ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
DIVISION OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
PO Box 115526
Juneau, AK 99811-5526

Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Wildlife Restoration Grant

GRANT NUMBER: AKW-29

PROJECT NUMBER: 5.0

PROJECT TITLE: Wood Bison Restoration and Management

PERIOD OF GRANT: 03/23/2018 through 6/30/2020

PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE: 03/23/2018 through 03/29/2019

INTERIM REPORT DUE DATE: Submitted to Coordinator June 3, 2019

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: C. Tom Seaton, Wood Bison Project Biologist

I. PROGRESS ON PROJECT OBJECTIVES DURING PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE

OBJECTIVE 1: Monitor the Lower Innoko/Yukon rivers wood bison herd.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Accomplished ongoing population studies. Due to late winter-spring mortalities in March and April of 2018, Alaska's only wild wood bison herd decreased from an estimated 140 animals in June of 2017 to an estimated 91 animals after June of 2018. The losses occurred during a late winter stress event mostly attributed to snow conditions that hindered access to forage and an extended winter season. By June 2018 the difficult time was over and the bison were again gaining weight and raising new calves. A peak of 11 calves was observed in June 2018. Using the developing sex/age composition techniques with high resolution photography (description in objective 2), we completed a composition count on 22nd June 2018. There were 15 mature bulls, 3 adult bulls, 42 adult cows, 11 calves, 8 subadults, and 10 yearlings. On January 16th and 17th of 2019, we captured 13 wild bison along the Innoko and deployed new Iridium radiocollars. At the time of capture, all 11 calves (then 8-9 months old) were still alive and in the bison groups. We flew monthly radiotracking flights during the reporting period and weekly or bi-weekly flights during calving season (weather dependent). In April of 2018, we completed a mortality survey where we necropsied 9 individual bison that died during the winter stress event. We have sent dozens of seasonal fecal samples off to laboratories to better understand diet and parasites.

1. OBJECTIVE 2: Improve population enumeration and population sex and age composition methods by incorporating high resolution aerial photography.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Preliminary work was done in development of methods for a composition survey tool applicable to bison that utilizes high resolution aerial photography from ADF&G's photocensus aircraft. We completed a composition survey of the Innoko/Yukon wood bison population in June 2018, and were able to get a good composition count. We completed a composition survey of all known age wood bison in captivity at AWCC, which let us proof our methods. Over the next year, we will be repeating the methods, troubleshooting any problems, and writing it up for publication.

2. OBJECTIVE 3: Provide education, outreach, and planning concerning the restoration of wood bison as a primary step in establishing new populations of wood bison.

   ACCOMPLISHMENTS: A Wood Bison News was published in 2018. It was posted on the internet, and advertised on Facebook, and sent to thousands of mail box holders in the Nonessential Experimental Population area. Regular verbal and written updates were provided to people near the Innoko/Yukon wood bison population, and throughout the state. Preliminary work has been done to set up public planning meetings that will lead to the establishment of subpopulations in other areas of Alaska. Those meeting are expected to start in winter 2019-2020. The upcoming public planning meetings will be a major use of this grant.

II. SUMMARY OF WORK COMPLETED ON PROJECT TO DATE.

HTTP://WWW.ADFG.ALASKA.GOV/STATIC/RESEARCH/WILDLIFE/SPECIES/WOODBISONRESTORATION/PDFS/WOODBISON_NEWS_10_SPRING_2018.PDF

III. SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT REPORTS AND/OR AMENDMENTS.

Not applicable

IV. PUBLICATIONS

Wood Bison News Issue No. 10, Spring - 2018

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THIS PROJECT

This project will be ongoing indefinitely.

Prepared by: C. Tom Seaton, Wood Bison Project Biologist

Date: 3 June 2019