

DATE: February 24, 1984

WOOD BISON RETURN
TO MANITOBA AREA- - -
Hope to Re-establish
A Free-Roaming Herd

The project that will attempt to re-establish a free-roaming herd of wood bison in the Waterhen district of the Interlake area of Manitoba is now underway.

Natural Resources Minister Al Mackling said his department has been working closely with the Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment Canada on this project. "Together we have worked very hard in planning the transfer of 50 wood bison to Manitoba this year and for the additional transfer of animals in the next four."

Mr. Mackling also noted the Canadian Wildlife Federation had allocated \$70,000 to the trust fund to operate the project in future years.

In future, wood bison transferred to Manitoba will be maintained with this year's original stock in a 2,300-hectare enclosure. The 1984 wood bison will not be released into the wild, but their progeny will. The chances are considered strong that bison born and raised within the holding facility will have a tendency to remain in the general area.

"I am particularly pleased to see this development proceed with the close co-operation and direct involvement of the members of the Waterhen Indian Band," said Mr. Mackling. "Their perseverance in keeping the project viable over the past two years is the kind of support that is required to further encourage wildlife resource management initiatives." He also commended the many support groups and agencies involved in the project for their hard work and co-operative efforts.

Only three free-roaming herds of wood bison exist today. These include about 185 animals at Elk Island National Park east of Edmonton; a wild herd in excess of 1,100 animals in the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary on the west side of Great Slave Lake, NWT; and a small herd of about 25 animals established in the Nahanni River area in 1980. In addition, eight small captive herds exist elsewhere in Canada, the United States and Germany.

"It will be both an honor and privilege to have a wood bison herd established in Manitoba and we look forward to the day when we can remove the wood bison from the endangered species list," said Mr. Mackling.

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BACKGROUND FOR BISON RELEASE

WINNIPEG . . . The wood bison will be introduced to the Waterhen district of the Interlake area of Manitoba February 22, 1984.

Today 17 wood bison, the first wave of approximately 50 animals to be relocated this year, will be transported to a two and one-half square kilometre corral near Waterhen, Manitoba by the Canadian Wildlife Service as part of a national program. Over the next four years additional animals will be relocated to Manitoba. They will be maintained with the initial stock in a larger (2300 ha) enclosure with a two-metre page wire fence. The intent is not to release the originally relocated wood bison from the enclosure, but only to release their progeny to the wild -- an approach designed to safeguard against animals wandering away from the area chosen for their relocation. The idea is that bison born and raised in the holding facility will possess a strong tendency to remain in the general area of their release and establish a truly wild herd.

Under the terms of a formal agreement to be signed by Canada and Manitoba, the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Manitoba Wildlife Branch will be establishing a management authority to carry out the project.

The Canadian Wildlife Federation deserves special mention in its desire to work co-operatively with the Waterhen Indian Band and government agencies. The CWF has allocated \$70,000 to the trust fund which will operate the project in future years.

The Manitoba project has one other unique feature. Once a free-roaming herd has been established successfully in the wild, the original transfer group of animals will be used as breeding stock.

The completion of this project has resulted through the hard work and co-operative efforts of the Canadian Wildlife Service and Parks Canada of the federal Department of the Environment, the Manitoba Wildlife Branch of the Manitoba Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Canada), the Waterhen Indian Band, the Northern Development Agreement (Manitoba-Canada), DREE, the Canada Employment and Immigration Centre (Manpower), P.M. Associates of Winnipeg, Consultants to the Waterhen Band, Canadian Wildlife Federation and the Manitoba Job Creation Program.

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In addition to these contributors, co-operators in the captive breeding program for wood bison have generously donated the surplus stock available for the relocations to be made this year, as well as providing assistance in many other ways. The Moose Jaw Wild Animal Park, Metro Toronto Zoo, Banff National Park, Valley Zoo, and the Alberta Wildlife Park are institutions co-operating in this project. Future relocations to Manitoba will be made from the source herd of wood bison being maintained at Elk Island National Park.

The wood bison is the largest land animal in North America. In appearance it differs only slightly from its cousin, the plains bison, by being larger, darker in color, and by possessing a more squarish hump. A mature wood bison bull may weigh in excess of one tonne.

Today, only three free-roaming herds of wood bison exist. There is a herd of about 185 animals at Elk Island National Park east of Edmonton; a wild herd in excess of 1,100 animals in the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary on the west side of Great Slave Lake, NWT, which was transplanted in 1963; and a small herd of about 25 animals established in the Nahanni River area in 1980. In addition, eight small captive herds exist elsewhere in Canada, the United States and Germany.