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Advisory Announcement

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ADF&G and DNR Forestry Team Up for Delta Bison

(Fairbanks) – The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and Alaska Division of Forestry (DOF) have teamed up to make life easier for Delta bison, less troublesome for Delta farmers, and safer for motorists traveling the Alaska Highway.

The two agencies have worked together to bulldoze more than 30 miles of trails on the 90,000-acre Delta Junction Bison Range in the past two months to create paths for bison to access forage without plowing through chest-deep snow. The trails help keep bison out of nearby agricultural fields, while also keeping the giant mammals off the Alaska Highway, where they pose a serious threat to passing motorists.

As of March, ADF&G had reports of at least nine bison killed in vehicle collisions this winter, a particularly high number compared to a normal winter.

“This winter has been exceptionally tough on many species of wildlife, including bison in the Delta Junction area,” said Alaska Department of Fish and Game technician Clint Cooper, who helps manage the Delta Junction bison herd. “Record snowpack and the rain-on-snow event from late December left 1 ½ - 2 inches of ice covering the snow throughout the Delta herd’s winter range. These conditions have made foraging very difficult for bison.”

“Bison are resourceful animals and have stomped out areas in hay fields to get through the ice layer to grasses below,” Cooper said. However, many of those fields are owned by local farmers, who don’t appreciate the bison’s resourcefulness.

As luck would have it, DOF was already using its D-7 bulldozer to do habitat improvement work on the bison range for ADF&G. “We were able to re-direct their efforts and have them plow snow on grass fields on the bison range, as well as make trails for bison to travel,” Cooper said. “This was done to provide an area where bison could forage, and hopefully attract bison to the fields away from private agricultural areas and the Alaska Highway.”

Approximately 200 acres were cleared on two field complexes on the bison range and about 30 miles of trail was plowed to connect the field complexes to give bison access points to the fields. Hopefully this will direct the bison to start south toward their spring/summer calving grounds. Most of the work was done in January but field and trail clearing has continued sporadically through February and into March. The dozer has traveled an estimated 300 total miles plowing snow.

“It really is a monumental effort, and ADF&G (and the bison) are very appreciative of Forestry being able to do this work,” Cooper said.

The effort appears to be working. During a flight on February 23rd, biologists observed 70 bison using the fields and trails that had been cleared. Bison were observed foraging on grass that was made more easily accessible through the plowing. Since then, increasing numbers of bison are using the cleared areas and trails. On Thursday of last week, with the help of forestry personnel, a 7-mile trail was plowed south from one field to provide an easier path for bison to start their normal spring movement to the Delta River.

The Delta Bison Herd, a wild herd established with transplanted animals in 1928, is managed through a drawing permit hunt that allows about 80 bison a year to be taken by hunters. The Delta bison hunt is the most sought-after drawing permit in Alaska. A mature bull weighs between 1,500 and 2,000 pounds.

The 90,000-acre Delta Junction Bison Range, located about 12 miles southeast of Delta Junction, was established by the Alaska Legislature in 1979 to perpetuate free-ranging bison by providing winter range and to contribute to reducing damage to agriculture.

“This is typically the time of year when bison become more active and begin to move southwest,” Cooper said.

Motorists traveling on the Alaska Highway and Sawmill Creek Road east of Delta Junction are urged to slow down and drive cautiously. According to Cooper, bison are especially active at night and can be difficult to see on the road in the dark.

The work done this winter was an effort to alleviate conflict between bison and farms, as well as give the bison travel corridors away from the Alaska Highway.

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