

WOOD BISON MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR LOWER INNOKO/YUKON RIVER IN WESTCENTRAL ALASKA, 2015-2020



Photo by Doug Lindstrand

by

ALASKA WOOD BISON MANAGEMENT PLANNING TEAM
2015



Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Division of Wildlife Conservation

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Cover photo: Wood bison bulls grazing at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, Girdwood, Alaska, 2014.

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CONTENTS

Alaska Wood Bison Management Planning Team	1
Dedication	2
Vision Statement	2
Background	3
Planning Process.....	5
Goals, Objectives, and Actions	6
GOAL 1: Establish a wood bison herd in the lower Innoko/Yukon River area and manage it for long-term viability	6
GOAL 2: Ensure adequate staffing and funding for all phases of wood bison management	7
GOAL 3: Minimize conflicts between humans and wood bison	8
GOAL 4: Encourage cooperation among land managers to ensure reasonable, standardized land use to access wood bison	8
GOAL 5: Manage harvest allocation to equitably benefit local resident, nonlocal resident, and nonresident hunters	9
GOAL 6: Minimize wood bison impact on other wildlife species and the ecosystem on which they depend	11
GOAL 7: Ensure continuing communication among all user groups..	12
Figure 1. Original range of wood bison in Alaska and Canada based on archeological records and oral and written history	3
Figure 2. The Alaska wood bison nonessential experimental population (NEP) area and the lower Innoko/Yukon River release site	7

This Alaska wood bison management plan is the result of a collaborative effort of an eclectic group of Alaskans with a broad range of interests. Below is a list of the Alaska Wood Bison Management Planning Team in alphabetical order of the groups represented.

Organization	Representative
Alaska Outdoor Council	Gary Stevens
Anchorage Advisory Committee	Joel Doner
Anvik Tribal Council	Carl Jerue
Big Game Commercial Services Board	Henry Tiffany IV, Kelly Vrem
Bureau of Land Management Alaska Office	Bruce Seppi, Cara Staab
Board of Game	Ted Spraker
Central Kuskokwim Advisory Committee	Lisa Feyereisen, Henry Morgan
Deloy Ges, Inc. - Anvik	Ernie Demoski, Malinda Chase
Deloycheet, Inc. - Holy Cross	Alfred Demientieff Jr, Kathy Walker Chase
Alaska Department of Natural Resources	Franci Havemeister
Doyon Ltd.	Sarah Obed, Ray Richards
Fairbanks Advisory Committee	Al Barrette
Federal Subsistence Board	Paul (Chris) McKee
Grayling, Anvik, Shageluk, Holy Cross Advisory Committee	Ken Chase
Grayling Tribal Council	David Harry Maillelle
Hee-Yea Lingde Corporation - Grayling	Patricia Ekada, Myrtle VanDoorn, Sandra Gochenauer, William Painter, William Nicholi, Gabe Nicholi
Holy Cross Tribal Council	Alfred Demientieff Jr
Innoko National Wildlife Refuge Manager	Kenton Moos, Brad Scotton
Matanuska Valley Advisory Committee	chose not to send a representative
Northern Alaska Environmental Center	Elisabeth Dabney, Alan Jubenville
Office of Subsistence Management, USFWS	Paul (Chris) McKee
Safari Club International - Kenai Chapter	Joe Hardy
Safari Club International - Alaska Chapter	Eddie Grasser, Doug Vincent-Lang
Shageluk Tribal Council	Arnold Hamilton
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	Ryan Mollnow
Western Interior Regional Advisory Council	Robert Walker
Yukon-Delta Regional Advisory Council	Greg Roczicka
Zho-Tse, Inc. - Shageluk	Jennifer John

Additionally, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) staff from the divisions of Wildlife Conservation and Subsistence were present to provide assistance and information. Those (in alphabetical order) were Cathie Harms, David James, Josh Peirce, Tom Seaton, Jim Simon, Rita St. Louis, Doug Vincent-Lang, and Seth Wilson.

Dr. Alistair Bath, Memorial University, Newfoundland, expertly facilitated all of the meetings.



Third meeting of the Alaska Wood Bison Management Planning Team, Anchorage, January 2015.

