



National Bison Association

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Bison Priorities for Natural Resources Conservation Service

National Bison Association Priority Issues Briefing Paper

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Background:

Bison restoration began as the animals teetered on the brink of extinction in the late 1800s, and the bison business has emerged as a viable part of the agricultural economy and rural landscape over the past two decades.

Growth in commercial bison production has been driven primarily by growing demand from consumers who are embracing the great taste, nutritional attributes, and environmental benefits of sustainably and ethically raised bison. But herds are growing on tribal and public lands as well, as Native Americans establish new cultural and commercial herds, and as public lands managers provide greater opportunities for the public to enjoy bison in parks and preserves.

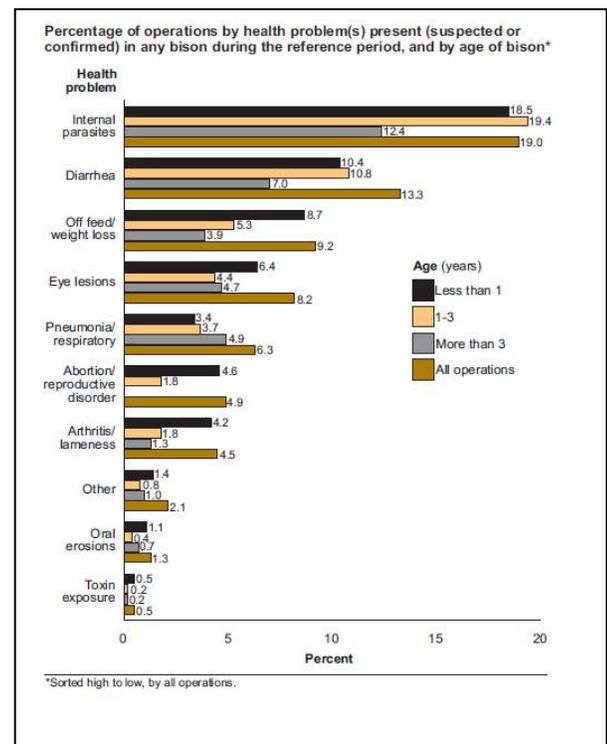
The continued growth and stability of bison producers, and bison herds, will require increased attention to a variety of NRCS planned conservation practices.

Bison: Similar but Different from Domestic Livestock

Bison are ruminant bovine animals. However, bison retain many unique biological and sociological characteristics of wild ruminants. They exhibit stress when confined, are seasonal breeders, and follow seasonal cycles for growth and metabolism. There are no NRC guidelines to help the industry as we the numbers of bison raised for production and conservation.

There is great demand for information from all levels within the industry, including: producers, processors, and retailers. A few research projects have provided some information on health issues, production practices, and behavioral patterns of bison herds, but there is a drastic need for additional scientific research on bison. Some of this information is published in the *Bison Producers Handbook*, 2nd Revised Edition, published by the National Bison Association (2016).

The final report of *Bison 2014*, the epidemiological survey of bison conducted by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) identified some of the key areas of concern for commercial bison producers. Recently, members of the National Bison Association's Science & Research Committee met with researchers and staff at the newly established Center of Excellence for Bison Studies at South Dakota State University to identify specific research priorities in bison herd health.



Specific priority areas for bison include:

Herd Health

- Need for NRC Guidelines for Bison
- Malignant Catarrhal Fever vaccine development
- Continued research in *Mycoplasma bovis* in bison and associated vaccine development
- Management of internal and external parasites in bison
- Nutritional research, including:
 - rumen function / profile-microbial, enzyme efficiency;
 - vitamins, minerals, protein, energy;
 - suitability of forages i.e. summer/winter;
 - reproduction, maintenance and growth;
 - concentrate/energy types and impact on health, gain, quality, cost, and finishing- by gender, age, and season via a long-term grazing study

Human Health Research

- Nutritional attributes of bison meat, both grain- and grass-finished
- Bison meat and links/impacts for cardiovascular health
- Potential for non-allergenic attributes of bison meat

Bison Production

- Ecologically sustainable management of bison
- Beginning/limited resource farmer support
- Business/financial management
- Bison production under different finishing protocols
- Managing for and producing high-quality meat
- Bison local, regional, national, and international marketing

Increasing demand for bison is one of the reasons that the National Bison Association, the InterTribal Buffalo Council, and the Wildlife Conservation Society in July, 2017, launched *Bison 1 Million*, a campaign to restore one million bison to North America over the next 10-15 years.



The National Bison Association has been engaged in a series of programs over the past five years to stimulate expanded bison production, including recruitment of new producers. Our Bison Advantage initiative includes educational resources, workshops, outreach to FFA and other measures to encourage additional production.

Despite the current financial viability of the bison business, and the strong economic outlook, we face significant hurdles in bringing new producers into ranching, processing and marketing.

Traditional agricultural lending institutions are largely unfamiliar with the fundamentals of bison production, and therefore extremely conservative when considering financing bison enterprises. This conservatism has become more pronounced as those institutions tighten their lending requirements because of the downturn in mainstream commodity production.

Many NRCS offices, likewise, consider bison production as a novel enterprise, and not as a viable agricultural opportunity. It's time that bison be recognized as a viable opportunity for agricultural producers and rural communities, and a keystone species in revitalizing America's grasslands and rangelands. The Natural Resources Conservation Service can play a significant role in this effort:

Our Recommendations:

1. Increased access to NRCS Financial and Technical Assistance to Bison Producers

Potential producers, including those in non-traditional bison production areas—should be provided with equal access to financial and technical assistance as those applicants engaged in mainstream commodity production.

As a start, bison production information should be included in the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide website, and Sharepoint repository for conservation planning.

2. Increase Understanding of Bison Production within NRCS Offices

Through the resources provided by a Risk Management Agency Grant received in 2014, the National Bison Association published the 2nd Edition of the *Bison Producers' Handbook*. This publication contains 22 chapters written by industry experts in all phases of production marketing from all regions of the United States. The National Bison Association would like to provide this publication to NRCS Offices across the country.

3. Utilization of Outreach & Technical Assistance Cooperative Agreements to expand tribal bison production.

These cooperative agreements are already being utilized to some extent to assist tribes in expanding bison production on their lands. The National Bison Association and InterTribal Buffalo council are working with South Dakota State University, Sinte Gleska University, and other institutions of higher education to expand bison production, and to address key priorities in terms of business planning and herd health.

4. Transition of Conservation Reserve Program Lands to Bison Production

With volatility in wheat, corn, soybean and cattle prices, moving that expiring CRP acreage into traditional commodity production makes little sense. Bison production offers an alternative for profitable livestock production without impacting those mainstream commodities. Bison also could be utilized as an effective means of mid-contract management.

5. Continued equal access to all Grassland and Rangeland NRCS Programs.

Many NRCS Grassland and Rangeland management groups focus on cattle, sheep and goats. Bison have historically been omitted.. It is vital that this equal access be established and continued.