

**Managing Disease Risk in Alberta's Wood Bison
with Special Focus on Bison to the West of
Wood Buffalo National Park**



**2011 - 2012
Progress Report**

August 2012

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Introduction

Alberta has long recognized that the key issue regarding the management of wild bison is the threat of tuberculosis and brucellosis spreading from infected animals in and around Wood Buffalo National Park to livestock (cattle and domestic bison) and to healthy wild bison.

These introduced cattle diseases represent an ongoing threat to Alberta's livestock industry since they could result in trade restrictions and significant economic losses. In addition, wood bison are listed nationally as "threatened" and by Alberta as "endangered." It will be impossible to fully restore healthy, wild bison populations until these livestock diseases are eradicated, since recovery herds will need to be kept small and relatively confined to reduce their risk of becoming infected. There is also a risk of disease transmission to humans and to other wildlife species. In 1990, a federal Environment Assessment Panel recommended completely eradicating all bison from Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP), followed by restocking with disease-free animals. This recommendation was not implemented by the federal government.

Alberta's long-term goal is to eliminate the disease risk. This would remove the risk to Alberta's livestock industry and would allow the restoration of wild populations of wood bison across northern Canada. The restoration of wood bison populations would fill a key ecological role and provide substantial cultural and economic benefits to Alberta. Until this long-term goal can be achieved, the interim approach is to prevent the spread of tuberculosis and brucellosis from diseased wild bison to domestic livestock and disease-free wild bison.

Alberta's approach for managing the disease risk to both domestic livestock and free-ranging wood bison is detailed in "Managing Disease Risk in Alberta's Wood Bison with Special Focus on Bison to the West of Wood Buffalo National Park." This approach implemented by Environment and

Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD) and Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) is focused on the area to the west of the park, as the Wentzel or Wabasca-Mikkwa bison pose a greater threat for transferring diseases to either domestic livestock or the wild Hay-Zama bison herd than do the Ronald Lake bison herd to the south of the park.

The approach has three broad components:

- Hay-Zama wild bison herd management;
- disease surveillance and risk reduction east of Highway 35; and
- monitoring populations of wild bison east of Highway 35.

The following is a progress report on that approach and includes work undertaken during 2011 and the winter of 2012. The June 2011 Progress Report is available at: srd.alberta.ca/FishWildlife/WildlifeDiseases/WoodBisonDiseaseManagement.aspx



1.0 Hay-Zama Wild Bison Management

Objective - To maintain the wild Hay-Zama wood bison herd free of bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis by limiting their numbers and distribution, particularly east toward Highway 35, thereby reducing the opportunity for exposure to diseased bison from the vicinity of Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP).

The Hay-Zama wood bison reintroduction program was started in 1983 to re-establish a healthy population of wood bison in northwestern Alberta. This was a significant element in the

national wood bison management plan, which called for at least one self-sustaining herd in each of Alberta, BC, Yukon, Northwest Territories and WBNP. The Hay-Zama bison herd has grown rapidly in numbers and distribution since 1994. A goal of the 2008 draft recovery strategy for wood bison in Canada was to protect “clean” recovery herds from contact with diseased animals. Hay-Zama bison are disease-free, while bison populations in and around WBNP are known or assumed to be infected.

