



Wood Bison News

Drawing courtesy of Wes Olson

Issue Number 3, Spring 2007

ADF&G Seeks Public Comment on Environmental Review of Wood Bison Restoration in Alaska

by David D. James, Division of Wildlife Conservation Regional Supervisor

On behalf of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation (ADF&G/DWC), I am happy to announce completion of the report Wood Bison Restoration in Alaska: A Review of Environmental and Regulatory Issues and Proposed Decisions for Project Implementation

(Environmental Review). This Environmental Review represents a significant milestone in the department's efforts to evaluate wood bison restoration in Alaska. Public comment on this report will have a major influence in determining whether the department continues to pursue wood bison restoration in Alaska and, if so, where we attempt to restore this historically important species.

Up to this point the proposal to restore wood bison has received support from a wide variety of organizations and individuals interested in Alaska wildlife management and wood bison conservation. In spring 2005 the department established a Wood Bison Restoration Advisory Group that included representatives of several state

Fish and Game advisory committees, Native organizations, conservation groups, including both environmental and sports-

returning wood bison to the wild in Alaska. Continuing this spirit of cooperation will be a key factor in the success of any restoration

asts. It is clear that wood bison are compatible with other wildlife species in the state and can play an important role in restoring and maintaining natural processes. The wood bison restoration project also has significance beyond Alaska.



*Members of the Wood Bison Restoration Advisory Group after the June 2005 meeting.
From left to right: Arnold Hamilton, Ben Stevens, Nancy Fresco, Ron Silas, Ronnie Rosenberg, Bud Burris, and Bob Byrne (back).*

man's organizations, and animal welfare interests. After thoroughly reviewing and discussing available information on wood bison, the group unanimously recommended that the department continue to pursue wood bison restoration. The members of this diverse advisory group showed a willingness to work together to achieve the common objective of

efforts that are pursued in the future.

Based on public input and thorough biological evaluation, ADF&G believes that wood bison restoration in Alaska represents an outstanding wildlife conservation opportunity and that wood bison restoration will ultimately provide benefits for local and non-local hunters and wildlife viewing enthusi-

The Wood Bison Advisory Group supported moving forward with wood bison restoration in Alaska and continuing to consider all three potential release sites.

Wood bison restoration in Alaska would help to achieve several goals in Canada's Wood Bison Recovery Plan and will contribute to international efforts to re-

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Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center Prepares to Play a Key Role in Wood Bison Restoration

The Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) continues to make preparations to play a key role in restoring wood bison in Alaska. Located at Portage, Alaska, AWCC is a nonprofit organization that provides wildlife viewing and education opportunities in a natural setting. For many years visitors have enjoyed seeing moose, muskoxen, plains bison, elk, black bears, grizzly bears, black-tailed deer and other animals. AWCC has worked closely with ADF&G for several years to develop the capacity to serve as a temporary holding facility for wood bison stock for restoration efforts.

In 2003, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service transferred 13 wood bison to AWCC. There are now 22 animals in the wood bison herd, and additional calves are expected this spring. About 65 acres in three separate enclosures have been set aside for wood bison.

ADF&G Seeks Public Comment

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store the ecological role of bison throughout North America.

There are some remaining challenges described in the Environmental Review that must be addressed in a cooperative manner in order for the project to move forward. While the department has been preparing this Environmental Review we have also been pursuing several other actions that are necessary to restore wood bison in Alaska. If these actions resolve some regulatory and permitting



Paul Williams, from the Yukon Flats community of Beaver, and AWCC Executive Director Mike Miller visit the wood bison at AWCC

The grazing enclosures for wood bison at AWCC have been created and maintained in part with support from the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

AWCC recently completed construction of a bison handling facility and hay barn with support from Safari Club International. If there is sufficient public support for wood bison restoration and a decision is made to move ahead with the effort, AWCC

issues in time, and sufficient public support is evident, we hope to import wood bison stock from Canada in winter 2007–08, and complete preparations to release wood bison into the wild by spring 2010 or 2011.

At present it appears that the issues related to importing bison can be resolved in the coming months, and that there is substantial public interest in working to prepare cooperative management plans to guide wood bison reintroduction and management in specific areas. Continued public support and advocacy from diverse wildlife users will be essen-

should be ready to support additional wood bison that could be imported from Canada in early 2008.

ADF&G and AWCC are completing a Memorandum of Agreement which will help guide future cooperative efforts, and also establish an Alaska wood bison restoration fund, which will provide a way for interested individuals and organizations to support the effort.

On April 20 AWCC received the Alaska Convention and Visitors Bureau award for “2007 Member of the Year.” The award was given to AWCC for outstanding contributions to wildlife conservation and the visitor industry.



Wood bison corral at AWCC

tial to achieving the wildlife conservation objective of restoring wood bison in Alaska and creating opportunities for diverse users to share in the benefits. ADF&G is pleased to provide the public with an additional opportunity to comment on this proposal to restore a historically important species to Alaska. If the public continues to support the project, we are eager to work with various wildlife users, landowners, local governments and managing agencies to evaluate and plan for wood bison restoration at specific locations in Alaska.

