

Wood Bison News

Issue Number 8, Summer 2014



Release Date Planned for Spring 2015!

More than 20 years ago, biologists with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game began work to reintroduce wood bison to Alaska. The largest land animal in North America, these big cousins to the more familiar plains bison died out in Alaska in the 1800s. A few herds survived in Canada and in the early 2000s, 66 wood bison were imported into Alaska. Today the herd has grown to about 135 animals, pastured at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center near Girdwood.

The bison have been quarantined at AWCC to ensure they are free of diseases. Thorough testing has been done and the bison have been given a clean bill of health. In the spring of 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service finalized details under the Endangered Species Act clearing the way for the reintroduction. This summer, Governor Sean Parnell announced his support and a release date of spring 2015. *Wood Bison News* offers a look at how and where the bison will be set free and more details regarding the reintroduction of this remarkable animal.

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Final Rule Published

Wood Bison Will Roam Alaska

The 10(j) Rule: An Important Step Forward for 2015 Wood Bison Release

The long-awaited special rule making wood bison a nonessential experimental population under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was published in the Federal Register by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on May 7, 2014. It is called the 10(j) Rule. Finalizing the rule was necessary before bison can be reintroduced to their historic homeland in Alaska because it will allow oil and gas development, mining, recreation, hunting, trapping and other land uses to coexist with wood bison herds without legal restrictions normally associated with the ESA. Although wood bison are listed as “threatened” under the ESA, the new rule means that wood bison will not have critical habitat set aside. They will live on the landscape essentially the same as moose, caribou and other Alaska wildlife.



Photo by Doug Lindstrand

The special rule is called *Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants: Establishment of a Nonessential Experimental Population of Wood Bison in Alaska*.

Key Points of the 10(j) Rule:

- Regulated hunting under sustained yield principles will be allowed.
- Activities such as resource development, hunting, trapping and recreation will be allowed.
- Designation of “critical habitat” under the 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 will have primary responsibility for bison management.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

50 CFR Part 17

[Docket No. FWS-R7-ES-2012-0033;
70120-1113-0000-C3]

RIN 1018-AW57

Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Establishment of a Nonessential Experimental Population of Wood Bison in Alaska

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Final rule.

SUMMARY: We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), in cooperation with the State of Alaska, will reestablish the wood bison, a federally threatened species, in historical habitat in central Alaska. We will reestablish the wood bison under section 10(i) of the Endangered Species

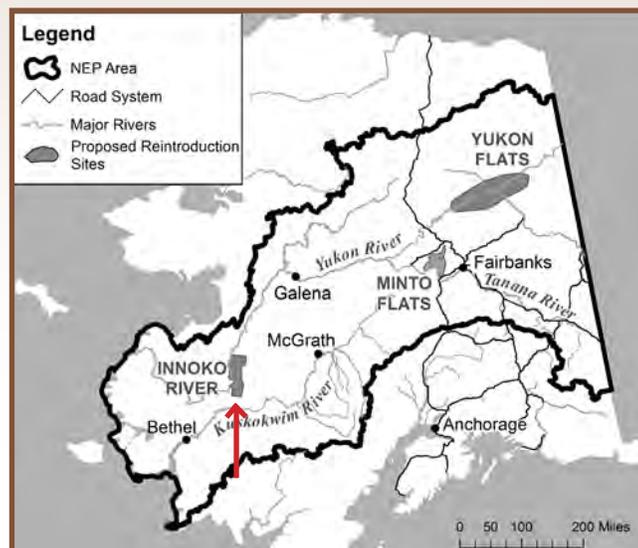
The full text of the rule can be viewed at in the Federal Register.

<http://www.fws.gov/policy/library/2014/2014-10506.pdf>

Where Will They Roam?

Biologists conducted an extensive evaluation of habitat in the early 2000s and identified several locations around the state where herds of at least 400 wood bison could thrive. Three of those locations were identified as potential release sites.

The 2015 release will occur in the Lower Innoko/Yukon River area near the village of Shageluk, approximately 300 miles west of Anchorage (red arrow). That release site offers excellent habitat, and there has been ongoing support from the local communities. Neither Yukon Flats nor Minto Flats was chosen as a release site because of concerns about potential conflicts with natural resource development.