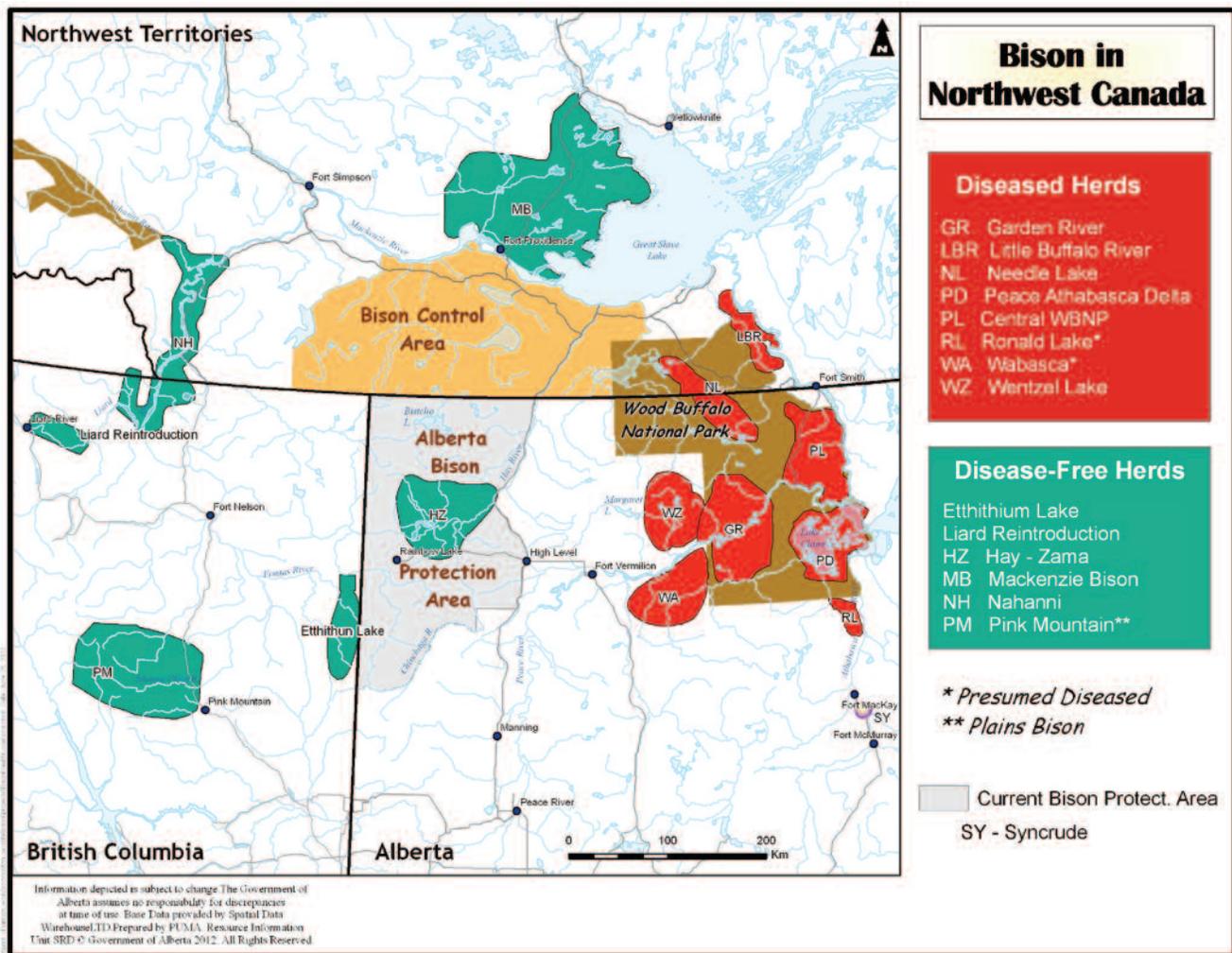


Figure 1. Bison Herds Currently Classified as Diseased or Disease-Free

The Hay-Zama bison herd has been monitored since the original release. The total number of bison peaked in the winter of 2008 when 652 animals were seen in 63 different groups. Observed range expansion raised concerns over bison moving east toward diseased bison from WBNP. In particular, there was specific concern over several instances of bison moving east along the Zama road to and beyond Highway 35. In the spring of 2008, it was determined that a highly regulated hunting season would be instituted and scheduled annually to stop the Hay-Zama herd from continuing to increase in numbers and distribution. The hunt serves two objectives relevant to this strategy:

- It protects the Hay-Zama herd from the near-inevitability of becoming infected as their numbers and distribution increased. **If this happened, there is a strong probability that the whole herd would have to be culled.**
- It allows for a significant amount of disease testing.

Update

From 2008/09 to the end of the 2011/12 bison hunting season, a total of 423 bison were harvested and 279 samples collected for disease surveillance of tuberculosis and brucellosis (Table 1). All samples submitted to date have been negative for both diseases.

Table 1. Hay-Zama Bison Harvest and Samples from all Seasons

Season	Hunters	Harvest	Tested Samples
2008/09	Aboriginal	74	58
	Non-Aboriginal	54	39
2009/10	Aboriginal	98	81
	Non-Aboriginal	57	43
2010/11	Aboriginal	34	8
	Non-Aboriginal	21	13
2011/12	Aboriginal	47	19
	Non-Aboriginal	38	18
Total		423	279

Hay-Zama Bison Population Status

A population survey was conducted from March 6 to 10, 2012, for the Hay-Zama herd. A total of 587 bison in 30 groups were found. The survey confirms the current Hay-Zama bison range has not grown and the population remains within the target of 400 to 600 bison (Figure 2). The population reduction and maintenance strategy is maintaining the Hay-Zama herd range at 3,500 square kilometres.

