



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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News

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SERVICE SEEKS COMMENTS ON PROPOSED WOOD BISON INTRODUCTION PROJECT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today that it will propose to release wood bison (*Bison bison athabasca*) in Alaska, in support of an Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) plan, in an effort to establish a wild population of this native wildlife species to the State. Potential introduction sites include Minto Flats, the lower Innoko/Yukon River area, and Yukon Flats.

In May 2012, wood bison were reclassified from endangered to threatened, to reflect successful efforts in Canada to reestablish free-ranging wood bison herds. The reclassification represents the significant progress that has been made towards recovery and is part of an overall recovery strategy that should eventually lead to delisting the species altogether. Introduction of wood bison in Alaska would support one of the goals of the Canadian recovery plan to foster the restoration of the species in other areas to help ensure its long-term survival.

In support of the ADF&G release effort, the Service is proposing to designate a nonessential experimental population of wood bison in Alaska under section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA) and an associated proposed special rule that would provide a wide range of management options, including assurances that the establishment of the wild herd(s) won't have any unintended consequences for the State, private landowners, industry, or Alaska Natives. If the proposed rule is adopted, the ADF&G would have primary management responsibility for leading and implementing the wood bison restoration effort.

Geoffrey Haskett, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Alaska Regional Director, said, "We support the ADF&G's efforts to release wood bison in Alaska. Establishing wild populations of this magnificent animal in Alaska would be a significant step toward its eventual recovery and delisting. We will assist the ADF&G as they work with landowners, industry and the Alaska Native community to address their concerns."

Doug Vincent Lang, Alaska Department of Fish and Game's Acting Director of the Division of Wildlife Conservation, said, "The Department looks forward to the establishment of a final rule incorporating the 10(j) nonessential experimental population provision and the special rule delegating primary management of this nonessential population to the State. I believe the proposed rule represents a necessary step towards the potential reintroduction of wood bison to the Alaskan landscape."

The ESA prohibits "take" of listed animal species – which includes killing, harming, or harassing the species or destroying its habitat – without authorization from the Service. However, the special rule we are proposing here, issued under Section 4(d) of the ESA, would define conditions under which "take"

of this species may occur without violating the law. The Service generally issues such rules to facilitate the overall conservation of the species or to preserve traditional land use activities, where such activities will not significantly affect ongoing and future conservation and recovery efforts.

Management plans for the introduced populations would be developed by ADF&G with involvement of landowners and other stakeholders. The rule also would allow for regulated hunting based on sustained yield principles. Hunting of wood bison has been used successfully as a conservation tool in Canada, and the ADF&G and the Service support its use in Alaska.

In association with these proposed rules, the Service has published a notice of availability of a draft Environmental Assessment (EA), as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. The draft EA analyzes the potential environmental impacts associated with the proposed introduction of wood bison in Alaska.

We are opening a 60-day comment period on the proposed rule and draft EA. We are especially interested in comments that are supported by data or peer-reviewed studies and those that include citations to, and analyses of, applicable laws and regulations. Please include sufficient information with your comments to allow us to authenticate any scientific or commercial data you reference or provide. We particularly seek comments concerning: (1) Any information on the biological or ecological requirements of wood bison; (2) Current or planned activities in the proposed introduction area; and (3) Any information concerning the boundaries of the proposed introduction area. Submit comments and information on either the proposed rules or the draft EA as follows:

1. *Federal eRulemaking Portal*: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Search for docket *FWS-R7-ES-22012-0033* and then follow the instructions for submitting comments.
2. *U.S. mail or hand-delivery*: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R7-ES-2012-0033; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203. Comments submitted to <http://www.regulations.gov> must be received before midnight (Eastern Time) on the date specified in the **DATES** section. We will post all comments on <http://www.regulations.gov>.

For further information contact Sonja Jahrsdoerfer at the address at the top of this document, or by telephone 907-786-3323. If you use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD), you may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 800-877-8339.

After the 60-day comment period, all comments and additional information received will be analyzed to determine whether to issue a final rule to implement this proposed action and to prepare a finding of no significant impact or an environmental impact statement. Comments we receive may lead to a final rule that differs from this proposal.

The Endangered Species Act provides a critical safety net for America's native fish, wildlife and plants. This landmark conservation law has prevented the extinction of hundreds of imperiled species across the nation and promoted the recovery of many others.

The wood bison is the largest native extant terrestrial mammal in North America. Average weight of mature bulls is about one ton (2,000 pounds). They have a large triangular head, a thin beard and rudimentary throat mane, their horns usually extend above the hair on their head, and the highest point of their hump is forward of their front legs. These physical characteristics distinguish them from the plains bison which is the subspecies that roamed the vast prairies of the continental United States.

An important partner in the wood bison restoration effort is the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) near Portage, Alaska. This non-profit organization has been caring for wood bison since 2003,

when 13 animals were first transferred to the facility. In 2008, an additional 53 disease-free wood bison were imported from Canada. The AWCC has the expertise and facilities to maintain and expand the captive herd, which now numbers over 130 animals, as they await release to the wild.

More information on wood bison, including details on the recent reclassification, can be found at: http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/endangered/species/wood_bison.htm. More information about wood bison in Alaska can be found at: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=woodbison.main>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwshq, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>.