



# WOOD BISON NEWS



Drawing courtesy of Wes Olson

Issue Number 6, Summer 2011

## ESA Regulation Issue Delays Wood Bison Release

By Bob Stephenson, Wood Bison Biologist

In the fall 2010 issue of the *Wood Bison News* we announced that spring 2012 would be the target date to release wood bison in the Innoko area. Now, due to a delay in completing regulations under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) the release

source development and allow the state to have the lead role in managing wood bison populations. It would also prevent the designation of critical habitat. This would be accompanied by a special rule, under section 4(d) of the ESA, which would

specify the sideboards of state management and allowable “take” of wood bison. In fall 2010 it appeared that the draft regulations would be published in the Federal Register, accomplishing their central purpose of ensuring that releasing a new species onto the landscape would not interfere with other resource development activities. However, these plans hit a snag due to factors not directly related to wood bison, as we explain below.

One of the key provisions in the draft 4(d) rule was to recognize that once bison populations reached a level that

could support a sustainable harvest (about 400 animals), regulated hunting would be allowed based on principles outlined in management plans developed by the state in cooperation with land-

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Photo by Doug Lindstrand

of wood bison to the wild will be delayed until 2013 or beyond. The final federal regulations have to be in place before wood bison can be released.

As many supporters of the wood bison project know, ADF&G has worked closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) during the last two years to develop a rule under section 10(j) of the ESA. The 10(j) rule would designate wood bison in Alaska as a nonessential experimental population, provide protections for other land uses and re-

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owners, FWS and other agencies, and other interested parties. ADF&G has always been committed to the principle that the benefits of wood bison restoration, including harvest, must be shared by local residents, other Alaskans and eventually visitors to our state.

However, recent litigation has raised a question about whether the FWS can allow hunting of species that are protected under the ESA. As a result, FWS recently indicated that at this time they are not prepared to authorize future harvests of populations of listed species (except for certain kinds of "take" otherwise authorized under the ESA) that have been designated as non-essential experimental. In March 2011, FWS informed ADF&G

that they could either publish a proposed rule by the end of April 2011 without a provision allowing future hunting, or wait for several months until the issue could be further discussed and hopefully resolved.

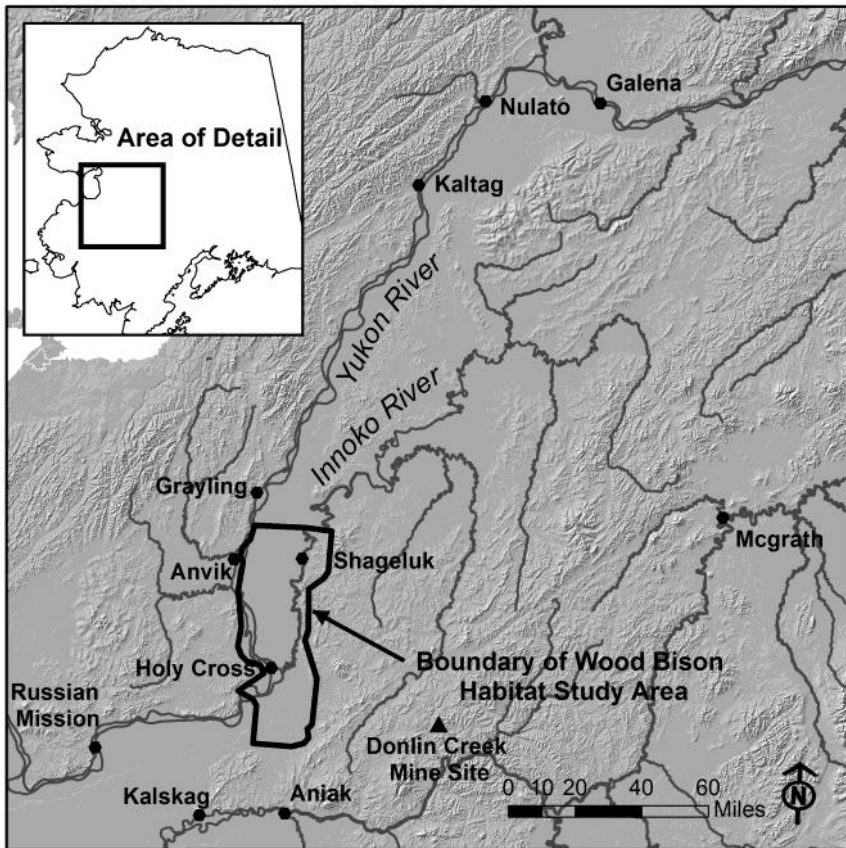
ADF&G decided that the ESA regulations must provide certainty in terms of allowing a future harvest and

*"It is our continued hope that we will be able to resolve this issue and release wood bison onto the Alaskan landscape in the near future."*  
*Acting Deputy Commissioner,  
Doug Vincent-Lang*

that the issue is too important to be deferred to a future federal regulatory process. The result is that the ESA regulations have been delayed. The first release cannot be implemented in 2012 as planned, and will have to be delayed until 2013.