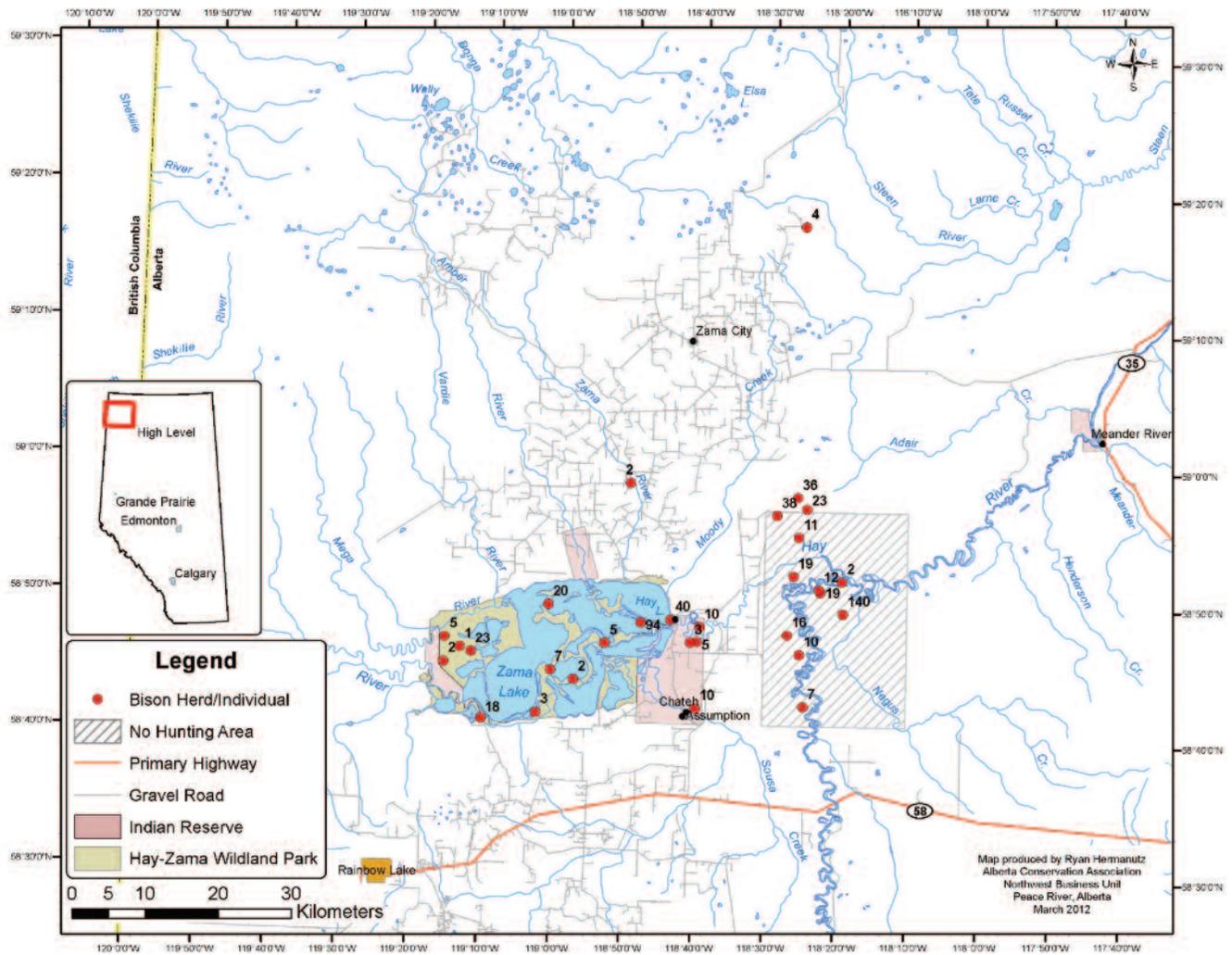


Figure 2. Hay-Zama 2012 Bison Survey Herd Locations

2.0 East of Highway 35 Disease Surveillance and Risk Reduction

The probability of bison moving west from the Wentzel herd or from the populations in the Wabasca-Mikkwa area is high. Gates et al. (2001) identified several routes that bison would likely use to move west. As well, bison from the Hay-Zama herd would most likely move east along these same routes. Most of the favourable travel routes pass through the agriculture zones in and around Ft. Vermilion and La Crete, and therefore pose the greatest threat to domestic livestock.

2.1 Detection Approach

Objective - To detect any wild bison on private agriculture lands near Ft. Vermilion and La Crete and the Agricultural and Highway 35 Surveillance Zones.

Surveillance areas have been identified along Highway 35 and around the Agricultural Area Zone. The Highway 35 Surveillance Zone stretches 10 km on both sides of Highway 35 from the High Level airport north to the Alberta – N.W.T. boundary. The Agricultural Area Zone contains farmland along Highway 58 from High Level to Fort Vermilion and farmland in the La Crete – Fort Vermilion area. Ongoing surveillance flights also explore associated areas that are potential movement corridors.

The purpose of the Highway 35 surveillance zone is to detect animals that: (i) may be moving from the east (high risk of infection) toward the Hay-Zama herd, or (ii) Hay-Zama animals moving from the west toward the high risk area. The purpose of the Agricultural Area Surveillance Zone is to detect bison (presumed infected) that may be moving from known population areas in WBNP, Wabasca-Mikkwa and Wentzel Lake areas.

2.1.1 Update

Highway 35 Surveillance Zone

A surveillance flight was flown in the Highway 35 Surveillance Zone on January 9, 2012, by ESRD staff. No bison or bison sign was detected during this flight. Routine surveillance flights throughout the winter were not conducted this year due to numerous additional surveys flown in and around the Highway 35 Surveillance Zone by ESRD. (See Additional Flights Highway 35 Surveillance Zone.)

Agricultural Area Surveillance Zone

From December 9, 2011, to March 5, 2012, four surveillance flights were flown in the Agricultural Area Surveillance Zone. No bison or bison sign was detected within the Agricultural Area Surveillance Zone.

Additional Flights

Additional Flights – Highway 35 Surveillance Zone

Additional surveys were conducted to search for bison April 5 and August 18, 2011, and January 31, 2012, in response to public reports of bison sightings in the area and on January 11, and March 16 and 19, 2012, during caribou surveys.

An additional detailed transect survey was conducted in February/March to ensure a thorough investigation of the entire area encompassing the seven public reports of bison since 2007 (Figure 3).

No bison or bison sign was detected on any of these flights.

