

Farmers, hunters battle over bison in Delta: Fence them or hunt them?

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FAIRBANKS - A battle over Alaska's biggest bison herd is brewing between hunters and farmers in Delta Junction, the latter of who contend the wild beasts are damaging agricultural crops and need to be reined in, whether it means building fences to keep them off crop lands or drastically reducing the size of the herd.

Hunters, meanwhile, are dead set against fencing the wild herd in and/or thinning it down. If anything, hunters want to grow the herd to create more opportunity for what is Alaska's most popular drawing permit hunt.

The result is a "confirmed stalemate" that will likely require action from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game or the Alaska Legislature to iron out, according to wildlife planner Randy Rogers with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

"The Delta Bison Working Group made recommendations on a number of things but didn't come to agreement on herd size or concepts of fencing," Rogers said of an advisory committee created to help the department make management decisions regarding the herd. "They agreed that fencing is a long-term solution but there's a big split in what kind of fencing option to use."

Some farmers want to fence the herd in on the 90,000-acre Delta Junction Bison Range, which sits south of the Alaska Highway, just a short romp from a number of farms in the Delta Agricultural Project. The range was created by the legislature in the early 1980s to keep bison off farm land but it hasn't been successful, for various reasons.

Some farmers would rather fence the bison out of their fields, assuming they could get considerable help paying for the fencing, because they, not the state, would be responsible for building and maintaining it.

Some farmers simply want to knock the size of the bison herd down.

"It's time to either cut the herd way back or solve the problem through fencing," Delta farmer Mike Schultz, a member of the bison working group and one of the farmers most effected by bison damage, said.

That's not necessarily the way hunters see it, however. The bison, introduced to the area in 1928, were there long before the farmers moved in, albeit at the encouragement of the state with the development of the Delta Agricultural Project.

"I sympathize with the farmers," Fairbanks hunter Lenny Jewkes, the statewide hunter representative on the bison working group, said. "The farmers do have a major problem that was created by selling the land where the buffalo roam."

But that doesn't mean hunters should be the one who pay for the formation of a penned herd and fewer hunting opportunities, he said. State law requires the herd to be free ranging, Jewkes noted "Fencing the herd in is not an option and a drastic reduction in herd size is not an option as far as hunters are concerned," Jewkes said.

Popular hunt

At an estimated 435 animals this fall, the Delta Bison Herd is the biggest of three free-ranging bison herds in Alaska. The other two herds are located on the Farewell Bend west of the Alaska Range near McGrath and in the Wrangell Mountains near Chitina, both fairly isolated areas.

The management objective for the Delta herd is 360 bison before the spring calving season, according to Delta area biologist Steve DuBois with the Department of Fish and Game.

The state regulates the herd size through sport hunting. Each year, based on the most recent population estimate, the state issues a select number drawing permits for hunters to hunt the herd.

Given the relatively easy access, high success rates and large size of the animals, the Delta bison hunt is by far the most popular drawing permit hunt in the state. More than 10,000 hunters per year apply for an average of about 100 Delta bison permits.

"It's a very, very popular hunt," Don Quarberg, the Delta hunting representative on the bison working group, said.

If the department were to reduce the size of the herd to 300, which was one of the proposals considered by the working group, it would mean an initial increase in the number of permits issued but a reduction in permits down the road.

"We would probably go down to about 80 permits (per year) and those would be split between bull or cow permits," DuBois said.

Whether or not reducing the herd would solve the problem is unknown but it makes sense that fewer bison would cause less damage.

"We really don't know what the result of reducing the herd would be and whether or not it would reduce the agricultural damage or not," Rogers said.

Reducing the size of the herd and the number of permits to hunt it might help cut down on crop damage but it would also have an economic impact on Delta Junction, Jewkes said. Hunters bring in about \$1 million a year to the Delta economy, he noted.

Jewkes feels that hunters and farmers have to work together to solve the problem. There needs to be compromises made on both sides, though he wasn't sure what those compromises are. Farmers will need the support of hunters if they're going to succeed, he said.

"There's 10,000 of us and 20 of them," Jewkes said.

The damage

It would also help if there was some way to determine how much damage the bison are actually doing to farmers' crops, a point repeatedly brought up by hunting representatives on the working group.

Based on the fact they spend about half the year on private ag lands, DuBois said the bison currently get about half their forage from ag crops and the other half from state and military land.

The Division of Agriculture in Fairbanks conducted its first ever crop damage assessment this year and estimated that bison caused approximately \$142,140 worth of damage to crop lands this fall.

But Charlie Knight, northern region manager for the ag division, cautioned that the estimate is "kind of a crude number."