ADF&G will do its best to resolve this issue as soon as possible, so that the wood bison restoration effort can move ahead.

FWS has indicated that they are willing to continue to explore options to resolve the issues related to the future hunting of wood bison, but it appears this will take some time. FWS has also committed to provide \$200,000 to help offset the additional costs of maintaining a larger number of wood bison for longer than we had planned at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center. Project supporters appreciate this contribution, and hope the harvest issue is resolved as soon as possible.



Map showing first proposed release site. Release has been delayed until at least 2013.

## Herd Health Update

By Rita St. Louis, Assistant Planner

Our herd at AWCC is a healthy growing herd with 102 bison. This spring 18 calves were born. As with any confined herd of animals, ours has some nutrition and parasite challenges, some of which are unique to bison. We grew concerned when five animals died between January and April. Reasons for the deaths were not completely known, but nutrition, parasites, and certain trace mineral deficiencies seemed to be a common denominator. So in April 2011 we retained an expert consultant, Dr. Gerald Parsons - who is a large animal veterinarian and has a herd of plains bison himself - to advise us. Dr. Parsons said our problems were not uncommon in confined bison herds, and he offered suggestions to remedy the situation. Following his advice, our veterinarians, Dr. Kimberlee Beckmen and Dr. Bob Gerlach, and AWCC's Mike Miller have readjusted the parasite medications and feed that our bison get. For example, some of the medication is sprinkled over the top of grain in the form of pellets. The larger bison

get first shot at the grain, so they get the most medication but need it the least. Getting a uniform dosage for all of the bison is not a simple matter. To help solve this, Dr. Parsons recommended using more grain feeders, including some that are on wheels and can be moved to different enclosures. Another recommendation was to change medications periodically so the organisms do not develop an immunity to one medication. Also following his advice, more supplemental grain will be fed. Acquiring the extra grain has taken time. Special thanks goes to Steve Mendive, from AWCC, who has spent many hours researching special bison formula and possible donations from some vendors for the grain supplement.

Keeping a bison herd of this size in captivity requires a continuous learning process, and we constantly discover better ways of doing things. Overall our herd is doing well, and we are looking forward to their release.



Photo by Doug Lindstrand

Bison eating first green grass of spring. After a winter of being confined into smaller pastures, and eating hay and grain, the bison regain weight in the spring and summer on the rich grasses grown at AWCC.



Photo by Doug Lindstrand

Mother bison tending her new calf, born this spring at AWCC

## Thank You and Best Wishes from Randy Rogers

To my many friends dedicated to wood bison conservation:

This summer I will be retiring from my work as a Wildlife Planner for ADF&G. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work on the Alaska wood bison restoration project and with the many individuals and organizations that are involved in this outstanding wildlife conservation initiative. I hope to be able to contribute to the project in other ways and look forward to the day when wood bison are again roaming free in our state.

There are too many people and organizations that deserve recognition for their contributions to the wood bison project to all be mentioned here. I have to start by thanking Bob Stephenson who had the original vision for wood bison restoration in Alaska and has been my mentor and partner for the past several years. It took a while for Bob to “train me up,” but we have worked closely together to meet one challenge after another to keep the project moving forward. It has truly been a pleasure working with Mike Miller and the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center. They have worked tirelessly on behalf of wood bison conservation and always bring a 100% “can-do” attitude to any measure needed for the health and well-being of the wood bison. Carlile Transportation Systems has been simply incredible with their continued donations amounting to tens of

thousands of dollars by transporting hay to AWCC. And speaking of hay, University of Alaska has donated many bales of hay for the bison at production cost. Norman Harris stated, *“Thank you for allowing the University of Alaska Fairbanks to participate in this project that will benefit all Alaskans specifically, and all people in the United States*

*generally.”* Safari Club International and their Alaska and Kenai Peninsula chapters paid for many of the wood bison facilities at AWCC, and they have offered legal advice and political support. The Turner Foundation provided funding that enabled ADF&G to import wood bison from Canada and move the project from a dream to a reality. Finally, ADF&G Regional Supervisor David James is the unsung hero who has worked behind the scenes to provide the management support and coordination with

our headquarters that has been vital to the project.

I have enjoyed working with residents of the Yukon Flats, the Minto Flats, and the lower Yukon and Innoko River area, as well as numerous people involved in state fish and game advisory committees and the federal subsistence councils. Paul Williams, Sr. from Beaver has been an inspiration and a long-standing advocate for restoring wood bison on the Yukon Flats. Ron Silas led the effort to consider restoring wood bison on Minto Flats. Arnold Hamilton and the Tanana Chiefs Conference Lower Yukon Sub-Region have shown unwav-



Randy Rogers holding the skull of a large wood bison

ering support for wood bison restoration in the lower Yukon/Innoko area for the past several years, and I hope they see wood bison on the landscape in the near future. The support and involvement of local residents, wildlife conservation organizations and other Alaska residents are crucial to the future success of the wood bison project.