DEDICATION

This wood bison management plan is respectfully dedicated to Robert (Bob) O. Stephenson, retired ADF&G Wildlife Biologist, who pioneered the wood bison restoration project more than two decades ago; to the late Randall (Randy) R. Rogers who, as a Wildlife Planner for ADF&G, worked hand in hand with the people in the lower Innoko/Yukon River region to reintroduce wood bison; and to many others who gave endless hours and enthusiasm to the project's completion.

VISION STATEMENT

Through the collaboration of many, reintroduce and manage a sustainable wood bison herd while ensuring a healthy landscape benefiting all people for future generations.

Background

Wood bison (*Bison bison athabasca*) roamed Alaska for approximately 10,000 years, gradually diminishing in numbers from west to east, and disappearing from Alaska altogether about 200 years ago (Figure 1). In 1991 ADF&G biologist Bob Stephenson proposed reintroducing wood bison to the Yukon Flats to provide an additional source of red meat for residents of the area which would simultaneously address the broader conservation goal of restoring free-ranging, disease-free wood bison in portions of their original range.

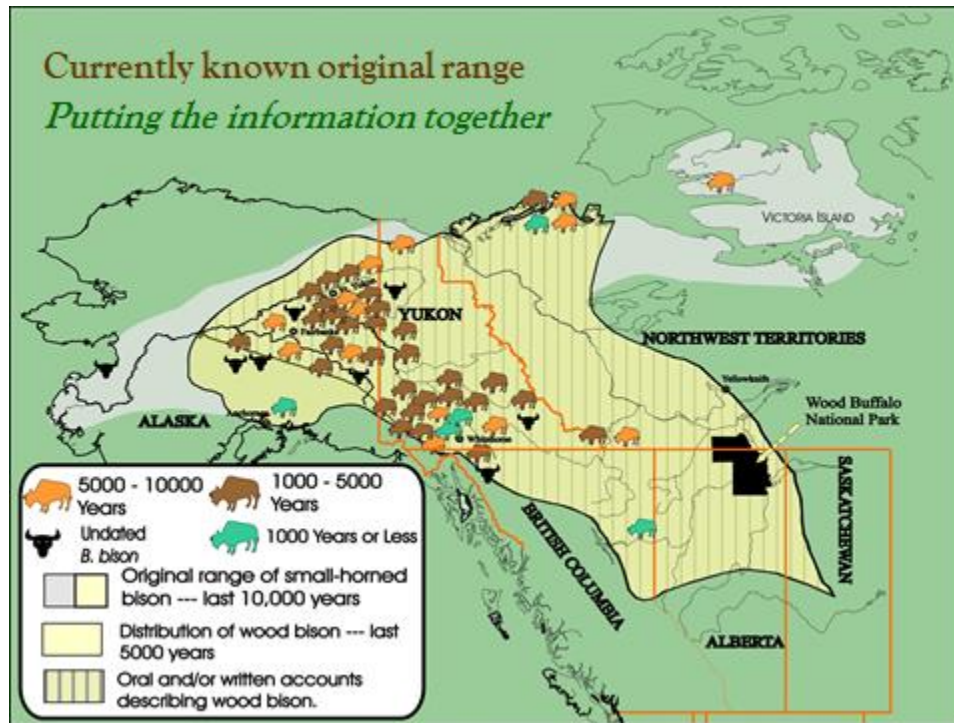


Figure 1. Original range of wood bison in Alaska and Canada based on archeological records and oral and written history.

In 1969 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed wood bison as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The status was changed to “threatened” in 2012. ESA requires a range of protections for listed species and their habitats. Concerns about these protections and management requirements resulted in opposition to restoring wood bison in Alaska. ADF&G worked with USFWS to develop a federal rule which was published in 2014 to designate wood bison in Alaska as a “nonessential experimental population” (NEP) under sections 10(j) of ESA. Sections 10(j) and 4(d) of ESA allow certain kinds of “take”—including hunting—to provide for the conservation of the species. The federal rule also gives ADF&G primary management responsibility for leading and implementing the restoration effort.

Continued concerns about potential management requirements under the 10(j) NEP classification compelled ADF&G to identify the lower Innoko/Yukon River area as the most appropriate of three potential release sites to initiate the restoration project where local communities had strongly supported the project for at least a decade, and where no large-scale economic development projects had yet been identified.

