

Wood Bison Stocking and Release**FY2010 Request: \$250,000****Reference No: 47022****AP/AL:** Appropriation**Project Type:** Research / Studies / Planning**Category:** Natural Resources**Location:** Fairbanks Areawide**Contact:** Doug Larsen**House District:** Fairbanks Areawide (HD 7-11)**Contact Phone:** (907)465-4190**Estimated Project Dates:** 07/01/2009 - 06/30/2014**Brief Summary and Statement of Need:**

This five-year project will complete a wood bison stocking and release program resulting in establishing up to three wood bison herds in interior Alaska (Minto Flats, Yukon Flats, Innoko). The project includes: 1) maintaining wood bison stock in captivity to conduct a complete disease testing and health certification program and to allow for breeding to increase the number of wood bison available to release into the wild; 2) complete the regulatory and planning requirements; 3) construct temporary field camps and bison enclosures at the release sites; 4) transport the wood bison to release sites; 5) conduct the initial biological monitoring of wood bison herds; and, 6) staff necessary to execute the project.

Funding:	<u>FY2010</u>	<u>FY2011</u>	<u>FY2012</u>	<u>FY2013</u>	<u>FY2014</u>	<u>FY2015</u>	<u>Total</u>
Gen Fund	\$250,000	\$1,760,000					\$2,010,000
Total:	\$250,000	\$1,760,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$2,010,000

<input type="checkbox"/> State Match Required	<input type="checkbox"/> One-Time Project	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Phased - new	<input type="checkbox"/> Phased - underway	<input type="checkbox"/> On-Going
0% = Minimum State Match % Required		<input type="checkbox"/> Amendment	<input type="checkbox"/> Mental Health Bill	

Operating & Maintenance Costs:

	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Staff</u>
Project Development:	0	0
Ongoing Operating:	0	0
One-Time Startup:	0	0
Totals:	0	0

Additional Information / Prior Funding History:

No prior appropriations for Wood Bison Reintroduction, Stocking, and Release.

Project Description/Justification:

Wood bison restoration provides a unique opportunity to enhance Alaska's wildlife resources and hunting opportunities. ADF&G has worked for 15 years to lay the necessary groundwork to restore populations of wood bison in the wild. ADF&G has completed habitat evaluations and environmental review and analysis, provided extensive opportunity for public input and satisfied many permitting requirements. With the import of wood bison from Elk Island National Park (EINP) in Canada, June 2008, the stock needed to establish a program to release wood bison into the wild is now available. The stock is held temporarily at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) in Portage.

Wood bison occupied much of interior and southcentral Alaska for more than 5,000 years before declining and disappearing during the past few hundred years. Restoring wood bison in up to three locations within their historic range in interior Alaska and managing them for a sustained yield and multiple uses will contribute to Alaska's economy and wildlife resources over the indefinite future. Cost-benefit analysis shows that over 25 years the economic benefits of re-establishing and managing a wood bison population will be about five times greater than the cost. Ultimately the goal

is to provide a wide range of opportunities for public use and enjoyment of wood bison including bison hunting and viewing. Once wood bison herds grow and expand there will be an additional source of meat for local and non-local hunters and there will be economic opportunities associated with guiding and travel industry support services. Once established, wood bison populations can support relatively high levels of harvest because they are much less vulnerable to predation than other big game in Alaska.

Restoring wood bison to the Yukon Flats has been a focus of cooperative efforts among ADF&G, Canada, local landowners and other conservation interests since 1991. In 2000 ADF&G expanded the scope of the project and conducted habitat studies to identify other potential sites in interior Alaska for possible wood bison restoration. Minto Flats west of Fairbanks and the lower Innoko/Yukon Rivers area near Shageluk were identified as additional sites with suitable habitat. ADF&G estimates that the Yukon Flats could support at least 2,000 wood bison, Minto Flats could support a herd of about 500 bison, and the area studied in the lower Innoko River area could support a herd of about 400 bison with the potential for larger populations in adjacent areas. It is likely that the three areas being considered could easily support a total of 3-5,000 wood bison over the long term.

In spring 2005, the department established a citizen's advisory group to review available information and provide recommendations on wood bison restoration. The Wood Bison Restoration Advisory Group recommended moving forward with wood bison restoration in Alaska and continuing to pursue restoration at all three potential release sites. In April 2008 the department completed an Environmental Review of Wood Bison Restoration in Alaska and a review of the project under the Division of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) Wildlife Transplant Policy. Public comment on these documents and associated public meetings at state fish and game advisory committee meetings and other locations demonstrated strong public support for the project. A Notice of Decision was issued by the Director of the DWC in December 2007 and instructed staff to proceed with efforts to restore wood bison in Alaska, continue efforts to import wood bison from EINP in Canada and proceed with efforts to restore wood bison in all three locations, with a Minto Flats project being attempted first.

During the January 2008 wood bison handling operation at EINP over 50 young wood bison were separated from the main herd for import to Alaska. In June 2008 all import permitting requirements were met and the wood bison were transported from EINP to the AWCC. There are now a total of 84 wood bison at AWCC which include a group of 32 animals that originated from stock obtained in 2003. These animals and their progeny will provide stock for Alaska's wood bison restoration program.

ADF&G has executed several cooperative agreements to support the wood bison project including an agreement with AWCC for managing and supporting bison in captivity, an agreement with the Department of Environmental Conservation, Office of the State Veterinarian for health monitoring, and an agreement and permit with Chugach National Forest providing for the use of 27 acres of Forest Service land for additional pasture for bison. The ADF&G and Department of Law are also working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a special rule for wood bison under the Endangered Species Act to provide the maximum assurance possible that wood bison restoration will not adversely affect other resource developments.

As the project moves forward the department will work with the public to develop cooperative management plans for each area proposed for wood bison restoration. Some key issues that will be

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addressed in developing cooperative management plans include how to share future harvest allocation and public access to bison. The Board of Game is supportive of the project and has indicated a desire to assist in developing harvest management approaches that will allow for an equitable sharing of harvest among various user groups.

Cost activities associated with this effort include the following:

- a) Care of bison in captivity
- b) Planning for implementation at Yukon Flats and Innoko
- c) Public information and regulatory/permitting compliance
- d) Stocking in the wild
- e) Post release biological testing and monitoring
- f) Staff cost to execute the project

Phase 1 of funding will initiate the stocking process in the proposed location, Minto Flats, and begin the post-release biological monitoring. Additional stocking areas in the Yukon Flats and Innoko will require funding as noted for FY11.