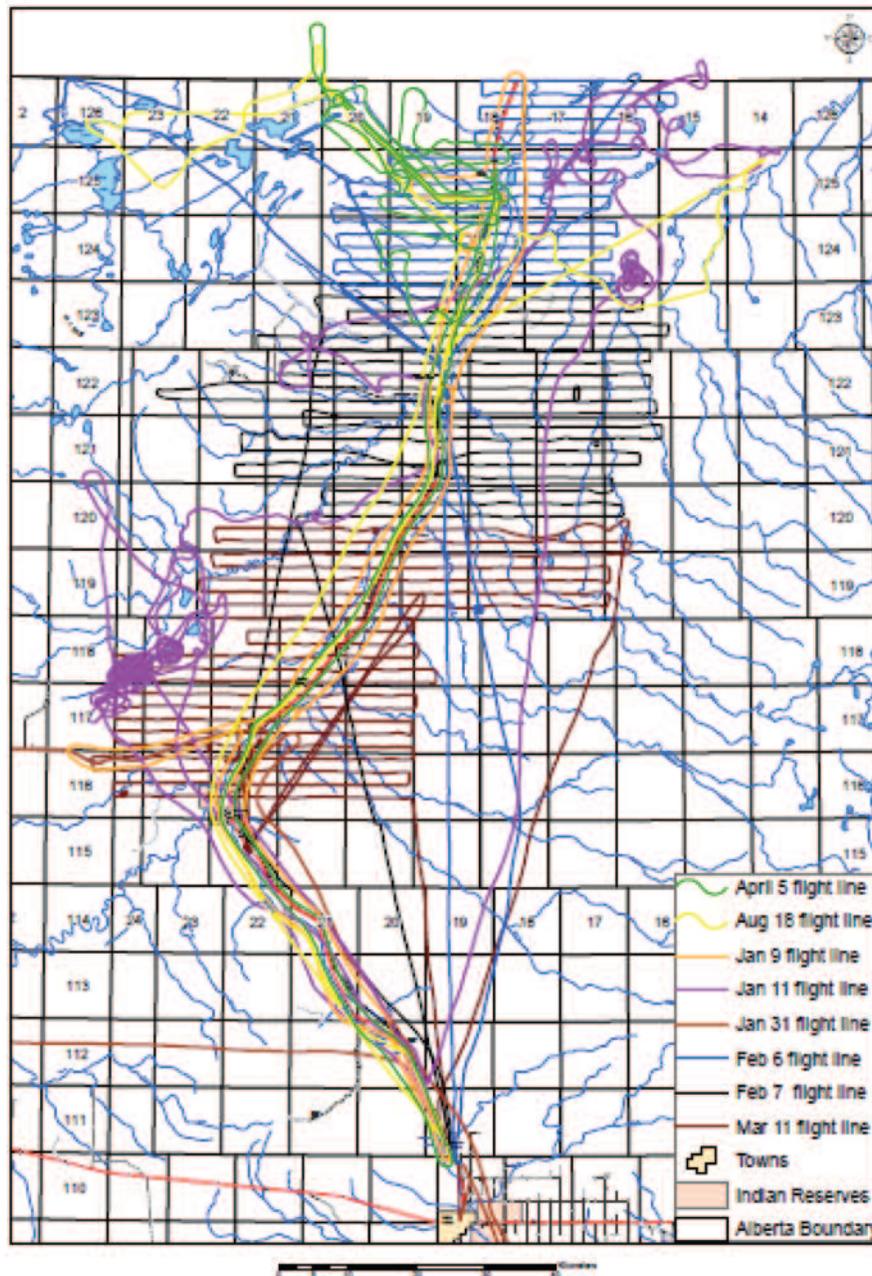


Figure 3. Additional Flights Highway 35 Surveillance Zone

Additional Flights - Agricultural Area Surveillance Zone

During the four routine Agricultural Zone Surveillance flights, key bison movement habitat was flown outside the zones to determine if bison were moving toward the Agricultural Zone (Figure 4). Three more flights, which provided additional opportunity to search for bison, were flown in and around the Agricultural Area Surveillance Zone on January 12, and March 17 and 20, 2012, during ESRD caribou surveys (Figure 5).

There has been no change from earlier reporting as the closest bison to this zone is 58 kilometres away in the Harper Creek drainage of the Wabasca/Mikkwa herd area.



