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Position on bison grazing on fenced crown land leases

Introduction

The following position statement relative to bison grazing on **fenced crown land leases** is prefaced by the overall position of AFGA on issues that affect the welfare of Alberta's fish and wildlife resources and access to it for the purposes of legitimate consumptive and non-consumptive uses by the Alberta public.

AFGA represents organized Albertan sportspersons who both appreciate and use Alberta's wildlife resources for a variety of purposes, including hunting, fishing, viewing, photography, and other activities associated with nature appreciation. AFGA members therefore have a passionate interest in wildlife and therefore act in various forms as a voice for the conservation, protection from decline, and preservation of diversity and health of Alberta fish and wildlife resource and its supporting habitat. In addition, it acts to assure reasonable access to the resource for the purposes stated.

AFGA appreciates the opportunity, provided by the Minister in early 2001, to sit as a member and contribute to the deliberations of the committee established to generate recommendation on the issue of whether domestic bison grazing should occur on crown land leases.

AFGA understands the need to use Alberta's natural resources for the benefit of society in general and appreciates that the bison ranching industry is a valuable and sanctioned agricultural pursuit in the province. However, AFGA has identified and explained the following possible and probable conflicts some of the activities associated with the bison industry have on the wildlife resource, its supporting habitat, and the public access to the resource.

(A) Effects on wildlife

1) Fencing required for bison containment on crown land leases

If crown land leases are to be used for domestic bison grazing, the AFGA expects that operators would contain the bison on the leased parcels. However, from discussions among Bison Committee members with experience in raising domestic bison, it was learned that the fencing required to assure containment would constitute a partial or complete barrier to movement of some wildlife species.

Most wildlife species, especially the large ungulates, must be free to move within their habitat to meet their daily and seasonal need for food, protection from weather, and to avoid predators and hunters. Barriers to movement, in the form of impenetrable fences, can exclude animals from all or parts of their daily home range, from accessing critical wintering/calving areas, and/or from using important feeding areas.

Barbed wire fences traditionally used on cattle grazing leases can generally be negotiated by most wildlife but smooth, high tensile wire or Paige wire fences can entangle wild ungulates that attempt to jump, pass under, or through them. Because they also have relatively low bottom wires, they can also separate mothers from their young.

For the above reasons, proliferation of bison fences on Alberta's crown land would, in the opinion of AGFA, have a detrimental affect on wildlife by causing a reduction in numbers and distribution of some important species.

2) Failure of fencing to contain bison on crown land leases

In the event that bison was allowed on crown land leases and the fencing failed to contain them, AFGA is concerned that escaped bison may establish local "wild" populations. Although the former plains and woodland bison were indigenous to Alberta, there are several reasons to consider that establishing new populations originating from domestic herds is undesirable from a wildlife conservation perspective. These reasons include: (a) current Alberta legislation excludes bison as "wildlife" (except for wood bison in Northwestern Alberta) and therefore newly established "wild" populations of escaped domestic bison would result in confusion relative to ownership, status, and hunting opportunity; (b) the genetics of domestic bison has likely been altered already by domestic breeding regimes and "wild" populations could contain undesirable traits; (c) new "wild" populations would increase the complexity of disease issues (discussed below); and (d) new "wild" populations would likely change the character of local habitat and result in reduced numbers and distribution of other wildlife species (see discussion on habitat effects below).

Recommendation/mitigation - Bison Committee discussion indicated that some bison ranchers feel confident their bison can be "trained" to respect traditional 3 or 4 strand barbed-wire fences. However, as an alternative to traditional bison containment fencing, the option is impractical. Alternative to the present design for fencing to assure bison containment (e.g. electric top wires, raising the level of the bottom smooth wire, lowering the total fence height) were either impractical as a standard or were deemed not to be sufficient for the intended purpose.

Therefore, AFGA recommends against bison grazing on crown land leased on the basis of the fencing issue.

(B) Effect on wildlife habitat

1) Alterations to wildlife habitat

Bison tend to use their range in a somewhat different manner than do cattle. From Bison Committee discussions and from personal experience of some AFGA members, it is known that the shrub understory of forested habitat is heavily used by bison early in the growing season. Shrub understories and shrubs in non-forested areas are very important to a wide variety of smaller wildlife species and provide much of the food for browsers such as moose. Long term bison grazing, even at the stocking rates recommended government regulators, can reduce the extent of shrubs or totally remove that important structural element in forested habitat.

Further, bison can cope with Alberta's winters without supplemental domestic forage. This adaptation would be conducive to winter, or all-seasons grazing. Extension of the traditional grazing season on crown land leases, in the opinion of AFGA, would exacerbate the aforementioned detrimental effects on wildlife habitat. In addition, winter grazing by bison tends to concentrate on wetlands and wetland edges, removing much of the residual dead vegetative cover important for over wintering many small mammal species and for nesting of water-associated birds the following spring.

Proliferation of bison grazing, particularly on forested crown land, in the opinion of AGFA, would have a detrimental effect on wildlife habitat by reducing its carrying capacity for some species, thereby reducing wildlife and habitat diversity.