The final rule for the 10(j) NEP under ESA was published May 7, 2014 by USFWS titled, “*Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants: Establishment of a Nonessential Experimental Population of Wood Bison in Alaska.*” The full text of the rule can be viewed at <http://www.fws.gov/policy/library/2014/2014-10506.pdf>

Under the rule:

- Regulated hunting under sustained yield principles is allowed.
- Activities such as resource development, hunting, trapping, and recreation are allowed.
- Designation of “critical habitat” under ESA is not allowed (this provides additional assurance that other land uses will not be affected).
- If a reintroduction effort fails, or in the unlikely event that litigation changes their legal status, the animals may be removed from the landscape.
- ADF&G will be the lead agency in reintroductions and, using scientific knowledge and experience, will have primary responsibility for bison management.
- Management of wood bison in the NEP area will be guided by provisions in
 1. the Federal Final Rule
<http://www.fws.gov/policy/library/2014/2014-10506.pdf>
 2. the associated Environmental Assessment
<http://www.regulations.gov/#!documentDetail;D=FWS-R7-ES-2012-0033-0003>
 3. the ADF&G Environmental Review
http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/species/speciesinfo/woodbison/pdfs/er_no_appendices.pdf and
<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=wildliferesearch.woodbison>
 4. a site-specific management plan (i.e., this document).

Planning Process

In addition to other provisions, the Federal Final Rule states:

“ADF&G will use public planning processes to develop implementation and management plans for wood bison restoration. Planning groups will include representatives from local communities, regional population centers, landowners, Alaska Native interests, wildlife conservation interests, industry, and State and Federal agencies, as appropriate for each area. Draft management plans will be circulated for public review, and final plans will be presented to the Alaska Board of Game and Federal Subsistence Board for review and approval.”

To develop a site-specific plan, ADF&G invited several user groups and agencies representing a broad range of interests to select representatives to participate on the Alaska Wood Bison Management Planning Team (Team) to develop a management plan for wood bison in the lower Innoko/Yukon River area. All but one invited group sent participants. Most Team members came to all three meetings, but in some cases organizations were represented by different delegates at different meetings. By the end of the first meeting, the Team realized that in addition to the regional Native landowner, Doyon, Ltd., the four land corporations (Deloycheet, Inc.; Deloy Ges, Inc.; Hee-Yea Lingde Corporation; Zho-Tse, Inc.) from the Grayling, Shageluk, Anvik, and Holy Cross (GASH) communities also should be a part of the Team. Representatives of those four groups participated in the second meeting. All told, 28 groups were represented.

The Team met for three, two-day sessions facilitated by Dr. Alistair Bath of Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada. It was tasked with developing a management plan for wood bison. ADF&G provided historical, biological and regulatory expertise, but the plan reflects the desires of the Team.

The Team explored, identified, and addressed key issues facing bison and bison management. To do that, it agreed to several tenets. The Team agreed to listen respectfully to each participant’s point of view and to mutually identify compromises or new solutions to resolve a wide range of issues. The Team also agreed to share the concerns of their respective constituents with each other, and then advocate the Team’s decisions back to their constituents. Furthermore, Team members agreed to not leave the group if the solutions developed by consensus were not to their liking, and they would not say “yes” if they really were thinking “no.” The Team agreed that because compromise was paramount to the success of a plan, all Team decisions should be by consensus.

The Team discussed core values, and fleshed out many of these values in detail. Respect for private property and mutual respect for diverse cultural values were deemed important and discussed at length. Likewise, the importance of fairness was discussed at length. The Team rejected the term

“equal opportunity” because it implied that all individuals should be treated exactly the same, which the Team agreed simply was not practical. Instead, the Team agreed on the concept of “equitable or balanced opportunity” because it better represented the reality of complexity of landownership, differences in proximity of users to wood bison, and other differences as well. In conclusion, the Team agreed that even if individuals were not treated equally, they could still be treated fairly.

The Team emphasized the necessity of meeting in the future to capitalize on the trust gained among each other, and agreed they should continue to work together to find solutions to future challenges. Furthermore, the Team believed that this plan should be in place for at least five years to give it a chance to accomplish the intended purpose.

