

Sturgeon River Plains Bison Management Plan Workshop
Monday – June 20, 2011
Big River Community Centre
10:00 AM – 4:00 PM

Meeting Minutes

Present

Robin Fremont – Facilitator

Coordinating Committee

- Seth Cherry – Prince Albert National Park
 - Jeff Weir
 - Joanne Reimer
 - Adam Pidwerbeski (Recorder)
- Rob Tether – Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment
 - Al Hrynkiw
- Gord Vaadeland – Sturgeon River Plains Bison Stewards
 - Angela Vaadeland

Advisory Committee

Darren Kennedy – Rural Municipality of Big River

Larry Gabruch – Nature Conservancy of Canada

Dallas Swan – Saskatchewan Crop Insurance

Bryan Lee – Metis Nation of Saskatchewan – Local 108 (Fish lake)

Steven Bear – Agency Chiefs Tribal Council

Glenn Herzog

Guest

Anna-Maria Fjellstrom – Vilhelmina Model Forest (Sweden)

Meeting Started: 10:00 AM

1. Welcome, introductions, review agenda, communications guidelines, housekeeping.
(Robin Fremont – Facilitator)
2. Review and approve minutes from previous workshop - May 16, 2011.
 - Corrections to minutes:
 - Correction to spelling of name - should be changed from Sarah Kempole Gereda to Sarah Kemp de Gereda
 - Amendment to discussion on wolf predation not being of big concern in the area at present: There is some concern – Darren Kennedy lost seven cattle (calves) due to wolves the previous year.
3. Update on action items from May 16, 2011 minutes (Coordinating Committee)
 - Université Laval bison research link on Bison Stewards web site
 - Work in progress
 - Joanne Reimer's / Melissa Nordin's reports on the Bison Stewards web site
 - Work in progress

- Other Bison Stewards web site updates
 - Banff Bison re-introduction will be put on Stewards web site – Central Rockies Bison Stewards (www.bisonbelong.ca), a group modeled after the Sturgeon River Plains Bison Stewards.
- Qualitative Disease Risk Assessment
 - (Ted Leighton’s students – Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre; initial discussions have taken place and this initiative should proceed.

4. Presentations:

- **Plains Bison Habitat / Nutritional Requirements** (Seth Cherry – Prince Albert National Park) [PDF file of this presentation placed on the Bison Stewards web site]
- Questions / Comments / Responses
 1. What is the current population estimate for the Sturgeon River plains bison? *Response:* Latest survey counted 150 bison, best guess is 150 – 250 bison in the population
 2. Time of year for bison calving? *Response:* Peak time from April through June.
- **Fescue Grassland Management in Prince Albert National Park - Implications to Bison Habitat Availability and Distribution Patterns** (Jeff Weir) [PDF file of this presentation placed on the Bison Stewards web site]
- Questions / Comments / Responses
 1. Has consideration been given to tree harvesting instead of prescribed fire? *Response:* Most of the forest in the area consists of aspen – relatively abundant in the region and not in demand. Current Parks Canada policy does not allow for timber extraction. Impediment to travel for bison created by burning might be beneficial in some circumstances.
 2. Will the fescue grassland 40-year fire cycle burn units be managed as random or fixed areas. *Response:* Depending on the objectives (e.g. reducing bison excursion impacts on landowners), a strategic random approach will be used (the oldest forest won’t be 40 years old!). The sizes of areas burned will vary – we don’t want to burn the entire unit or to have 1300 ha pieces in a checkerboard. We need to emulate the dynamic nature of the aspen parkland.
 3. Kelly Foster in Cutknife area has been working for the past 8 years using a burning / grazing regime to restore fescue grasslands in 17 quarters of land.
 4. Why a 40-year fire cycle? *Response:* This is a conservative approach. There are other factors at play (herbivory) and fire is just another factor. Our fescue grasslands are outliers of contiguous grasslands – a transition from aspen parkland to mid-boreal upland.