Figure 4. Additional Flights Agricultural Area Surveillance Zone

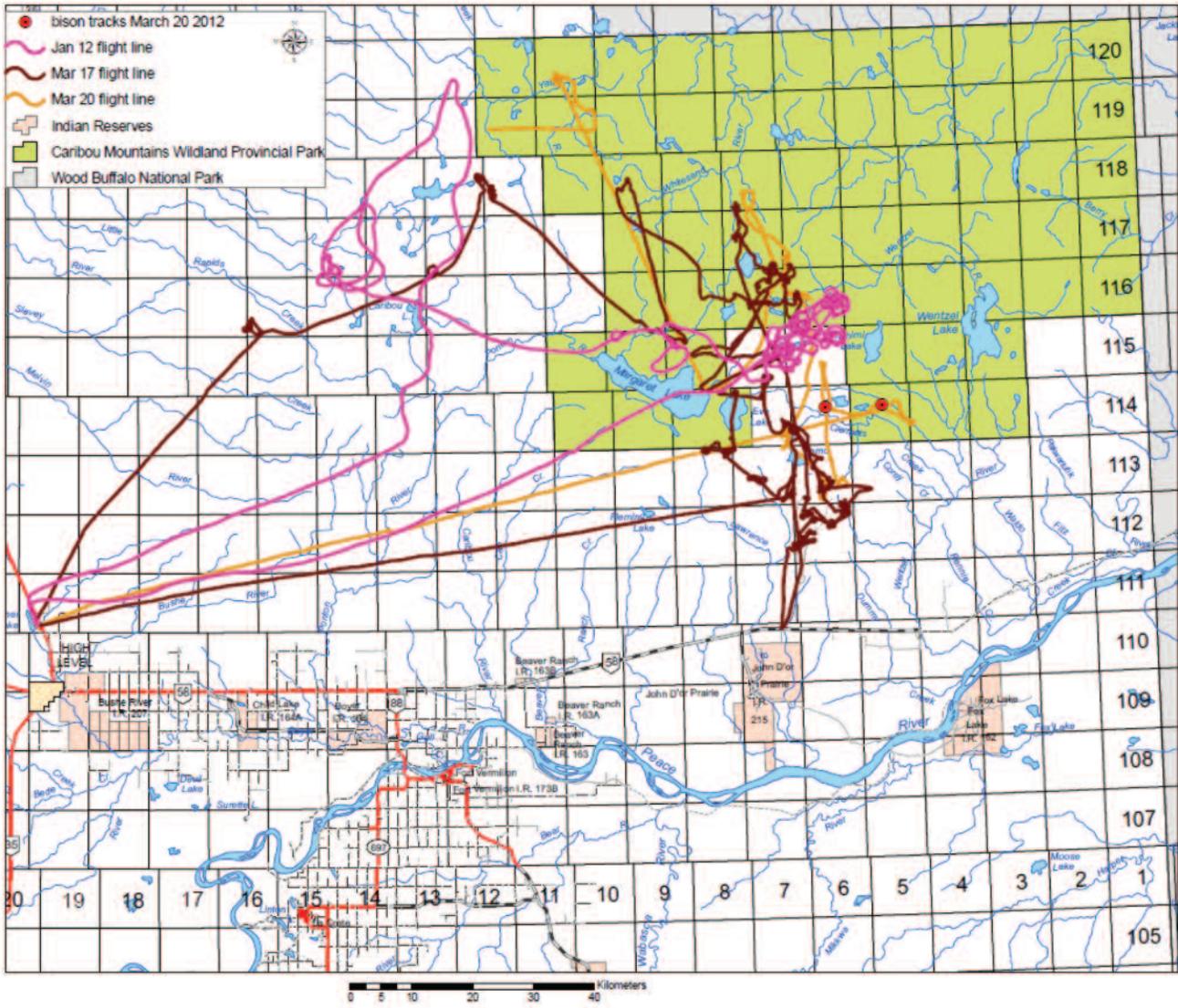


Figure 5. Additional Flights Agricultural Area Surveillance Zone, Caribou Surveys

2.1.2. Public Reporting

Objective - To encourage client groups associated with government, as well as the general public, to report wood bison sightings in the surveillance zones.

Update

Public communication/consultation has continued with respect to part of this initiative. In April and January 2012, posters were delivered to the gas station at Indian Cabins, as well as industrial work sites on main access routes west of Indian Cabins, Steen River and the maintenance yard of LaPrairie Contracting.

In November 2011, annual Fish and Wildlife District public meetings in High Level and LaCrete were used to encourage stakeholders and the public to report sightings of bison within a 10-kilometre strip along either side of Highway 35. Aircraft companies were provided information regarding the need to report bison sightings.

The Government of Alberta's (ARD/ESRD), "Managing Disease Risk in Alberta's Wood Bison with Special Focus on Bison to the West of Wood Buffalo National Park" June 2011 Progress Report was sent to First Nation, Métis, agricultural, local municipal, hunting and outfitting stakeholders in July 2011.

Posters and advertisements to encourage agriculture producers to report bison sightings were developed and placed in local newspapers and agriculture notice boards by the Alberta Beef Producers.

Additional use of posters and public contacts were used to ask the public to report bison sightings east of Highway 35.

2.2 Response Plan

Objective - To remove all wild bison detected on private agricultural lands near Ft. Vermilion and La Crete and in any of the Agricultural and Highway 35 Surveillance Zones. Wherever possible, meat should be salvaged and tissue samples for disease detection should be collected.

2.2.1 Response efforts will involve active removal by shooting and killing of any bison detected through surveillance activities. Tissue sampling and disease testing will be an integral component of these efforts.

2.2.2 Sustainable Resource Development staff from High Level and Ft. Vermilion Districts will action bison reports. Reports outside normal office hours will be investigated through 1-800-642-3200 RAP line. Government will engage aboriginal and non-aboriginal hunters, outfitters, landowners, etc. to facilitate removal and salvage of meat where feasible and to ensure blood and tissue samples are collected and tested. Remote access by helicopter may be required in some instances.

Update

On April 3, 2011, a public report of bison seen west of Indian Cabins in mid-March was received. On April 5, the area was flown and no bison or bison tracks were found. On August 18, Wildlife and Enforcement Field Services staff were able to accompany a Wildfire Management flight in that area and looked for bison. No bison or bison sign was located.

On January 27, 2012, there was a public report of bison east of Highway 35 two to three kilometres north of Meander River. On January 31, Wildlife Management staff flew the area and did not locate any bison or bison tracks.

In response to these and historical possible bison sightings, an intensive survey of the Highway 35 Surveillance Zone was conducted. No bison or bison tracks were located during this intensive search effort (see Additional Flights – Highway 35 Surveillance Zone).

3.0 Population Monitoring Plan East of Highway 35

The number of bison east of Highway 35, their movements and distribution over time is unknown and remains a significant factor in our assessment of disease risk. To our knowledge, most bison reside in two herds, referred to as the Wentzel and Wabasca-Mikkwa herds. This program initiated a survey to estimate the entire bison population in Alberta outside WBNP, and will subsequently survey every three years to assess population changes over time. As noted earlier with respect to the Hay-Zama population, herd size is an important risk factor. In addition, a program confirming the disease status of these herds will be needed before establishing long term goals and strategies for them. Currently, bison east of Highway 35 are offered no conservation protection with the exception of bison found within Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park.

3.1 Population Estimate and Distribution

Objective - To determine with some precision the numbers and distribution of wild bison in northern Alberta in areas surrounding Wood Buffalo National Park.

3.1.1 Aerial Survey

The area outside of WBNP has been divided into three areas to facilitate and prioritize bison surveys (Figure 6). It is proposed to survey all areas over a three-year period in order of priority, and then conduct monitoring surveys of each herd on a three-year cycle to evaluate size and distribution changes over time.