Goals, Objectives, and Actions

GOAL 1: Establish a wood bison herd in the lower Innoko/Yukon River area and manage it for long-term viability.

The Team recognizes that restoring wood bison in Alaska would be a conservation opportunity of state, national, and international importance; providing a broad range of benefits to hunting and nonhunting uses alike. The Team also emphasized the importance of hunting as an important management tool.

OBJECTIVE 1: Transport 40–100 wood bison to Shageluk, Alaska starting in March 2015 for release into the wild (Figure 2).

OBJECTIVE 2: Closely monitor and conservatively manage the wood bison during the initial years of becoming established in the wild, to better understand how well the herd will adapt to its new surroundings including occasional deep snow and flooding.

OBJECTIVE 3: Conduct ongoing field surveys to monitor the status of the herd.

Action 1 — Conduct field surveys to collect biological data on population size, cow:calf ratios, bull:cow ratios, productivity, survivorship, age structure, body condition, seasonal movements, and dispersal.

OBJECTIVE 4: Conduct forage-assessment surveys to monitor the impact of the herd on its habitat.

OBJECTIVE 5: Ensure that future harvesting of the herd is maintained at a level that does not prevent growth and expansion of wood bison into adjacent areas where suitable habitat exists.

OBJECTIVE 6: Maintain separation between wood bison and plains bison to prevent interbreeding.

OBJECTIVE 7: Conduct routine disease-testing to monitor health of wood bison and associated wildlife.

GOAL 2: Ensure adequate staffing and funding for all phases of wood bison management.

OBJECTIVE 1: Assign and support an ADF&G biologist to intensively monitor wood bison while the herd becomes established in the wild and, afterward, to continue monitoring to ensure well-informed management decisions.

OBJECTIVE 2: Ensure that revenue from drawing permit application fees is used to support the wood bison management program.

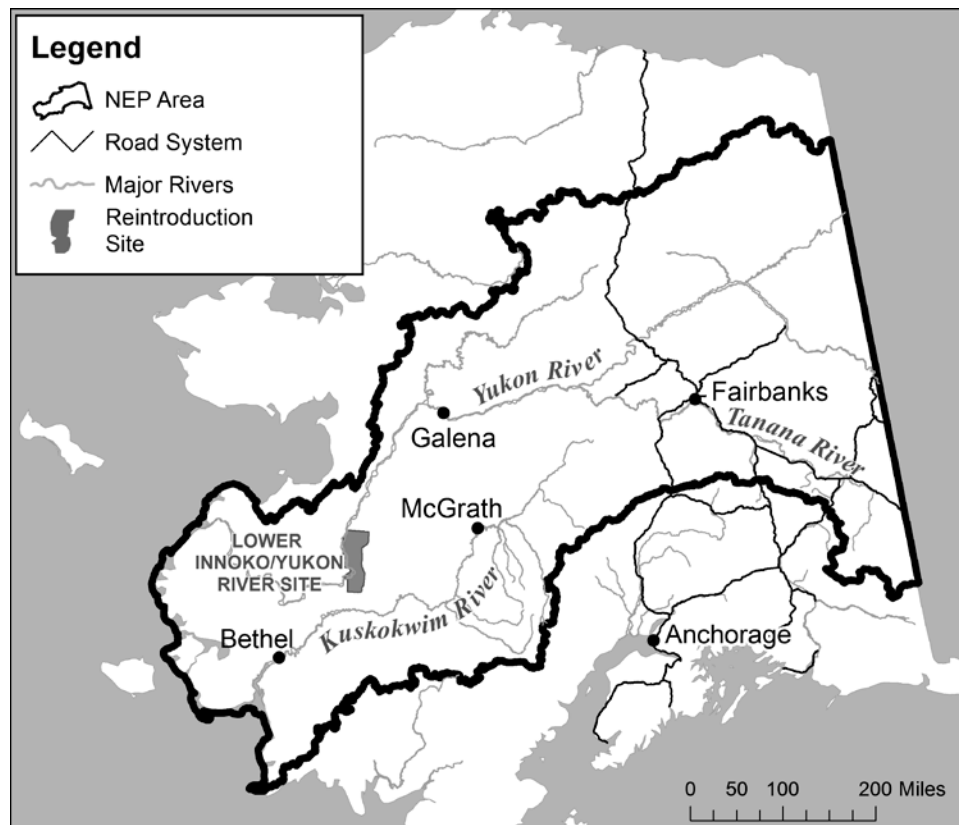


Figure 2. The Alaska wood bison nonessential experimental population (NEP) area and the lower Innoko/Yukon River release site.