5. RM of Paddockwood is selling 50+ quarters of pasture land to a single buyer to manage for grazing. Could this be an option to expand the fescue grassland restoration? *Response:* This would be an uphill battle as most of the area in question has been broken and planted to tame forage (e.g. smooth brome). Fescue grasslands are communities comprising over 140 plant species. We are not managing for fescue as a single species – we are managing for a fescue grassland community (in which fescue as a species is often a minor component).
- **On Private Land: Free Ranging Bison** (Joanne Reimer) [PDF file of this presentation placed on the Bison Stewards web site]
 - Questions / Comments / Responses
 1. Confrontations between horses and bison during hazing operations? *Response:* Not much – horses somewhat hesitant at first. If a bull is pushed too hard it will turn on an ATV, but never a horse.
 2. What is the total land area where bison excursions occur? *Response:* Approximately 100 square kilometres.
 3. Distances of excursions? *Response:* Bison out as far as 10 km – but large groups no more than 3 km.
 4. Overall success of diversionary fencing? *Response:* Not proven to work that great – bison will go where they want to go.
 5. Second cut sedges also preferred by bison. Mature oats not grazed.
 6. Fencing on private land to keep out bison is permeable – height restriction and the bottom is open. Fencing products now are improved. Costs of building and maintenance are significant. Volunteer help cuts down on expenses.
 7. Pre-harvest and post-harvest costs of bison damage to landowners are different.
 8. Purchasing areas of second-cut alfalfa might be an option.
 9. Hazing and fencing overall success can be debated, but the number of complaints have been reduced. This is going in the right direction.
 10. Noisemakers not very effective.
 11. Bison get habituated and adjust to the hazing routine (similar process as predator avoidance).
 12. Liability issues need to be considered.
 13. Are there any provincial forest lands between Nesslin and Moonlight Lakes that might have meadows suitable for bison, possibly with some burning? *Response:* Some areas might be suitable, however, some of this land is privately owned. Most open areas have smooth brome.
 14. Erickson Prescribed Fire in the park – approved for several years now – is intended to provide a combination of summer and winter habitat for bison.

- **Habitat and the Aspen Parklands** (Larry Gabruch – Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) [PDF file of this presentation placed on the Bison Stewards web site])

Questions / Comments / Responses

1. Are there cattle genes in the Sturgeon River plains bison population?
Response: No information at this time, but this is being worked on
2. How does NCC manage invasive species? *Response:* When an invasive is detected, the response is to hit them hard using herbicides. Overall, the plan is to manage lands so they are not colonized by invasives. Some species – e.g. smooth brome – are here to stay. But more recent ones are targeted fairly aggressively.
3. Do Conservation Easements require a legal survey? *Response:* No – we use land features, GPS and existing Legal land Description.
4. Are Conservation Easements monitored? *Response:* Yes – annually, either by over flight or on the ground.
5. How about mineral extraction rights? *Response:* Most mineral rights owned by the province. If any extraction is allowed, restoration is required.
6. Are any crown lands currently included in Conservation Easements? *Response:* No – but this is a possibility. In theory, crown lands are protected.

LUNCH BREAK

Questions / Comments / Responses regarding NCC presentation (continued)

1. How does Nature Conservancy pay for maintenance of easements – e.g. the cost of fire management? *Response:* Landowner is responsible for managing property. Not many use fire, most use grazing (also a natural process). Fire as a tool difficult to justify because forage is valuable for livestock. Also fire management is expensive and requires many resources. Possibly more potential for fire in aspen parkland that can be explored. In mixed-grass prairie fire use is not popular.
2. Acquiring property that has some tame forage for Conservation Easements has some merit – sometimes they can be regenerated to natives.
3. Any partnerships / consultations with First Nations and NCC? *Response:* Not yet, but this is something that NCC wants to develop. Many First Nations lands are natural areas with little risk of being broken.
4. Would First Nations involvement be a benefit to the management of the Sturgeon River plains bison? *Response:* Definitely, yes! The bison management plan is part of a much larger project – “Reconnecting Bison, Grasslands and People”. First Nations figure prominently in this due to the pivotal nature of bison in First Nations culture. The bison theme is being developed in educational programming and First Nations involvement is very important.

5. Group Discussion on Bison Habitat Requirements / Feedback on Morning Presentations (Facilitator)

Summary of points from discussion:

1. NCC has a role to play in the Bison Management Plan. Conservation Easements are one possibility – higher priority lands could be those that attract more bison excursions. NCC also has expertise in restoration activities.
2. Paspiwin site in Prince Albert National Park (255 ha), currently developing vision and mission statements, could have a role in the bison management plan (i.e. education) [NOTE: Paspiwin Feast scheduled for September 10, 2011 at the Paspiwin site off Highway #263, southeast corner of the park.].
3. Fish Lake Heritage Site designation is in the works (four quarters of land) – conservation easements could be explored.
4. Bison management a large part of the “Reconnecting Bison, Grasslands and People” project has many opportunities for experimentation (e.g. prescribed fire influences on bison movements and habitat usage). We have a fair amount of collar information. The park is looking for feedback on how we can go forward with this.
5. Could explore purchasing alfalfa-based land outside park (lure crops) – might be some funding options for this. However, this might result in longer-term excursions or bison becoming permanent on these alfalfa lands and then ranging farther onto private lands. We don’t want to promote extension of bison range onto private lands – we want to promote them staying in the park or going onto provincial crown land. Also, do we want to encourage bison foraging on tame forage – need to have a discussion on this point.
6. Lure crops need not be a permanent thing – could also purchase second cut crop (not really compensation – but payment for services.) Need to find creative ways to compensate landowners. In Saskatchewan, only example of lure crop usage is restricted to waterfowl.
7. We need to make expertise available to farmers regarding growing alternative crops that would not be attractive to bison. Perhaps seeding native forage outside the park will deter bison from excursions – however – economic reality is that this may not be a viable option. Strategies will need to be adapted for different landowners.
8. Planting tame crops INSIDE the park boundary to keep bison from leaving the park would reduce the amount of protected, native vegetation in the park – which is contrary to park policy. Sturgeon River remains the best boundary to keep bison in the park.
9. Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment has to play a bigger role in the management of this bison population. The province is committed to putting its fair share of resources into implementing the approved bison management plan.