This is Not Your Standard Bison Roundup

Distance and lack of roads to the bison release site present logistical challenges, and the time is short. We have a lot to do.

Major Tasks Before the Bison are Released Include:

- Develop a management plan involving the input of representatives from local communities, regional population centers, landowners, Alaska Native interests, wildlife conservation interests, industry, and state and federal agencies.
- Purchase fencing materials and hire local people to help build a temporary holding enclosure near Shageluk.
- Purchase and transport hay, water tanks, as well as field camp equipment to use at the temporary enclosure.
- Hire a transport plane.
- Purchase specialized containers that can carry bison in a transport plane.
- Purchase and deploy radio and satellite collars so bison can be closely monitored after the release.
- Conduct final health handling and sorting of animals to be sent to Shageluk.



The initial release will be into a temporary holding enclosure near Shageluk for approximately two–five weeks. This will allow the bison to settle into their new environment.

How Many Bison Will Be Released?

That Depends on Funding

In the next year the state has committed \$380,000 for releasing two loads of bison. Bison differ in size; a load can vary from 30 young animals to 12–15 adults. The most benefit would come if we released at least 100, which translates to a total of six loads. To do this we need funding for more airplane loads. Each extra load costs about \$92,000.

More Animals Yield Greater Benefits in Less Time

Releasing a larger number of bison would provide greater genetic diversity, better collective ability to cope with deep snow and predators, and a better mix of abilities to deal with the challenges in their new environment. Also, a larger herd can increase faster, reaching a minimum population target sooner.

How Can We Achieve the Ideal Outcome?

We hope to acquire funding for four more plane loads, which is around \$369,000.

Anyone wishing to provide financial assistance to this project should contact:

Tom Seaton, ADF&G - tom.seaton@alaska.gov907-459-7235

or

Mike Miller AWCC - mike@alaskawildlife.org 907-301-7942



There is so much habitat in the Innoko region, it is very exciting to think about what kind of resource this bison herd could be in a few decades.

— Tom Seaton,
Wood Bison Biologist

Planning for the Release

The 10(j) rule requires a public planning process to determine how the bison will be managed

The 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. More detailed information on wood bison reintroduction and management is provided in the EA associated with this action.”



How Will the Plan Develop?

Management plans for the release will be developed by ADF&G in cooperation with landowners and other interest groups

To develop a management plan which includes input from all interest groups, ADF&G has retained Dr. Alistair Bath, an associate professor at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland. Dr. Bath is a recognized leader in complex planning efforts. He will organize and facilitate meetings of the Alaska Wood Bison Management Planning Team, a diverse group of interested people who will work toward understanding and addressing the key issues through a consensus-driven process.



Why Dr. Bath?

Dr. Bath is considered a world leader in the field of applied human dimensions of wildlife management, having more than 25 years of experience mediating issues in natural resources management and human-wildlife conflicts involving diverse interest groups. “It’s not about studying people,” says Dr. Bath “but it’s about working with people and listening to their issues and finding solutions.”

His research projects have focused on management of large mammals such as lynx, brown bears and wolves. Alistair Bath has worked on diverse issues that include bison restoration in Germany and a resolution for a controversial wolf management plan in Bulgaria. More recently his expertise has led to the cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian authorities in an effort to create an urban biosphere in and around Jerusalem. Currently he is working with Wood Bison National Park in Canada.

Who Gets to Hunt Them and When?

We hear this question often. The answer is not laid out in the 10(j) rule. Our first priority is getting the bison into the wild so the herd can thrive and grow to a sustainable population. How long it takes to grow and provide harvest opportunity depends on how many animals are released and their age structure. For example, it will take more years if 30–40 young animals, as opposed to 100 mixed aged animals, are released.

Within the constraints of federal and state laws, the Alaska Wood Bison Management Planning Team will work toward understanding and addressing the key issues relating to hunting. They will develop a management plan that initially focuses on establishing a secure, sustainable population of wood bison. Some issues may have to be addressed after bison are released, but before hunting is allowed.

Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch

Update on the Captive Herd

The wood bison herd at The Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center continues to flourish under the watchful eyes of Mike Miller and the staff at AWCC in Portage.

Thirteen calves were born in 2013 and 32 in 2014. It is important to have calves born every year so that the herd represents all age groups. The herd now numbers about 135 animals.