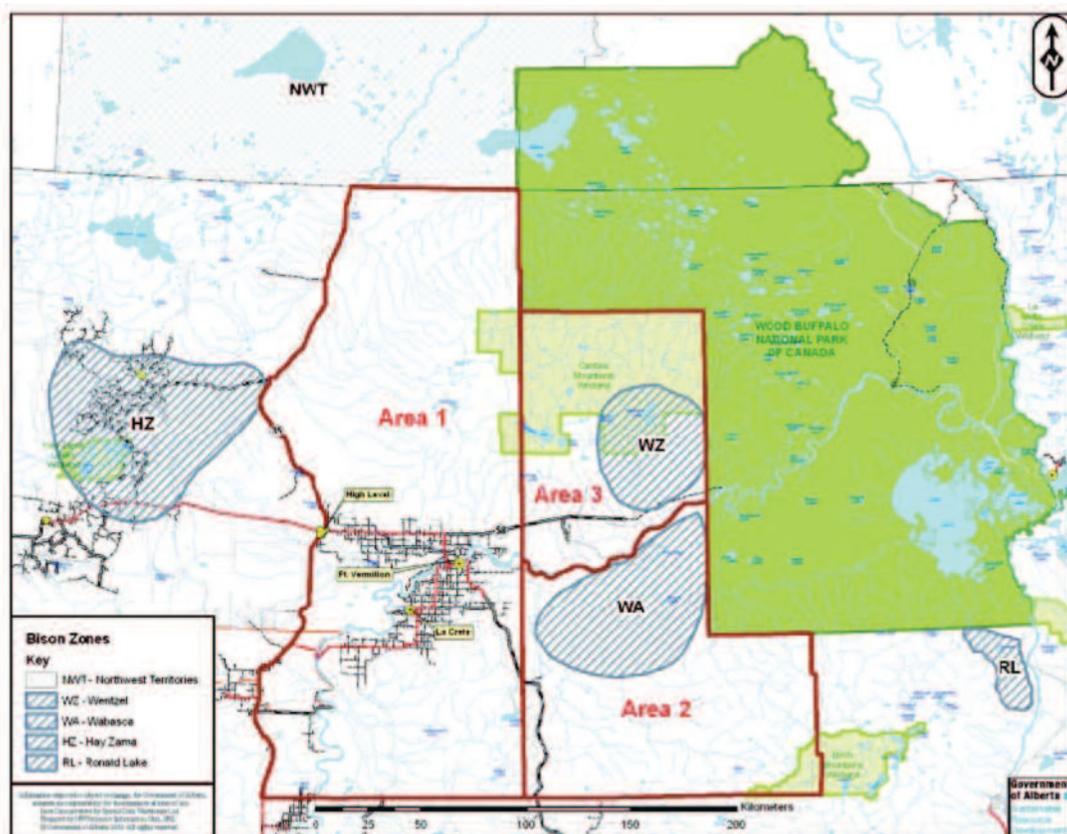


Figure 6. Aerial Survey Areas for Bison Population Estimates

There are no confirmed sightings of bison in Area 1, and it is assumed there is no resident population of bison in Area 1.

Update

The bison survey for Area 1 was planned for the winter of 2011/12; however, it was not undertaken due to a lack of adequate snow. Surveying for bison in this area is a lower priority and is very costly. Plans are to combine it with a moose survey in the future to maximize efficiency.

Surveys of Areas 2 and 3 were reported in an earlier progress report (June 2011).

3.1.2 Public Reporting

Encourage the public, bison hunters, trappers and outfitters, First Nation bands and aboriginal harvesters to report bison sightings and local knowledge regarding preferred habitat use and seasonal movements in each of the three areas.

Update

As with public reporting in the surveillance zones, posters and information were provided to the public. (See section 2.2. update.)

3.2 Disease Status of Bison Outside of Wood Buffalo National Park

Objective - To determine the disease status of bison in northern Alberta to the west and southeast of Wood Buffalo National Park.

Data on the prevalence of brucellosis and tuberculosis in the outlier herds (Wentzel and Wabasca-Mikkwa) is incomplete and inconclusive. There are no data concerning rates of infection in the Ronald Lake herd to the southeast of WBNP, which anecdotally may be growing and ranging farther south. However, outlier herds are assumed to be associated with bison from the park, which are known to harbour these diseases. Bison east of Highway 35 are assumed diseased and are classified as non-wildlife under the *Wildlife Act*. As a result, they are not protected and can be hunted year-round except in the Caribou

Mountains Wildland Provincial Park. Alberta Health issued a public advisory for the area in 1992, urging anyone handling, processing and consuming potentially diseased bison to take precautions. Regardless of current status, the proximity to the parent WBNP disease reservoir puts all outlier herds at a high risk of infection.

To ultimately assess the risk of disease transmission to livestock and disease-free wild bison and to plan surveillance and containment programs in the future, efforts will be made to determine the disease status for each outlier herd. Sampling will generally be conducted by government staff, but if the opportunity presents itself through the ongoing harvest of bison by hunters in the area, the samples collected voluntarily may still be tested. Hunters may be supplied with a limited number of sampling kits and be provided with information on the two diseases suspected to be in the bison so that the risks can be assessed and the proper precautions can be taken.

3.2.1 Disease Sampling

The proposed disease sampling is a phased approach, with each progressive phase increasing in cost, statistical precision and sample size. Bison will be salvaged opportunistically where interested individuals and ground access are available. The disease-testing program for a given herd will be terminated as soon as one of the two diseases (bovine tuberculosis or brucellosis) is detected. The herd will then be ranked as diseased. The disease sampling is based on the following assumptions:

- that outlier herds have similar prevalence of bovine tuberculosis or brucellosis to that occurring in WBNP (40 to 50 per cent);
- that it may take small sample sizes to detect disease presence if it is at high prevalence; and
- that detection of either disease is enough evidence to classify a bison herd as diseased.

Phase One

Phase one will use Government or contract collection of two to four animals from each herd for each year of the program, or until the presence of disease is detected. All collection efforts will focus on sampling older bulls wherever possible. With potentially high prevalence, we may be able to establish disease status in one or two years. This phase will run no more than three years.

If there are no diseased bison detected in phase one, Government will evaluate the option of implementing higher precision sampling phases.

Note: Genetic material will be archived for each bison sample to support any investigations into the origin of these populations.

