

**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 PERFORMANCE: 16 Feb 2020 to 30 September 2021

PERFORMANCE YEAR: 02/15/2020 through 02/15/2021; year 3 of a 4.7-year grant

REPORT DUE DATE:

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

Authorities: 2 CFR 200.328
2 CFR 200.301
50 CFR 80.90

I. PROGRESS ON PROJECT OBJECTIVES DURING PERFORMANCE YEAR

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

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Work continued 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 are in the testing phase of the technique development, and we completed composition surveys of the Innoko/Yukon wood bison population in June 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021. The technique has shown success in ongoing population monitoring. The technique has helped us estimate that Alaska's only wild wood bison herd experienced a rebound in 2021 from an estimated 93 animals in June of 2020 to an estimated 103 animals in June of 2021. This was a 10% population growth after a 17% population decline the previous year. Much of this population growth can be attributed to higher survival in late winter because snow was relatively soft, without ice layers through March, which allowed adequate access to forage resources during the April calving period. A peak of 26 calves was observed in June 2021 using the technique. The preliminary results from the composition photos suggest that there were 32 adult bulls, 30 adult cows, 26 calves, 10 subadults, and 5 yearlings in June of 2021. The technique is still under development, but it holds promise to be very effective for bison management in the future. We collected images for 2 other Alaska bison herds in 2021. Over the next year, we will be repeating the methods, troubleshooting any problems, and continue to summarize the methods for publication.

OBJECTIVE 2: 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 update was published each summer in 2020 and 2021 to on the ADF&G web site and on Facebook. Some media outlets picked up the story and published articles based on the press release. Regular verbal and written updates were provided to people near the Innoko/Yukon wood bison population, and throughout the state. The wood bison curriculum developed in previous years was distributed to teachers as they requested it. A 3-day public planning meeting was held in Fairbanks early February 2020. The purpose of the meeting was to update the Management plan for Lower Yukon-Innoko bison herd. The meeting was held in Fairbanks and was successfully completed. The members of the planning team called for two main differences to the plan in the future. One is to target additional releases of bison in the Lower Yukon-Innoko area, and two is to include more folks from the YK delta area in the future planning team. A subcommittee was conceptualized to work through the process of including those new members. The new plan is in the process of being written, but the Covid pandemic has stopped much of the progress because the lack of public meeting potential, hindering the subcommittee. The new plan should come out in early 2022. Many meetings with individual interest groups have been completed in 2020 over internet meeting platforms like Zoom and Teams. Once Covid restrictions are lifted, more public planning meetings for Eastern Interior Alaska will be scheduled to assess the possibility of establishing more wild populations of wood bison.

II. SUMMARY OF WORK COMPLETED ON PROJECT TO DATE.

Below is a link to the published Alaska wood bison updates and the wood bison news.

<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=woodbisonrestoration.herdupdates>

III. SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT REPORTS AND/OR AMENDMENTS.

A major part of this grant is for public planning meetings to establish future releases of wood bison in the effort to restore the species. The new restrictions on public assembly due to the Covid19 pandemic are a major and unexpected hindrance to public meetings. It is our hope that solutions to the pandemic will come soon and change this predicament we face. In the meantime, people are getting more used to internet based, remote meetings. Perhaps we may be able to hold future meetings in this way. Significant issues of rural internet connectivity stand as challenges to this process.

IV. PUBLICATIONS

<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=woodbisonrestoration.herdupdates>

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THIS PROJECT

Restoration of wood bison to their original range in Alaska is an ongoing process that will take decades to accomplish. This grant will contribute to that valuable effort over the next 2-3 years. Challenges to restoration of wood bison in Alaska are mainly political and bureaucratic, but this

grant specifically addresses those challenges with funding for public meetings to find ways through these challenges.

Prepared by: C. Tom Seaton

Date: 18 November 2021