New Pasture Secured

Mike Miller and ADF&G reached an agreement with the Chugach National Forest (USFS) to get an additional 138 acres of pasture for wood bison. The USFS pastures now total 165 acres. Many organizations — ConocoPhillips, Wells Fargo, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and Granite Construction—donated materials and labor to fence the new acreage. Having the extra land will allow AWCC to rotate pastures more efficiently and crowding will be reduced.

Reduced crowding and separating certain age groups is important so that larger animals do not physically dominate younger, smaller bison. Confining bison in crowded conditions increases stress, conflict, and diseases and parasites.



Health Program

The wood bison herd at AWCC has been certified as disease-free. ADF&G conducts regular major health surveys. All animals are moved from a corral into a series of chutes ending in a squeeze chute. Each animal is held safely in the squeeze chute. Vitamins, minerals and dewormer are given. Blood, feces, and hair are collected for further studies.

Many people make these handlings a success including the Alaska State Veterinarian, USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS), staff from AWCC, and staff from ADF&G. Read an interesting account of a recent handling by author Jenna Schnuer at:

<https://medium.com/the-magazine/how-to-move-a-wood-bison-e4e9b5b7c235>

The health program includes:

- Monitoring the animals monthly by ADF&G's wood bison biologist.
- Ear tagging and microchipping selected animals.
- Supplementing trace minerals and anti-parasite medication.
- Collecting blood, feces and other samples for microorganism screening.
- Treating individual animals with injury or illness.



David Sinnett, APHIS, reviews data with Jessica Wagner, ADF&G.



ADF&G biologists take blood samples.

Thanks For Your Help!

It takes a lot of effort to keep a herd of bison at AWCC. Mike and Kelly Miller and the staff at AWCC have been at the forefront of this effort from the beginning. AWCC donates countless hours to keep the wood bison healthy. They feed and monitor the animals daily. During health handling events they provide lodging and meals for the entire crew. AWCC has been extremely successful in obtaining funding and other help from a diverse group of donors.

The following generous donors commit funds, in-kind donations and labor. They showed a total dedication to this conservation project aimed at restoring wood bison to their native habitat in Alaska.

Wood bison project supporters (2006–2014)

Carlile Transportation Systems – For seven years, donated transportation of hay and building materials.

Safari Club International – For seven years, donated funding for a livestock trailer, bison handling facility, hay barn, JD Tractor, bunkhouse and hay purchases. 2014, donated \$95,000 towards the 2015 release.

University of Alaska Fairbanks, School of Natural Resources & Agriculture Sciences - For eight years, donated and discounted high quality hay.

Totem Ocean Trailer Express – 2014, donated shipping of eight conex loads of Washington State wood bison hay.

USFS Chugach National Forest – 2013, awarded a 15-year free lease of additional acres to total 165 acres with option to renew for the wood bison.

Wells Fargo Bank/National Fish & Wildlife Foundation – 2013, awarded a major grant to clear, plant and build a four mile fence on the 138 acres of USFS property.

ConocoPhillips – 2013, donated 800 drill stem pipes for posts for four miles of fence.

Granite Construction – 2013, heavily discounted the construction of the road into the USFS property.

USFS – 2013, donated all gravel material needed to build the road.

State of Alaska, Plant Material Center - 2014, donated native grass seed for the USFS project.

John Deere Corporation – 2010, discounted 30 percent for new tractor purchase.

Rasmuson Foundation – 2011, awarded a grant for a new John Deere tractor.

Alyeska Resort – 2010, contributed to John Deere tractor.

University of Alaska Fairbanks – 2012, donated three grain silos.

Alaska Mining & Diving – 2014, donated three new snowmobiles to the wood bison program.

Natural Resource Conservation Service – 2007, funded 100 percent of fencing required to enclose 40 acres of USFS property.

Anchorage Soil & Water Conservation District – 2009, funded the clearing of 40 acres of USFS property.

Teck Cominco, Alaska – 2008, sponsored a community celebration of the importation of wood bison from Canada to AWCC.

Turner Foundation – 2008, funded all expenses to capture, test and transport 53 wood bison from Elk Island Park, Alberta to AWCC.