Update

Disease-sampling kits for individuals hunting bison east of Highway 35 were made available to local Fish and Wildlife offices and to Martin Braat, local Alberta Beef Producers' representative in the Ft. Vermilion area. In March 2011, an outfitter was provided disease-sampling kits. Three separate blood samples and one lung sample were submitted to the High Level Fish and Wildlife office by this outfitter successfully hunting bison in Area 3. Serology tests conducted by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) revealed that two adult female bison tested positive for exposure to brucellosis. These results were provided to the public in an Information Bulletin July 28, 2011 (Appendix 1). Although these results were evidence of exposure, confirmation of disease status of the herd requires tissue cultures to confirm that the bacteria is present.

Consequently, a disease sampling program was conducted in December 2011 to confirm disease status in each herd. The Canadian Bison Association and Alberta Beef Producers partnered with the Government of Alberta in this program due to their interest in improving the knowledge of disease status for these wild, free-ranging wood bison. Due to the significant costs associated with disease sampling in remote areas, the sample size

was increased from the originally planned two to four bison. A total of four bison from the Wabasca/Mikkwa and seven bison from the Wentzel herds were sampled (Figure 7). Sampling was conducted by an ESRD disease specialist and area staff, as well as a veterinarian with the CFIA. The disease sampling protocol required the animals be killed to collect an extensive number of tissue samples from organs, respiratory and reproductive tracts. The test results are as follows:

Wabasca/Mikkwa Herd – Harper Creek

- Laboratory tests conducted on the four samples were negative for both tuberculosis and brucellosis.
- These results do not mean that the Wabasca herd is not infected with either of these diseases as the number tested does not provide a large enough sample to indicate the herd is disease-free.

Wentzel Herd – Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park

- Laboratory tests were conducted on seven samples, all were negative for tuberculosis.
- Three samples had evidence of exposure to brucellosis.
- *Brucella abortus* bacteria was isolated in two of the three samples.
- The third sample continues to be tested.

The results were provided to the public in an Information Bulletin June 29, 2012 (Appendix 2).

These findings confirm that the Wentzel Herd is diseased. Further testing will be undertaken in December 2012 for the Wabasca/Mikkwa herd.

Genetic material was obtained from each bison sampled and will be added to a provincial database.

It is recommended that two new strategies be incorporated into the approach “Managing Disease Risk in Alberta’s Wood Bison With Special Focus on Bison to the West of Wood Buffalo National Park.”

1. ESRD will work with Tourism, Parks and Recreation (TPR) to amend regulations to facilitate hunting bison in the Caribou Mountains Wildland Park as a mechanism to restrict range distribution and numbers of animals in the Wentzel Lake wood bison herd.
2. Include the Ronald Lake bison herd south and east of WBNP as part of the disease management program. This would include bringing local stakeholders and aboriginal groups up-to-date on the disease management program, establishing good estimates for herd size and distribution, and determining the herd’s disease status. Note: Although this herd does not pose any risk to domestic animals nor disease-free bison herds, the status of all herds is required for any long-term solution to eliminating disease sources.

Literature cited:

Gates, C. C., J. Mitchell, J. Wierzchowski and L. Giles. 2001. A landscape evaluation of bison movements and distribution in northern Canada. AXYS Environmental Consulting Ltd. 115 pp.

References

To find more information on bison disease management, go to:

