

**British Columbia Bison Association
Strategic Plan**

October 2008

MISSION STATEMENT

To promote and encourage a bison industry that is economically and environmentally sustainable at both the producer and processor levels that is fueled by consumer acceptance and demand in Canada and abroad.

VISION

A prosperous and environmentally sustainable bison industry, for British Columbia.

THE ORGANIZATION

The BC Bison Association is a registered non-profit society formed by the amalgamation of the BC members of the former Peace Country Bison Association and the BC Interior Bison Association. The association receives money through annual membership fees as well as access to a share of the tag levy funds collected by the Canadian Bison Association. The Canadian Bison Association is an organization of the provincial associations.

CURRENT STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

The BC bison industry is unique in that BC is the only province in Canada that considers bison wildlife. The industry is regulated by the Ministry of Environment and administered by the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands. All bison ranchers are legally required to obtain a game farm license issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands. This license must be renewed yearly by paying a \$100 fee and submitting a herd inventory. To protect the BC livestock industry a health declaration by the sellers must accompany bison imported from other provinces or states. The game farm act also confines bison ranching on freehold tenure and prohibits grazing on crown land. This severely curtails expansion of the BC Bison herds because grazing leases and grazing permits are an integral part of many BC cattle ranches.

The BC bison industry is relatively small, the 2007 Stats Canada figures reporting 12000 plus animals on 106 ranches. One association represents the entire province of BC, consequently challenges arise with marketing, transportation, production and slaughter. In the past without a strategic plan the provincial government has been reluctant to assist the association with anything other than liaison with the bison industry specialist, which

the association greatly appreciates.

The association's current web site is in need of restructuring and constant updating. Assistance to new producers can be done through the website as well as advising the public on locations where they can purchase bison meat and products. A bison brochure and video (promoting Buy BC products) should be developed that could be distributed at trade shows and special events. Current provincial bison ranching information and economics for new producers is outdated and non-existent.

The provincial Meat Inspection Regulations under the Health Act implemented in 2007 has placed a hardship on bison producers with requirements for provincial or federal inspection of any meat products leaving the farm. Presently access to slaughter facilities with inspection are unavailable in specific areas and can require long hauling distances increasing transportation costs, stress and potential injury to the animals. Older bison bulls or mean cows can also present problems because they can become impossible to corral, tag and load with inherent danger to facilities and handlers.

The association has an ongoing duty to keep members informed of government regulations, research results, disease issues, sales and upcoming conference dates. To date this has mainly occurred through the Canadian Bison Association emails, website and Smoke Signals magazine.

OBJECTIVES

The association is working towards eliminating the requirement for game farm licenses for bison or request they be issued for a five year term instead of the current one year period. The annual herd inventory is valuable for personal records and filling government forms but is only a requirement in the province of BC. The BCBA will work towards having requirements standardized throughout the provinces.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency is responsible for health of animals. The association feels that the BC Health Declaration for Imported Bison should be discontinued unless a valid reason for the requirement is obtained.

The association would like to see a policy adopted in BC similar to that of Alberta for grazing bison on crown land. Alberta has developed specific fencing and management practices which could be adopted for BC ranchers by BCMAL

The BC Bison Association would focus on current problems within the industry, recommend solutions, form a basis for lobbying with the government and encourage participation from producers. The Association will monitor animal care/welfare legislation and communicate on legislative issues with industry and government (including BCMAL) as required.

A professionally designed website, regularly updated with a coordinating brochure and promotional video would aid the association on advising the public about the health benefits of buffalo meat and where they could buy the product in BC. The site would also include links to other bison related websites including the Canadian Bison Association where RFID tag orders forms, among others can be downloaded

The association recognizes the need for meat inspection to protect both the consumers and reputation of Canadian bison meat. In remote areas that have no slaughter facilities or with long hauling distances to inspected slaughter facilities some type of exception should be implemented. Old bulls and cows with ornery temperaments sometimes cannot be handled so a solution on how to salvage this meat needs to be negotiated.

STRATEGIES

Long Term

- Work with the BCMAL to amend the game farm act to renew game farm permits every 5 years and drop the requirement for a herd inventory
- Request changes in legislation to allow bison to graze on crown land similar to other provinces

Mid Term

- Work with CFIA to maintain consistent health standards consistently across Canada
- Strive to encompass association goals, objectives and equality of rules among provinces to enhance the production of bison in BC
- Ensure slaughtering of animals is more humane i.e. less travel time with exemptions to anyone further than a 200 mile radius from an inspected facility by allowing on farm slaughter.

Priority

- Request harvest permits to allow hunters to harvest an animal (old bulls/mean cows) for their personal use e.g. 3% of the bison herd.
-Develop and maintain a website with ongoing updates that is easy to use and provides valuable information to bison producers and people interested in entering the bison business
- Source funding to develop BC Bison video or videos to inform consumers and potential investors of the benefits of bison , both health wise and economic

THE FUTURE

There is renewed optimism in the bison industry due mostly to the increase in prices and demand at recent auction sales. The aim of producers is to make ranching bison a viable business. Raising bison is much simpler than raising cattle. Once the initial outlay for additional fencing and handling systems are in place the costs are also less than cattle. Over the past ten years ranchers have been forced to work off farm in order to keep the farm going in the hope that eventually prices would , fortunately in the past year we have witnessed a dramatic rise in prices. The association must continue to help educate our members on marketing their animals, keeping the industry raising the healthiest meat and

helping solve the challenge of getting the animals inspected and slaughtered nearby.

CONCLUSION

Canadian bison meat products are presently commanding a 60% premium over beef. The inherent advantages of raising bison including increased longevity over cattle herds, fewer or no calving problems, inherent disease resistance, maintaining health while able to ingest lower quality feed, extended grazing periods, lower health maintenance problems contributing to a hormone/antibiotic free product. This helps bison achieve one of the lowest environmental footprints of all meat producing animals. To maintain markets the industry has created it is imperative the Canadian herd expands and BC has the environmental capacity to be in the forefront.