10. Ministry of Environment has concerns about expansion of bison onto provincial crown lands – especially about additional resources required for management. Potential for Bison Stewards and Ministry of Environment to work together on plan to manage bison on crown lands. If population is managed within defined levels, expansion of the bison onto provincial crown lands might not be a huge problem. There is also the opportunity for bison harvesting (hunting). Also, a possibility of conflicts with other users of provincial crown lands (e.g. campers). Possibility of increasing logging to create bison habitat.
11. With the bison population at a relatively low level, now is a good time to make management decisions and to be prepared for when the population increases.
12. Potential action item – assessment of adjacent provincial crown lands for bison habitat suitability (possibly done through Université Laval or University of Saskatchewan. Range Health Assessment and Species Range Identification protocols could be a tool (ecosystem classification process).
13. Potential legal implications of hazing (illegal activity under Ministry of Environment). However, Bison Stewards have a year-round permit for this and this is currently not an issue (nor expected to become one).
14. Long-term funding required for bison management (continue hazing and develop and implement other management tools.). Need to develop SWAT teams to implement hazing. This is an immediate concern as bison excursions likely this fall. Will there be funding for hazing operations?
15. Can we test / implement strategies that we discuss in our workshops prior to the Bison Management plan being approved?
16. We need a suite of tools for bison management. Stewards / landowners can choose the appropriate tool for the situation. Each landowner's situation is different. We do have some tools available – compensation, hazing, harvesting – how can we move forward with the tools that we have?
17. Numbers of landowners affected by bison excursions: 5 throughout season; 3 in fall affected the most; up to 20 negatively affected in one way or another to various levels. Total area affected - 100 square kms; core area affected - 50 square km. All affected landowners are involved in some fashion with the bison management plan.
18. Compensation becomes a negotiation between landowner and adjuster – sometimes landowner feels a positive result, other times landowner experiences the opposite. Compensation is a separable topic, we need a separate workshop on it and we need to bring in experts from crop insurance.
19. All bison management issues are closely related. Habitat and management issues are closely connected.
20. Important to maintain good relationships between all parties – landowners, Ministry of Environment and the Park. There are many opportunities for consensus.
21. There is the possibility of application of fire to reduce conflicts.

22. Coordinating Committee (along with appropriate experts) will work at putting together sections of the plan and submitting these for feedback from the Advisory Committee. We need to have clear expectations from all involved in the planning process as to what needs to be in the plan.

6. Field Trip Planning (Coordinating Committee)

- Coordinating Committee to make arrangements and to inform Advisory Committee members as to details of the summer field trip.
- Considerations include:
 - Opportunity to see bison and bison habitat
 - Involvement from Université Laval researcher(s)
 - Include visit(s) to private lands and discussions with landowners as part of the trip. Should have landowners who are not very supportive present and get their perspective.
 - Possibly invite Paspiwin group
 - Must keep the numbers manageable
- Logistics:
 - Last two weeks of August
 - Five hour duration (approx.)
 - Horse and wagons for transportation – some hiking (inside Park)
 - Meal provided

7. Bison Management Plan – Goals for the Summer (Coordinating Committee)

- Coordinating Committee to work on the following sections:
 - Introduction / Background
 - Disease Management
 - Habitat Management

8. Plan for the Next Workshop

- Topic: Population Demographics
- Date: Sept. 20, 2011
- Time: 10:00 AM
- Location: Big River Community Centre

9. Closing Comments:

- This workshop was productive, good communication between participants. Some straying from the topic, but overall, good conversations.
- Looking forward to get out on the field trip
- Hoping for better (increased) participation in upcoming workshops.
- Park overdue for prescribed fire – good to see this happening
- This group is necessary – the issues are not so much a bison problem, but a people problem. Must continue to work together.

Meeting ended – 3:30 PM