"It's almost impossible to come up with a number," he said. "On the ground you can't see all the damage and in the air you can't tell how much is bison damage and how much is moose damage."

Knight used aerial photographs taken by DuBois to pinpoint damage areas and then surveyed the damaged areas on the ground. He also interviewed farmers about damage, investigated reports of damage and created an online survey farmers could fill out.

The damage caused by bison comes in different forms. In some cases, the bison simply trample, eat and wallow in crops like barley, oats, grass and hay. In other cases, farmers are forced to harvest grain earlier than they would like to prevent bison from damaging it. Doing so results in expensive drying costs. Bison also run through potato fields, roll around in seeding grass fields and run through fences.

Damage this year wasn't as bad as last year or some previous years farmers reluctantly told Knight, but they contend that damage by bison is significant, he said. This year's damage estimate was lower than Knight thought it would be.

"To be honest, I thought it would come up to \$350,000 to \$450,000," he said. "We had a warmer summer and they could get their harvest in about the time the bison were coming in."

Still, Schultz said he had some barley fields that "got hammered pretty hard" by bison.

One of the recommendations the bison working group did make was to establish an on-going crop damage assessment program to get a better handle on crop damage and the cost benefits of building expensive fencing. The Department of Fish and Game will take up that possibility with the Department of Natural Resources and the legislature, Rogers said.

On the fence

The basic question when it comes to fencing is do you fence the bison in or out?

The Department of Fish and Game opposes fencing the herd in because it goes against the department's mandate to manage the state's wild game resources in a responsible manner for the best interest of all Alaskans.

"We just don't do that," Fairbanks regional supervisor David James said of fencing wild animals.

Barring any fencing, the herd should be knocked down to 150 animals, Schultz said.

"If hunters want a larger herd than that there has to be a fencing program that goes along with that," he said. "Whether you fence them in or out."

Fencing the bison in "would be easiest and cheapest for all concerned," Schultz said.

The working group nearly had consensus on a proposal to reduce the herd to 300 animals and to support a cost-sharing program for farmers to fence their fields but Phil Kaspari, a farmer who also sits on the working group representing the Cooperative Extension Service in Delta, wouldn't agree to it.

"It doesn't solve the problem," Kaspari said of farmers fencing off their fields.

The bison are just going to wander around searching for food and farmers who can't afford to fence their fields will suffer, he said. In addition, maintaining a fence is not easy, Kaspari said.

"It's another burden on the farmer when I would just as soon the agriculture industry be able to spend its resources on agricultural ventures," he said.

Kaspari favors fencing the bison onto the state bison range and "thinking outside the box" to come up with a long-term solution.

"We need to have a fundamental shift in philosophy," he said. "We need to quit looking at the herd as a problem between agriculture and bison and start looking at this as an opportunity."

The state should clear more land and plant more crops on the 90,000-acre bison range — the state currently farms about 2,000 acres of the range — similar to the program at Custer State Park in South Dakota, which is home to a penned herd of about 1,500 bison on 72,000 acres that is open for hunting.

“They manage the herd and they manage the range,” he said.

Successful agriculture and free-ranging bison are not a good mix, Kaspari said.

“Everybody (in the Lower 48) laughs when they hear that,” he said. “They don’t go hand in hand.”

Even ignoring the cost factor of putting up miles of expensive, bison-proof fence, there are all sorts of potential impacts with fencing. Any kind of fence would have to be maintained and there would always be the threat of someone cutting the fence. If that happened, who would round up the bison?

Fencing bison off private ag lands could simply move the problem from one area to another, too. Bison would start wandering around looking for other food sources, similar to what they did prior to the development of the Delta ag project, DuBois said. Before the ag project was built, bison were routinely seen wandering around town and were a problem for farms on Tanana Loop, he said.

Fencing would also impact the travel patterns of other wildlife, such as moose, DuBois said, not to mention open the door to all sorts of access issues.

“Every one (of the fencing options) has major implications,” DuBois said. “There’s all kinds of variables and we don’t have a handle on any of them.”

Quarberg, the Delta hunting representative on the working group, said he hasn’t talked to a single hunter who wants to fence in the bison.

“That’s not acceptable,” he said. “We’re going to fight that tooth and nail.”

At this point, the department will try to act on the recommendations the working group did agree on — to improve bison habitat on the bison range, increase hunter success rates to ensure harvest objectives are reached and to establish an on-going crop damage assessment program — while it debates potential herd size and fencing options with the Department of Natural Resources and Alaska Legislature, Rogers said.

“We have to make some decisions on how we’re going to move forward,” he said.

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