In the end though, it's all about the bison. Wood bison are truly magnificent creatures that belong on the Alaskan landscape and deserve the chance to flourish in their natural habitat once again. After the wood bison herds are established and have grown people will be able to enjoy their presence and reap the benefits for many generations to come.

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In January 2008, at the end of the wood bison round-up at Elk Island National Park, I was standing in a corral with Archie Handel, Park Warden, and the young wood bison selected for import to Alaska. I made a promise to those bison that we would find them a new home in the wild lands of Alaska, where they could live and prosper. Let's all continue working to fulfill that promise and the vision for wood bison restoration that so many Alaskans and others have shared for nearly two decades.

Thank you my friends and best regards, Randy

## Legislative Action Affecting the Wood Bison Project

By Ben Mulligan, Special Assistant to the Commissioner

As part of the process for establishing the 2012 fiscal year operating budget, the House and Senate Finance Committees included language intended to affect the wood bison project in two ways. To import any more wood bison or to relocate the existing herd to another part of the state, the Department would first have to obtain a signed letter from the appropriate federal agencies stating that wood bison will not be considered threatened, endangered, or any other protective status in Alaska, now, or at any time in the future. Furthermore the Department would have to obtain approval from the legislature to import or relocate wood bison in the state. This intent language applies only to the fiscal year from July 1, 2011 to June 30, 2012.

In addition to the language in the budget, Representative Alan Dick (R-Stony River) introduced House Bill 186. House Bill 186 is similar to part of the operating budget intent language and requires the Department to receive approval from the Alaska State Legislature before importing any more wood bison into Alaska or relocating wood bison to a new area within Alaska. Following hearings in early April the House Resources Committee voted to advance HB 186 to the full House of Representatives for further consideration. However, time in the legislative session ran out and no action was taken by the full House. The bill could come up for further consideration in the House of Representatives next year. No companion legislation has been proposed in the Senate.

## Tom Seaton, New Wood Bison Biologist On Board

This summer we have another wood bison biologist on board. Tom Seaton, who has been Assistant Area Biologist for the Fairbanks area, was selected for that position. Those of us who work with Tom and with wood bison feel really fortunate.



Tom Seaton, the new wood bison biologist. In this photo, Tom is conducting a moose browse survey.

Tom comes with a unique skill set to make him the ideal person for the job. Foremost, Tom is a top-notch biologist who has worked extensively with all game and furbearer species in Interior Alaska. He developed a moose browse survey method that is being used statewide to evaluate habitat use. Tom is the chief pilot for Region III, which is good, because it is important to have a pilot as the wood bison biologist. Tom said one of his early tasks is to become familiar with the scientific literature on bison biology and to learn the “institutional knowledge” from the folks at Fish and Game. Of course Bob Stephenson will be sharing his extensive knowledge to get Tom up to speed. Finally, Tom is not a stranger to wood bison. He was one of the two lead handlers at the most recent wood bison health screening events.

## Doug Lindstrand, Photographer and Supporter

Most of the best photos you have seen in our *Wood Bison News* and other publications were taken by Doug Lindstrand, a freelance artist/photographer who has lived in Alaska since 1970. Doug is well-known for his Alaska books such as *Alaska Sketchbook* and *Wild Alaska*. He also publishes prints, cards and various other books on art and wildlife. Doug has generously allowed us use of his photos of wood bison to enhance or bring attention to the wood bison restoration project. Doug can be seen photographing at AWCC about any time of year and in all weather

conditions. He donates his photographs because of the true importance of this project. He said, *“We are seldom given the opportunity and honor of reintroducing a species back into its rightful homeland and that it is the shared hope of many that this majestic animal will soon once again roam free and grace the wilds of this unique State of Alaska.”*

We greatly appreciate Doug, his beautiful photographs, his absolute generosity, and his support of the wood bison project.

Doug Lindstrand takes photos during the entire year in all weather conditions.





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Photo by Doug Lindstrand

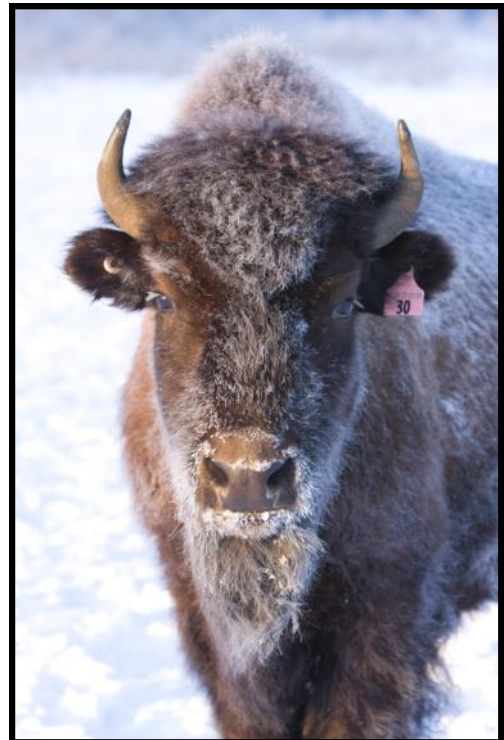


Photo by Doug Lindstrand

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