

# **PROPOSED EXPERIMENTAL POPULATION, SPECIAL RULE AND DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR WOOD BISON REINTRODUCTION**

## Questions and Answers

### **1. What is the Federal government announcing?**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), in support of an Alaska Department of Fish & Game plan, proposes to establish a nonessential experimental population (NEP) of wood bison (*Bison bison athabasca*) in Alaska and a special rule for management of wood bison, and announces availability of a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for this proposed rule.

### **2. What is a “nonessential experimental population?”**

A nonessential experimental population can be designated, under section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), outside a species’ current range, but within its historic range for the purpose of reintroducing the species into that historic range. This designation would allow for a wide range of management options, and provide assurances that the establishment of the wild herd(s) won’t have any unintended consequences for landowners, industry, or Alaska Natives

### **3. What is the size of present wood bison populations and where are they found today? What was their historic range?**

Through recovery actions in Canada, wood bison herds have grown from two in 1978, with about 400 individuals, to 7 disease-free, free-ranging herds (located in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and the Yukon and Northwest Territories) with approximately 4,400 individuals today.

Historically, the wood bison ranged from interior Alaska throughout the northwestern provinces of Canada. Wood bison were last seen in northeastern Alaska in the early 1900s in small groups or single animals, but there are no free-ranging herds today in Alaska or elsewhere in the United States.

### **4. Who will have management responsibility for reintroduced wood bison?**

The Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) will have primary responsibility for leading and implementing the wood bison restoration effort and will keep the Service apprised of the status of the effort on an ongoing basis. In the special rule, pursuant to Section 4(d) of the Endangered Species Act, the Service proposes to authorize ADF&G as primary manager of the nonessential experimental population.

## **5. What did the draft Environmental Assessment analyze and what were its findings?**

The draft EA analyzes the potential environmental impacts associated with the proposed reintroduction of wood bison in Alaska. The draft finding is that designating wood bison in Alaska as a “nonessential experimental population” and authorizing the release of wood bison in one to three locations in interior Alaska would not result in significant impacts to the human environment.

## **6. Will the public have an opportunity to comment on the proposed rule and EA? How?**

A 60-day comment period for both documents will open on the day these documents are published in the Federal Register.

Comments and information on the proposed rule and draft EA may be submitted by either of the following methods:

1. *Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>.* Search for docket *FWS-R7-ES-2012-0033* and then follow the instructions for submitting comments.
2. *U.S. mail or hand-delivery:* Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R7- ES-2012-0033; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203. Comments submitted to <http://www.regulations.gov> must be received before midnight (Eastern Time) on the date specified in the **DATES** section. We will post all comments on <http://www.regulations.gov>.

## **7. Will there be public meetings?**

We have not pre-planned any public meetings or hearings, but we will hold them if requested. We must receive requests for public hearings, in writing, addressed to Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Office, Fisheries and Ecological Services, at 1011 East Tudor Road, Anchorage, AK 99503, or email [woodbison-AK@fws.gov](mailto:woodbison-AK@fws.gov) by **[45 DAYS AFTER THE DATE OF PUBLICATION]**.

## **8. Where do I find the documents in order to review them?**

The proposed rules and draft EA are available online at: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Search for docket FWS-R7-ES-2012-0033.

## **9. What is the wood bison’s Endangered Species Act status?**

Wood bison are currently listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

**10. Will subsistence or sport hunting be allowed for wood bison in Alaska?**

The ESA allows subsistence hunting by Alaska Natives and non-native permanent residents of Alaskan native villages, if it is not in violation of any other Federal or State law. The proposed “nonessential experimental population” designation and associated special rule includes possible future hunting based on sustained yield principles established by the ADF&G.

**11. Where will Alaska’s wood bison come from?**

The primary source of Alaska’s wood bison is a captive-bred population at Elk Island National Park, (EINP), Alberta, Canada, which was propagated for the purpose of providing disease-free stock for reestablishing populations in other parts of the species’ original range.

In June 2008, under permits obtained from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Canadian Wildlife Service and the State of Alaska, 53 wood bison were translocated from the disease-free Elk Island National Park Canadian herd to a temporary holding facility at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) near Portage, Alaska, where they joined a small existing wood bison herd. There are over 100 wood bison at AWCC.

**12. How is a wood bison different from a plains bison?**

Wood bison are somewhat larger than plains bison (*B. b. bison*), and are distinguished by their more pronounced hump (with the highest point forward of the front legs), forward-falling display hair on the head, reduced chaps and beard, and less demarcation of the cape.

