

Bison Range Restoration

FY2024 Request: \$2,000,000

Reference No: 64829

AP/AL: Appropriation
Category: Development
Location: Delta Junction

Project Type: Economic Assistance

House District: Richardson Hwy/East Mat-Su (HD 9)

Impact House District: Richardson Hwy/East Mat-Su (HD 9)

Contact: Theresa Cross

Estimated Project Dates: 07/01/2023 - 06/30/2028 **Contact Phone:** (907)269-6398

Brief Summary and Statement of Need:

This proposal seeks to increase the Delta Junction bison herd population, reduce impacts to local agriculture, increase local food securities, and build a new sustainable relationship between the Department of Fish and Game and the Delta Agricultural community.

Funding:	FY2024	FY2025	FY2026	FY2027	FY2028	FY2029	Total
1004 Gen Fund	\$2,000,000						\$2,000,000
Total:	\$2,000,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$2,000,000

<input type="checkbox"/> State Match Required	<input type="checkbox"/> One-Time Project	<input type="checkbox"/> Phased - new	<input type="checkbox"/> Phased - underway	<input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing
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

Prior Funding History / Additional Information:

Project Description/Justification:

The American Plains Bison in Delta Junction are one of only two species of bison remaining in the world. They were transplanted from the Nation Bison Range in Montana to the Delta Junction area in 1928. Since then, the herd has flourished and become a valuable resource to the State of Alaska and North America as a whole. Because of the remoteness of Delta Junction, the genetics of the herd has remained untouched by domestic variations. This unique asset has led the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) to use the Delta Junction herd for stock to start three other herds within Alaska, ensuring bison populations for generations to come.

Since the early 1960's ADF&G has had the ability to manage the harvestable surplus from the Delta Bison Herd through the draw tag process. Those hunts generate a significant amount of statewide and local revenue. Each bison hunter spends \$1,600 in Delta Junction and another \$400 in other parts of the state. The success rate for harvesting a bison has been high, recently, 60-80 bison have been taken each year. This hunt has become the most sought-after tag in the state, generating over 40,000 applications annually.

The dynamics between the Delta Bison and Agriculture has been the governing factor for bison management since the 1960's. Damage to crops has been the source of much conflict between farmers and ADF&G. The Delta Junction area is the largest producing agricultural area in the state, raising almost all the small grains and most of the hay that goes to feed livestock throughout Alaska. Most of the livestock in Alaska are raised in Delta Junction. In addition to crops and livestock grown in the Delta Junction, farmers have invested in value-added processing including slaughter plants, a commercial feed pelletizing plant, a flour mill, and a dairy processor. As a compromise, the Delta Bison Working Group (DBWG) was created to represent both agriculture and wildlife communities. The DBWG set a population limit of 270-350 bison pre-calving. This limit does not allow the Delta Bison population to expand.

The ADF&G has been managing approximately 1,000-acres of the 90,000-acre Delta Junction Bison Range for grass and small grain production to delay the bison herd migration onto agricultural land prior to harvest time. Previous beliefs were that bison would remain in an area until a need for water motivated their movement. However, current research projects have pointed out that plains bison actively select more nutritious forages, and forage in a highly efficient manner that satisfies their nutritional needs. Data from the new research shows that plains bison movements are driven by forage quality and availability of quality forage.

This proposal will increase the number of acres being actively managed on the Delta Junction Bison Range from about 1,000 acres up to approximately 4,000 acres, while also improving the feed palatability to compare more closely with that on the farms. The goal of the project is to provide enough feed and water to hold the bison on the range until approximately October 1, as monitored by GPS collar. The management plan also will provide for feed in the form of grass hay to carry them through the winter.

Keeping the bison away from agricultural land will increase food securities directly, by reducing damage to crops and indirectly, because the bison herd population will be allowed, through the cooperation of the Department of Natural Resources, Division of Agriculture and ADF&G, to grow in accordance with the carrying capacity of the Delta Bison Range and have a larger sustainable surplus for harvest and seed stock.

This funding request will be administered by the Salcha-Delta Soil and Water Conservation District (SDSWCD). The SDSWCD will attempt to match all the funds with Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act (PR Act) funding. The SDSWCD has managed many bison improvement projects in the Delta Junction area and, as a subdivision of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, is a perfect partner to help both the Agricultural community and the ADF&G meet this combined goal. The goals of this project align with SDSWCD's existing mission statement, therefore, the SDSWCD has agreed to forgo any administration or indirect fees that would ordinarily be associated with this project, so that all funds may be eligible for the PR Act match.

This project will develop and implement a plan to accomplish these goals, thus resulting in keeping the bison on the existing Bison Range:

Short-Term Goals (2023-2024): \$2,000,000 over two years:

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- 1) Clean up the approximately 2,000 acres of existing previously cleared areas and convert them into more nutritious forage. This activity will include mowing, discing, fertilizing, planting of annual cover crops and perennials
- 2) Establish three new watering wells
- 3) Begin the process of opening approximately 2,000 acres of new fields by clearing vegetation, root raking, break discing, followed up by planting cover crops.
- 4) Collar 30 bison with GPS transmitters

Mid-Term Goals (2025-2028): \$1,500,000 over three years:

- 1) Increase the managed acres of grassland/sedge cover using best management practices for production.
- 2) Increase forage quality and quantity to delay the bison herds movement to agricultural areas until October.
- 3) Widen the travel corridor from the Panoramic Fields to the Gerstle River Fields.
- 4) Collar 20 more bison with GPS transmitters