Volunteers – Anchorage Fire Department, Defenders of Wildlife, Wells Fargo Bank, Salmonberry Tours, Safari Club International, Girdwood Fire Department, Boy Scouts of America donated labor the the wood bison project.



A Carlile driver looks on as he delivers another load of hay to the wood bison.

“Yes, we’re still 110 percent behind them. It’s been a long time, we definitely support (the reintroduction).”

—Eugene Paul,
1st Chief, Holy Cross Tribal Council

“... Everyone has been waiting for it to happen for 15 years. We look forward to working with Fish and Game to plan for the release.”

—Ken Chase,
Grayling-Anvik-Shageluk-Holy Cross Fish and Game Advisory Committee Chair

New Wood Bison Education Materials

The Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center has teamed up with Bear Trust International and Inspired Classroom to develop science-based education programs rooted in wood bison research and ecology. To celebrate the reintroduction of wood bison, the team wanted to find ways to include Alaska youth in the restoration process. The lessons in the wood bison curriculum were designed to help youth develop ownership of their natural resources, hone skills in science and math, and raise conservation awareness.

This material targets youth in grades 7–8, and meets national science and math standards. It is designed so that students become wood bison scientists as they use real-world data to determine where on the Alaska landscape a captive herd of wood bison can be restored.

The Wood Bison Curriculum is available for free download at:

<http://beartrust.org/wood-bison> or,

<http://www.alaskawildlife.org/wood-bison-curriculum/>



WOOD BISON CURRICULUM

Overview



This wood bison curriculum includes the following:

- A short video that introduces the wood bison conservation project and the corresponding 3 lessons in this curriculum
- 2. A STEM lesson, "Where Will the Wood Bison Roam?" where students become the biologists to determine where wood bison could be restored on in the Alaska wild. This STEM lesson also includes 2 additional, optional extension STEM lessons: Creature Feature (collect data along a habitat transect in the school yard) and Calculate it! (calculate the amount of forage a herd of wood bison require annually)

Portable Wood Bison Skeleton Education Kits

In addition to the curriculum, another complimentary education project is underway. With the help of ADF&G, educator and Alaska State Science Olympiad Director Tim Lundt is in the process of cleaning and creating two complete wood bison skeletons that will be used by teachers around the state.

These kits come in wooden boxes and are designed so that students can study the structure of the bones and reassemble the entire skeleton. This is a great way for students to learn about wood bison structure and anatomy and how they are designed to fit into their environment.

One wood bison skeleton will be available in South Central Alaska and one in Interior/Northeast Alaska. To obtain one of these educational kits, contact:

Mike Taras, ADF&G - mike.taras@alaska.gov.....(907) 459-7230



Tim B. Lundt, the Alaska State Science Olympiad Director and science teacher at Mat-Su Career & Tech High School, works with his students to process wood bison bones and turn them into skeleton kits for education purposes.



A Timeline of Major Wood Bison Events

2014 - Spring 2015 release date announced by Governor Parnell on August 5th.

2014 - Final 10(j) rule published May 7th.

2012 - Wood bison downlisted from endangered to threatened.

2009 - Petroleum development interests protested the reintroduction of an ESA listed species.

2008 - ADF&G and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service begin process to list the wood bison herd as a “nonessential experimental population” —called the 10(j) rule.

2008 - ADF&G trucked 53 Wood Bison from Elk Island National Park, Canada to AWCC.

2007 - Wood Bison Environmental Review published.

2004 - Wood Bison Restoration Advisory Group created.

2003 - USFWS transferred 13 wood bison to AWCC.

2002 - Habitat assessment of remaining Interior Alaska started.

2001 - Stephenson et al. published a paper titled—*Wood Bison in Late Holocene Alaska and Adjacent Canada: Paleontological, Archeological and Historical records.*

1995 - Habitat assessment of Yukon Flats.

1994 - Feasibility assessment.

1993 - Historical research began.

Remembering Randy

Randy Rogers, ADF&G wildlife planner and intrepid champion of the wood bison reintroduction program passed away on April 17, 2013 after a courageous battle with cancer. Randy was a quintessential team player. He treated all points of view fairly and with respect. As the rest of us slog through the quagmire of paperwork and regulations, we honor Randy by remembering that he never took his eye from the prize. He worked tirelessly to ensure wood bison would one day roam wild in Alaska.

