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NEWS ABOUT BISON

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Wood Bison Downlisted by U.S. Fish & Wildlife ***Move a Positive First Step toward Delisting***

Westminster, CO (May 4, 2012) -- The National Bison Association and Canadian Bison Associations today categorized this week's downlisting of Wood Bison from the Endangered Species list as a positive first step toward the ultimate removal of the herds from the list.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service this week issued a final rule announcing that wood bison are being downlisted from "endangered" to "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. Wood bison, which are classified as a separate sub-species from the more plentiful plains bison, have been listed as endangered since the Endangered Species Act was established in 1970.

According to the announcement in Thursday's Federal Register, "This action is based on a review of the best available scientific and commercial data, which indicate that the primary threat that led to population decline, unregulated hunting, is no longer a threat and that recovery actions have led to a substantial increase in the number of herds that have a stable or increasing trend in population size."

This week's action is expected to open the door to the importation of wood bison into the United States from Canada. Threatened species are allowed to be shipped across national borders under a CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) permit process.

Terry Kremeniuk, executive director for the Canadian Bison Association, said, "Previously Wood bison could not be exported into the US unless moving to an approved program such as a zoo or research facility. With the reclassification, Canadian Wood Bison producers have an opportunity to expand their markets to the US with the appropriate CITES permit."

Dave Carter, executive director of the National Bison Association, added, "The downlisting is a positive first step in recognizing the recovery of wood bison. We think that Fish and Wildlife needs to take the next step and fully removed wood bison from the list."

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The National Bison Association and Canadian Bison Association have collaborated with industry partners and conservation groups over the past several years to address issues surrounding wood bison. Last year, the National Bison Association and Canadian Bison Association filed a joint comment urging delisting of the wood bison based upon recovery of the species.

The Federal Register notice reported that only 19 public comments had been received on the proposed downlisting, with 13 of those comments supporting downlisting. A strong subset (7 of the 13) of those comments advocated that bison be completely delisted.

The Federal Register notice stated, “Since listing (in 1970), the status of wood bison has improved because enactment and enforcement of national and international laws and treaties have minimized the impacts of hunting and trade, and reintroduction of disease-free herds has increased the number of freeranging herds in Canada from 1 population of 300 in 1978, to 7 populations totaling 4,414 bison in 2008. These free-ranging populations are stable or increasing. Therefore, we have determined that the wood bison no longer meets the definition of endangered under the Endangered Species Act. This rule changes the listing of the wood bison from endangered to threatened.

“While we have determined that the wood bison no longer meets the definition of endangered under the Endangered Species Act, some threats to wood bison remain. Habitat loss has occurred in Canada from agricultural development, and we expect losses will continue in concert with human growth and expansion of agriculture, including commercial bison production,” the notice continues. “The presence of disease in Canada constrains herd growth, and regulatory mechanisms are inadequate to prevent disease transmission within Canada. However, the continued reintroduction of disease-free herds, the ongoing development and updating of management plans, the active management of herds, the ongoing research, and the protections provided by laws and protected lands provide compelling evidence that recovery actions have been successful in reducing the risk of extinction associated with the threats identified.”

An estimated 400,000 plains bison now thrive in herds in the United States and Canada, with more than 95 percent of those animals under the care of private ranchers. However, the woods bison population has traditionally been located on public lands in Canada. The downlisting is expected to open the door to importation of woods bison into the United States.

The State of Alaska also contains one herd of wood bison. State officials there have been working to reintroduce the animals—which are currently being held in corrals south of Anchorage—into the Yukon Flats. However, that reintroduction has been stymied because of issues relating to the status of the animal on the Endangered Special list.

Carter noted, “The situation in Alaska is a clear instance in which any listing of the endangered species list is actually hampering the restoration of the species on both public and private lands. Delisting of woods bison will spur the restoration of this species to its natural habitat.”

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