GOAL 3: Minimize conflicts between humans and wood bison.

Much has been learned about conflicts between people and wood bison in Canada. Wood bison rarely attack people, and are less likely to do so than moose. Like moose, bison want to move away or avoid people but, if cornered, could become aggressive. Unlike moose, old bison bulls are generally more aggressive than cows with calves.

Lethal removal or harassment of problem wood bison will be guided by state regulations (5 AAC 92.410 “Taking of game in defense of life or property,” 5 AAC 92.033 “Permit for scientific, educational, propagative, or public safety purposes”) and also by federal regulations (50 CFR 17.84 (x)(5)(iv) “What take of wood bison is allowed in the NEP area?”).

OBJECTIVE 1: Educate all user groups about wood bison and their interactions with people.

OBJECTIVE 2: Establish procedures to accurately identify and resolve problem bison situations.

Action 1 — Lethal removal of wood bison will be allowed only in the defense of human life.

Action 2 — Nonharmful harassment of wood bison in coordination with ADF&G will be allowed in defense of property.

OBJECTIVE 3: Establish a cooperative effort between ADF&G and local communities to develop procedures and train personnel to deal with problem wood bison.

OBJECTIVE 4: Exempt lethal removal of problem wood bison from harvest quotas.

GOAL 4: Encourage cooperation among land managers to ensure reasonable, standardized land use to access wood bison.

The land around the lower Innoko/Yukon River release site is a “checkerboard” of Bureau of Land Management and Native corporation lands. Native corporate lands are private lands, and use by people who are not shareholders is commonly prohibited. A land-use policy is necessary to provide a way for nonshareholders to be able to use the wood bison resource. The Team agreed that respecting private property rights is an important aspect of allowing reasonable, standardized land use for local and nonlocal residents as well as

nonresidents. Representatives of five Native corporation landowners developed a unified policy including fees to allow reasonable land use.

OBJECTIVE 1: Provide reasonable land use for all users of wood bison on private corporate lands.

Action 1 — Ensure a common fee—to be paid regardless of success—for land use to access bison as follows:

1. No fee for shareholders of the four GASH village corporations;
2. Fee of \$300 for all hunting nonshareholder Alaskans;
3. Fee of up to \$300 for all nonhunting, nonshareholder Alaskans;
4. Fee of \$500–\$1,500 for nonresidents of Alaska.

OBJECTIVE 2: Provide proper orientation materials to nonlocal wood bison hunters and viewers to ensure compliance with private landowner access requirements and restrictions.

Action 1 — Provide detailed maps of landownership boundaries to hunters and viewers of wood bison.

Action 2 — Require all nonresidents to be accompanied by a local person.

Action 3 — Strongly encourage all nonlocal Alaskans to be accompanied by a local person.

Action 4 — Provide land use requirements and restrictions and other orientation materials to ensure compliance with landowner desires.

Action 5 — Provide a single location to receive fees, and to issue necessary paperwork for land use.

Action 6 — Minimize conflict between local and nonlocal users by notifying appropriate villages when a user is arriving.

OBJECTIVE 3: Put all monies received for land use fees into a trust fund, agreed to and administered by the GASH villages, to be used for student scholarships.

GOAL 5: Manage harvest allocation to equitably benefit local resident, nonlocal resident, and nonresident hunters.

Restricting hunting on federal land to only federally qualified subsistence hunters, or restricting hunting to only those who win a state drawing (lottery) permit will not satisfy the interests of all Alaskans. A hunting allocation system that ensures equitable and reasonable hunting opportunity to local

communities as well as to a broader segment of the hunting public including nonlocal residents and nonresidents is preferred.