**13. Will the wood bison release impact oil and gas or other development?**

No. The NEP designation and accompanying 4(d) special rule are designed to provide assurance that wood bison in Alaska will not interfere with oil and gas or other resource development. The proposed special rule stipulates that unintentional take (including killing or injuring) of the reintroduced wood bison would not be a violation of the Endangered Species Act, when such take is incidental to an otherwise legal activity (e.g., oil and gas development, mineral extraction, timber harvest, etc.).

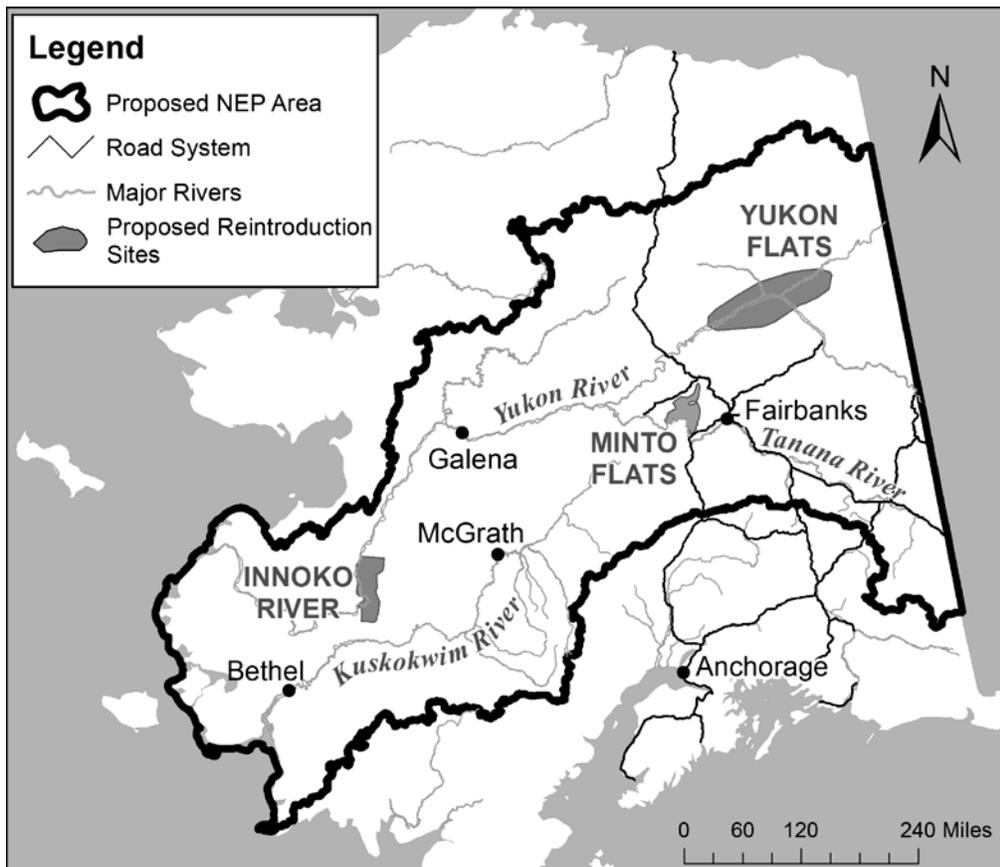
**14. Do ESA section 7 consultation requirements apply to NEPs?**

When NEPs are located outside a National Wildlife Refuge or National Park Service unit, only two provisions of section 7 of the ESA apply: section 7(a)(1) and section 7(a)(4). In these instances, NEPs provide additional flexibility because Federal agencies are not required to consult with us under section 7(a)(2) of the ESA. Section 7(a)(4) requires Federal agencies to confer (rather than consult, as required under section 7(a)(2)) with the Service on actions that are likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a species proposed to be listed. A conference

results in conservation recommendations that are optional as the agencies carry out, fund, or authorize activities. However, because a NEP is by definition not essential to the continued existence of the species, it is very unlikely that we would ever determine jeopardy for a project impacting a species within a NEP.

### 15. Where might wood bison be released?

The Alaska Department of Fish & Game proposes to release wood bison into one or more of three areas within the bison’s historical range in Alaska (Minto Flats, the lower Innoko/Yukon River area, and Yukon Flats) as shown on the accompanying map.



### 16. How would wood bison be monitored after introduction?

The ADF&G will monitor the population status of reintroduced bison herds at least annually to document productivity, survival and population size. Depending on available resources, monitoring may occur more frequently, especially during the first few years of reestablishment efforts. This monitoring will be conducted primarily through aerial surveys and will be accomplished by State or Service employees, through cooperative efforts with local governments, or by contracting with other appropriate species experts. Other Federal agencies

may also be involved in population monitoring, particularly where National Park System or Bureau of Land Management lands are involved. Tribal governments or other organizations may also participate in population monitoring and other management activities.