2) Expansion of the area of influence

Because bison are adapted to Alberta ranges and weather regime, they can subsist on ranges of much less quality than can cattle. Therefore, lands that are presently unsuitable for leasing to cattle operators could be suitable for bison grazing (e.g. bog/fen areas, sedge wetlands). If bison grazing was to be allowed on crown land leases, it is reasonable to assume that the land base for grazing would expand to

include poorer quality (from a cattle food perspective) sites. This would result in an expansion of all the concerns described above (plus those described below relative to access).

Further, the Green Zone (with a few exceptions) is presently out of bounds for cattle grazing. Expansion of bison grazing onto the already very limited vacant crown land base within the White Zone, in the opinion of AFGA, would result in pressure to extend bison into the Green Zone. If such were the case, wildlife, wildlife habitat, and public access would be detrimentally affected.

Recommendation/mitigation - Reducing bison stocking rates on crown land leases below that used for cattle, avoiding the early leaf flush period, and setting on-off dates for grazing to avoid the winter period may partially mitigate for the concerns about habitat affects. However, the only way to address the latter concern about area of influence is to prohibit expansion of the grazing land base in the White Zone and prohibit it in the Green Zone.

(C) Disease issues

1) Effects on wildlife

The presence of tuberculosis and brucellosis in wild bison in and around Wood Buffalo National Park is of great concern to the cattle and domestic bison industries because it can affect Canada's status relative to livestock and livestock product export on the world market. However, those diseases have been present in that area and periodically in other portions of the province over much of the past century and there has been only minor consequences to other wildlife species. There are also other cattle-associated diseases periodically present in the province, which can have detrimental effects on wildlife (e.g. anaplasmosis, catharal fever, hemorrhagic disease, etc.) but none of these would likely be additionally dangerous if the bison industry expanded. There are more serious threats to Alberta's wildlife from other disease agents, such as the moose ticks, chronic wasting disease, brain worm, lung worm, giant liver flook, mange, rabies, etc. However, it is not likely that additional bison would exacerbate the threat to wildlife by those agents.

AFGA is very concerned that disease and parasites could cause major losses and/or changes to Alberta wildlife and understands that present diseased bison in the north has potentially major detrimental consequences to Canada's agricultural status and position in world markets. For these reasons AGFA supports efforts to minimize the spread of these and other diseases even through domestic bison grazing on crown land leases *per se* does not seem to elevate the threat of epizootics in wildlife.

2) Perception of wildlife involvement in livestock disease situation

Discussion on disease issues in domestic livestock often implicates wildlife as being a reservoir for some disease agents. In some cases (rabies, Newcastle's disease, ticks, mange, flocks, etc.) this is true. However, tuberculosis and brucellosis do not appear to be harbored in wildlife and therefore action to remedy an outbreak of TB or brucellosis in domestic stock should not involve reduction or removal of wildlife.

Recommendation/mitigation - Bison Committee discussions have, in the opinion of AFGA, outlined very severe risks involving probability of spread of TB and brucellosis to cattle and wild and domestic bison herds in the northern half of Alberta. Although the consequences to wildlife is of concern it is not considered severe and mitigation is not recommended from a wildlife perspective. However, AFGA supports other committee members that recommend against bison grazing on crown lands where there is a possibility of spreading TB and brucellosis from infected wild bison to domestic livestock, including bison.

(D) Effects on public access to wildlife

1) Fencing

Existing regulations relevant to public access on crown lands leased for cattle grazing, the timing and duration of the traditional cattle grazing season (which is to a large degree unlegislated), and the

nature of cattle containment fencing allows reasonable but limited public access for trespass in the pursuit of legitimate wildlife-related activities. Bison grazing on crown land leases, in the opinion of AFGA, would result in greater restrictions on this public access because higher and more elaborate fences and possibly more limited entry points (gates) would make it more difficult to for people to cross.

2) Perceived threat to public safety

Although domestic bison apparently pose no greater human safety threat than cattle, many uninitiated users of wildlife harbor the fear that free ranging bison constitute a safety hazard for people using bison grazing leases, and would not attempt to use the lease when bison were present.

Recommendation/mitigation - Because suitable alternatives for bison fencing are not available, AFGA recommends against bison grazing on crown land based on the fencing issue as it relates to limiting public access to wildlife.

(E) Future treatment of existing crown land bison grazing operations

AFGA is aware that 47 bison grazing leases (most with a 10 year tenure) presently exist and understands that the operators involved entered into lease agreements in good faith with the provincial Public Lands and Forestry agencies. AFGA is sympathetic with concerns that may be expressed by these operators relative to changes to regulations that detrimentally affect their lease agreement. Therefore, if crown land bison grazing is discontinued in all or part of the province, or if ensuing regulations become too onerous for them to continue their operations, AFGA recommends adoption of a system to fairly compensate operators for investments made to date, or to grandfather in the affected operations with a gradual phase out agreement.

AFGA
June 2001