Monetary contributions from federal, state, and private sources over the past two decades for wood bison restoration have been substantial. The willingness of local landowners to allow bison on their lands as well as the future use of their lands by bison hunters are substantial commitments. Local residents support the project, and must have some assurance of realizing benefits from the wood bison population. There is strong local interest in bison as a source of red meat to augment moose harvests. Additionally, other Alaskans and people outside of Alaska support the project and they too wish to realize benefits from wood bison. It is important to respect cultural differences among the diverse interests represented in the Team while recognizing that these deeply held values all stem from a commonly-shared appreciation of hunting traditions. Therefore, finding a middle ground between extremes of the state and federal harvest allocation systems is in the best interests of all participants.

Also, the Team emphasized the philosophical importance of striving for a positive “total hunting experience” including enjoying the trip, enjoying the hunt, and sharing the experience.

OBJECTIVE 1: Enforce regulations and encourage voluntary actions that result in no wasting of meat.

Action 1 — Provide hunters, especially nonlocal hunters, with orientation materials to help them deal with the logistics of removing harvested wood bison from the field.

OBJECTIVE 2: Allocate 20 percent of the harvest under a state limited registration permit to be issued in Grayling, Anvik, Shageluk, and Holy Cross, and allocate 80 percent of the harvest under a state drawing permit hunt of which at least 90 percent is reserved for residents of Alaska.

OBJECTIVE 3: Open the first hunting season when the size and productivity of the herd allows a harvest of a minimum of 20 wood bison so the four GASH villages will each be eligible for one permit.

OBJECTIVE 4: Encourage all hunters, especially nonlocal hunters, to share clean, well-cared-for meat with local communities.

OBJECTIVE 5: Establish hunting regulations to avoid simultaneous hunting of wood bison and moose.

OBJECTIVE 6: Conservatively issue wood bison harvest permits as needed under the regulation 5 AAC 92.033 “Permit for scientific, educational, propagative, or public safety purposes.”

OBJECTIVE 7: Delay state and federal customary and traditional use determination processes until a hunt history has been established and data are available regarding harvest and use patterns.

OBJECTIVE 8: Support and encourage the establishment of local infrastructure and support services related to viewing and harvesting activities.

GOAL 6: Minimize wood bison impact on other wildlife species and the ecosystem on which they depend.

Much information exists on interactions between wood bison and other wildlife species in the boreal forest environment in Canada. Many of the studies that contain this information are described or cited in the May 2014 Federal Rule that provides for the establishment of nonessential experimental populations of wood bison in Alaska, the November 2013 environmental assessment, and the 2007 ADF&G environmental review of wood bison restoration in Alaska. Wood bison are an indigenous species that evolved along with other animal and plant species in the boreal forest and no significant negative impacts of wood bison on species in this environment have been documented to date.

Also, plains bison exist in Alaska in four different populations as a result of an introduction effort that began in 1928. It is relevant to the concern about wood bison on the environment and other species that no significant negative effects by plains bison in Alaska have been documented to date.

OBJECTIVE 1: Ensure that only certified weed-free hay is used for supplemental feeding of bison.

OBJECTIVE 2: Conduct field inspections for invasive plant species at supplemental feeding sites.

OBJECTIVE 3: Monitor wood bison interactions with their habitat and other species.

GOAL 7: Ensure continuing communication among all user groups.

Communication is critical to the success of the wood bison restoration project. In addition to biological parameters, social and political considerations also must be explored.

OBJECTIVE 1: Maintain positive working relationships among the diverse user groups to help resolve future concerns and issues.

Action 1 — Conduct Team meetings at least once a year as funding allows.

Action 2 — Share updates and reports on the status of the wood bison herd and management program with the Team.

OBJECTIVE 2: Recognize that this plan is adaptive and it surely will be amended to reflect what will have been learned after the release. This plan should not be substantively changed for at least five years to allow adequate evaluation of its effectiveness.

OBJECTIVE 3: Continue and encourage additional efforts devoted to helping the public learn about wood bison, the role they play in the northern ecosystem, and the restoration program.

Action 1 — Disseminate existing educational programs such as those developed by ADF&G and by the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center and Bear Trust International for grades 7–8.

Action 2 — Make available skeleton kits to school age children to learn about bison anatomy and function.

Action 3 — Develop and disseminate new materials as appropriate to educate the public about wood bison.