide sportsmen or groups has any say in the matter whatsoever. His reasoning was the pheasant is an exotic imported species whose program cost to rear and stock was being eliminated as part of the budget cutting measure.

Unfortunately for the governor, that shirt didn't wash well, since the entire program was and has been totally funded by sportsmen dollars through annual income from license sales deposited in the dedicated Conservation Fund. The program has also been heavily subsidized, both physically and economically, by volunteers, and the "savings" at best might be \$300,000, a drop in the bucket compared to the total NYSDEC budget of about \$1.5B.

Pheasants have been a part of our ecosystem for more than a century, but changes in agriculture, extensive land development replacing habitat, and other factors have seen the numbers able to survive and reproduce in the wilds diminish. However, they still do in areas more in tune with their needs, such as the lower Hudson Valley, Long Island, and Western New York. The cock pheasant is also one of the most beautiful game birds in the world. To see one is a real treat and probably a sight we may never see again outside of private preserves.

As far as an imported exotic, we have plenty of other species that have become household words – the brown trout (from Germany), the starling, sparrow and pigeon (from England), wild pigs, donkeys and horses (from Europe), and many others. So why single out pheasants just because they're considered a gamebird. They are also viewed by people other than hunters...birders, children on nature discovery walks, etc., etc. Many kids in rural areas have learned much about responsibility and wildlife, thanks to the 4-H and sportsmen clubs popular pheasant chick-rearing programs.

If the program had been funded by general taxpayers' money, there likely wouldn't have been the uproar it's created with license-buying sportsmen/women who see it as another nail in the coffin of DEC's once promising fish and wildlife programs that dated back to the old NYS Conservation Department. But what has many scared right now is what's next...wildlife habitat and management, fisheries, public access, parks, forestry management? The current DEC is so environmentally top-heavy, there's little left for fish and wildlife programs, and even that could worsen if the governor and legislature (all controlled by Downstate) chooses to insulate its "total Green" budget mindset at the

cost of all else. With the NY Environmental Protection coffers currently bulging with more than \$200M, it certainly makes little sense to axe a popular program that, at best, might carve \$300.000 off the huge state deficit.

The governor has also indicated he'd like to add a \$10 special trout-salmon stamp over and above the cost of a fishing license. That could very well lead to a special mandatory stamp being required for every huntable or catchable wildlife and fish species in the state, from bass to bluegills and squirrels to rabbits. All this when state residents, especially upstate, are struggling just to make ends meet.

Although I keep saying "governor," this is probably the work of Judith Enck who holds the newly created title of deputy Secretary for the Environment and who is a staunch environmentalist with a reputed distaste for upstate sportsmen/women, hunting and firearms ownership, despite being raised in the Catskills. Ms Enck, in fact, is likely DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis' real boss and has the ear of Governor Paterson on all matters affecting the outdoors. Apparently when Ms. Enck says "Jump," both Paterson and Grannis do. The "New York Times" nicknamed her "the tart-tongued Judith Enck."

I guess what is bothering so many people is that the current administration fails to listen or heed the professional advice of its DEC biologists and experts on many matters, but rather either ignores their advice or acts in the best interests of those appointed or elected to high positions in the state capitol, most of them from New York City. Ironic in a way since I would never feel qualified to say what's best for NYC, but apparently some downstaters in high positions feel they know what's best for upstate and its residents.

The "us versus them" scenario has been going on for some time now. But as the budget cuts are made known, it may only get worse, especially for sportsmen/women and other outdoor enthusiasts.