



## U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Region 7 - Alaska

1011 East Tudor Road

Anchorage, Alaska 99503

(907)786-3309 (TDD Available)

*News*

11-02

February 7, 2011

Contact: Bruce Woods 907-786-3695

### **Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Reclassification of Wood Bison from “Endangered” to “Threatened”**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) today announced it has prepared a status review of the wood bison (*Bison bison athabasca*), which is listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as endangered. After evaluating the best scientific and commercial data available, the Service has determined that reclassifying the species from endangered to threatened is warranted.

On November 26, 2007, the Service received a petition from the co-chairs of Canada’s National Wood Bison Recovery Team requesting that the agency reclassify the wood bison from endangered to threatened. The petition contained information about recovery efforts in Canada, and referred to information provided to the Service’s Division of Scientific Authority. On February 3, 2009, the Service published a 90-day finding acknowledging the petition provided sufficient information to indicate that reclassification may be warranted and that the Service would initiate the status review referenced above.

There are two closely related subspecies of bison: the wood bison and plains bison. Physical and genetic differences distinguish the two subspecies. The wood bison is considered the largest living, native terrestrial mammal in North America. The average weight of mature males is approximately 1 ton (2,000 pounds). They have a large triangular head, a thin beard and rudimentary throat mane, and a poorly-demarcated cape. The highest point of their hump is forward of their front legs, they have reduced chaps on their front legs, and their horns usually extend above the hair on their head. In contrast, the plains bison are smaller and lighter in color than wood bison. Plains bison have a thick beard and full throat mane and well-developed chaps. The highest point of the hump is over their front legs and their horns rarely extend above their bonnet of dense, curly hair.

During the early 1800s, wood bison numbers were estimated at 168,000. By the late 1800s, however, the subspecies was nearly eliminated, with only a few hundred remaining. Overharvest was the primary

cause of the population decline. In 1922, Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP) in Canada was set aside for the protection of the last remnant population of wood bison, which was then estimated at 1,500-2,000 individuals. Between 1925 and 1928, more than 6,600 plains bison were translocated to WBNP. These plains bison hybridized with the wood bison and also introduced tuberculosis and brucellosis to the herd. These diseases still persist and are an impediment to recovery. No effective vaccines exist to protect free-ranging wood bison populations from brucellosis or tuberculosis.

In 1959, an isolated northern population of relatively pure wood bison was found in WBNP, and two herds were established from these animals: the Mackenzie herd and the Elk Island National Park herd. Most of the world population of wood bison is derived from 37 animals captured and relocated from this isolated northern population. In 1978, there were only about 400 disease-free wood bison; 100 in the Elk Island National Park captive herd and 300 in the free-ranging herd in the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary. Recovery actions, guided by the Canadian National Recovery Plan, have led to the establishment of several more disease-free herds in Canada. By 2000, when the last Canadian status review was conducted, the number of disease-free herds had grown to 6, which included a total of 2,800 individuals. Since 2000, an additional herd has been established, bringing the total number of herds to 7, and the number of disease-free, free-ranging bison has increased to approximately 4,400.

The Service requests information from the scientific community and public on the following topics:

- Information on taxonomy, distribution, habitat selection and use, food habits, population density and trends, habitat trends, disease, and effects of management on wood bison;
- Information on captive herds, including efficacy of breeding and reintroduction programs, origin of parental stock, stock supplementation for genetic purposes, growth rates, birth and mortality rates in captivity, location of captive herds in comparison to wild populations, effects of captive breeding on the species, and any other factors from captive breeding that might affect wild populations or natural habitat;
- Information on the adequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; trends in domestic and international trade of live specimens, sport-hunted trophies, or other parts and products; poaching of wild wood bison; illegal trade and enforcement efforts and solutions; and oversight of reintroduction or introduction programs;

- Information on the effects of other potential threat factors, including contaminants, changes of the distribution and abundance of wild populations, disease episodes within wild and captive populations, large mortality events, the effects of climate change, or negative effects resulting from the presence of invasive species;
- Information on management programs for wood bison conservation in the wild, including private, tribal, or governmental conservation programs that benefit wood bison; and
- Current or planned activities within the geographic range of the wood bison that may impact or benefit the species; including any planned developments, roads, or expansion of agricultural enterprises.

Written comments and information concerning this proposal can be submitted by one of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments.
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R9-IA-2008-0123; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.

Comments must be received within 60 days, on or before April 11, 2011. The Service will post all comments on <http://www.regulations.gov>. This generally means the agency will post any personal information provided through the process. Requests for public hearings must be submitted within 45 days to the Service, in writing, at the address shown below by March 25, 2011.

The public may also obtain a copy at the Anchorage Regional Office, 1011 E. Tudor Road, Anchorage, Alaska, or by calling the Regional Office, 907-786-3309, and requesting a copy.

The ESA provides a critical safety net for native fish, wildlife and plants and to date has prevented the extinction of hundreds of imperiled species across the nation, as well as promoting the recovery of many others. The Service is actively engaged with conservation partners and the public in the search for

improved and innovative ways to conserve and recover imperiled species. To learn more about the Service's implementation of the ESA, go to <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>.

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](http://www.fws.gov).

-FWS-