Chugach National Forest Proposes to Make Land Available for Wood Bison Pasture

The Chugach National Forest (CNF) is poised to make an important contribution to the wood bison restoration effort by providing additional land where wood bison can be held until they are released in the wild. CNF has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) for a proposal to allow ADF&G to use 27 acres of National Forest land adjacent to AWCC

as a temporary pasture to help support wood bison. Public comment on the EA has strongly favored the proposal. If the EA is approved, ADF&G, AWCC, the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and CNF will complete a Memorandum of Understanding to guide use and care of the land.



Wildlife Transplant Policy Review Underway

ADF&G has initiated the process to evaluate possible wood bison restoration according to the DWC Wildlife Transplant Policy. DWC Director Matt Robus approved a scoping report, made a finding on the status of wood bison according to the classifications in the policy and established a Wildlife Transplant Policy Review Committee. The committee is chaired by Dr. Kris Hundertmark, Assistant Professor of Wildlife and Ecology at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and includes ADF&G biologists responsible for the areas where wood bison restoration is being considered or who are involved in managing plains bison herds in Alaska.

After reviewing all of the available

information on wood bison ecology and environmental effects, the committee unanimously agreed that wood bison restoration is not likely to effect a significant reduction in the range, distribution, habitat, or pre-existing human use of other species. They also emphasized the need to plan for adequate public access to bison and let herds grow to at least 400-500 animals, and to achieve higher levels wherever possible to help maintain genetic diversity. The findings of the committee are available for public review and comment and can be found in Appendix F in the Wood Bison Environmental Review. The committee will finalize its findings after considering public comment.

The Wood Bison Wildlife Transplant Policy Review Committee unanimously agreed that wood bison restoration is not likely to effect a significant reduction in the range, distribution, habitat, or pre-existing human use of other wildlife species.



Photo by Gary Lackie

Update on Wood Bison Import Efforts

USDA May Allow Import of Breeding Bovines: In January 2007 the USDA proposed new regulations that would again allow the import of bison and other bovines from Canada for breeding and other purposes. Under the existing regulations, which were established in connection with concerns about "Mad Cow" disease, an exemption would be required to import wood bison. It is hoped that the new regulation will be finalized in time to allow Alaska to obtain additional stock without the need to obtain a special permit.

Importing Wood Bison from Canada: ADF&G is making plans to import an additional 40-50 wood bison from Elk Island National Park in Alberta in early 2008. The Department is working with the Alaska State Veterinarian and veterinarians in Canada to finalize health monitoring protocols for wood bison both before and after they are imported. An application for an import permit was submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in March 2007. This permit is required because wood bison in Canada are listed as endangered under the US Endangered Species Act. The application will be noticed in the federal register so that the public has an opportunity to comment, and a few months will probably be required for the process to be completed. While ADF&G is making preparations to proceed with wood bison restoration, actually doing so depends on public comment on the Environmental Review and other factors.



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Wood bison were the last subspecies of bison to naturally occur in Alaska. They were present for most of the last 5,000 to 10,000 years until they disappeared in the last few hundred years. Please take a moment to let us know what you think of the proposal to return wood bison to suitable habitat in interior Alaska.

**A summary of the Environmental Review of Wood Bison Restoration
in Alaska is enclosed. The complete report can be found at:
<http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=game.restoration>**

Comments are welcome through June 30, 2007.

Wood Bison Restoration in Alaska



Painting by Randall Compton

A Wildlife Conservation Opportunity for the 21st Century

ADF&G would like to thank the following people who served on the Wood Bison Restoration Advisory Group:

- ◆ **Bud Burris**, Fairbanks Advisory Committee (AC) and Alaska Outdoors Council
- ◆ **Bob Byrne**, Safari Club International, Washington, D.C.
- ◆ **Paul Edwin**, Chalkyitsik Village Council
- ◆ **Nancy Fresco**, Northern Alaska Environmental Center
- ◆ **Arnold Hamilton**, Grayling-Anvik-Shageluk– Holy Cross AC, Shageluk
- ◆ **Ronnie Rosenberg**, Animal Welfare considerations, Fairbanks
- ◆ **Ron Silas**, Minto Village Council
- ◆ **Bruce Thomas and Ben Stevens**, Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, Fort Yukon
- ◆ **Nicole Whittington-Evans**, The Wilderness Society, Anchorage

Fairbanks artist Randall Compton produced the above wood bison painting for Dr. Stephen Sutley. They have generously offered to allow ADF&G to use the artwork to help promote the wood bison restoration project. An image of the painting is on the cover of the wood bison Environmental Review. If the project continues to move forward, ADF&G may cooperate with other organizations to produce posters similar to the one shown above.

Thanks also to the Safari Club International Foundation and the Pope and Young Club for financial support to prepare the wood bison Environmental Review!