srd.alberta.ca/FishWildlife/WildlifeDiseases/WoodBisonDiseaseManagement.aspx

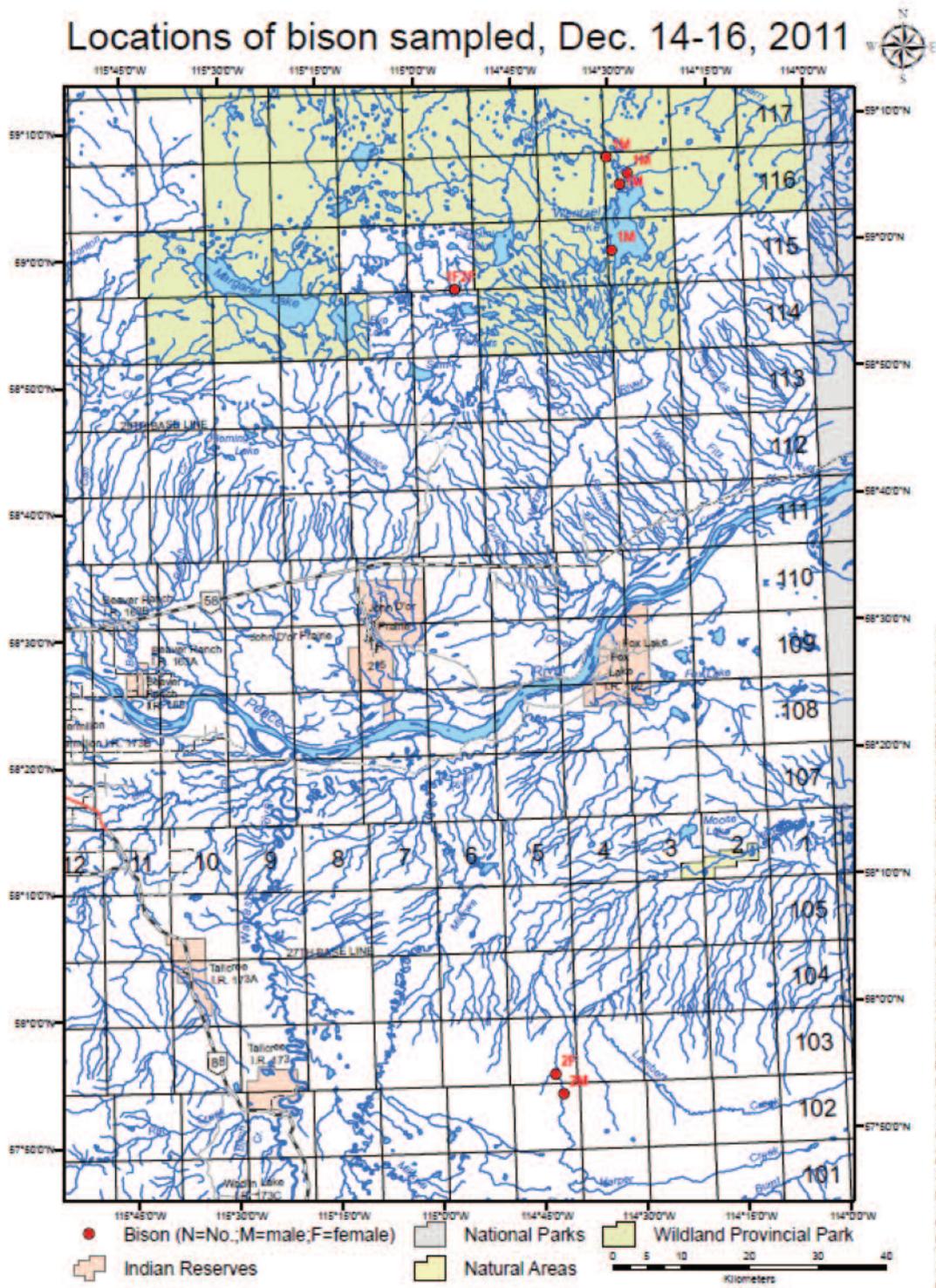


Figure 7. Locations of Bison Sampled Dec. 14-16, 2011

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Information bulletin

July 28, 2011

Disease detected in wood bison outside Wood Buffalo National Park

Hunters informed of the risks associated with brucellosis

Edmonton... For years it has been suspected that brucellosis and bovine tuberculosis, introduced diseases that are common in wood bison in Wood Buffalo National Park, also occur in bison immediately west of the park. Evidence of brucellosis exposure has now been detected in two bison about 20 km west of Wood Buffalo National Park. Hunters, ranchers, Métis Settlements and First Nations in the area will continue to be informed on risks of disease and future bison management.

Under provincial legislation, wood bison east of Highway 35 and west of Wood Buffalo National Park can be hunted without a licence, except in Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park. Some hunters participate in disease surveillance by providing samples for testing. An outfitter, provided with information and sample kits by Sustainable Resource Development, harvested two adult female bison in February and March that tested positive for exposure to brucellosis. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency verified the results on July 22.

The risk of disease transmission to humans remains very low and those who continue to harvest bison west of Wood Buffalo National Park are encouraged to contact the local Fish and Wildlife office for information on the risks associated with brucellosis and tuberculosis. As a precaution:

- any bison harvested should be handled carefully with gloves and examined for signs of disease, obvious lesions or other unusual features; and
- if the meat is to be eaten, it must be cooked thoroughly—smoking the meat is not sufficient to kill the bacteria that cause these diseases.

The Alberta government has a disease-management program to protect the province's agriculture industry and disease-free wood bison in northwestern Alberta. All free-ranging wood bison detected on private agricultural lands near Fort Vermilion, La Crete and within 10 kilometres of Highway 35 will be removed. Bison populations west of Wood Buffalo National Park will continue to be surveyed to confirm numbers, location and whether they carry any disease. This effort will continue until a long-term solution is applied to the bison in and around Wood Buffalo National Park.

For more information on brucellosis, bovine tuberculosis and the disease-management program for wood bison, please visit <http://srd.alberta.ca/FishWildlife/WildlifeDiseases/>.

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June 29, 2012

Disease detected in bison outside Wood Buffalo National Park

Management strategy in place to protect wild bison and livestock

Edmonton... The Government of Alberta is taking steps to monitor and manage the spread of infectious diseases in wood bison near Wood Buffalo National Park.

Bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis have been present in the wild wood bison population of Wood Buffalo National Park for decades. Recent samples, taken from bison located outside the park boundaries, have tested positive for bovine brucellosis.

Four wood bison were sampled from the Wabasca herd near Harper Creek and seven bison were sampled from the Wentzel Lake herd in the Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park. While none of the animals tested positive for tuberculosis, two of the seven samples from the Wentzel Lake bison herd tested positive for brucellosis and a third continues to be tested.

The Alberta government has in place a disease-management and monitoring strategy to protect disease-free wood bison in northwestern Alberta and domestic livestock such as cattle.

All free-ranging wood bison detected near private agricultural lands around Fort Vermillion, La Crete and within 10 kilometres of Highway 35 will be removed. Bison populations west of Wood Buffalo National Park will continue to be surveyed and tested to confirm numbers, location and disease status of each herd.

Members of the public are encouraged to report all bison sightings in the area west of Wood Buffalo National Park and east of Highway 35. Please notify local Fish and Wildlife offices. Under provincial legislation, wood bison east of Highway 35 and west of Wood Buffalo National Park can be hunted without a licence, except in Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park.

The risk of disease transmission to humans remains very low and those who continue to harvest bison west of Wood Buffalo National Park are encouraged to contact the local Fish and Wildlife office or government web pages for information on the risks associated with bovine brucellosis and tuberculosis. As a precaution:

- any bison harvested should be handled carefully with gloves and examined for signs of disease, obvious lesions or other unusual features; and
- meat to be eaten should be cooked thoroughly—smoking the meat is not sufficient to kill the bacteria that cause these diseases.

Wood bison are currently designated as threatened species by the Government of Canada and are listed as endangered species within a designated Hay-Zama area in northwestern Alberta under the provincial *Wildlife Act*.

Further information on the wood bison disease management program is available at <http://www.srd.alberta.ca/FishWildlife/WildlifeDiseases/WoodBisonDiseaseManagement.aspx>.

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