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Secretary Kempthorne Launches Bison Conservation Initiative

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne today announced an initiative that will work with state, tribal and agricultural interests to strengthen bison conservation efforts to help this iconic species recover and thrive.

"One of the classic symbols of the American frontier is the image of vast herds of bison grazing on the western plains," Kempthorne said. "Americans today still find inspiration in bison ranging freely on the landscape, as Yellowstone National Park demonstrates."

"While the days of millions of free-roaming bison are gone," Kempthorne noted, "our initiative acknowledges the important role of bison on the landscape, in tribal culture and in our national heritage and will work in partnerships to sustain a strong and well-coordinated conservation effort throughout this country, throughout this century."

There are more than 500,000 plains bison (bison bison) in North America, most privately owned, in herds of less than 1,000 that are fenced within relatively small areas. There are also 4,000 woods bison, a different subspecies, free-roaming in Canada. Interior now manages almost 7,000 bison in seven national wildlife refuges and five national parks.

To address the health and genetic composition of the Department's bison herds, the initiative proposes several specific actions to better manage and integrate bison populations on select Interior lands. To promote cooperative conservation in bison management, Interior will strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones with states, Native American tribes, landowners, agricultural interests, conservationists and others interested in bison health and recovery.

States have management responsibility for most of the bison within their boundaries and bison have a central role in many Native American cultures. Agricultural groups, both landowners and those with public land leases, have significant interests and involvement with bison management and a number of conservation groups are dedicated to bison and other wildlife improvements. The governments of Canada and Mexico also have important roles to play in bison conservation.

Where there is strong local support, partnerships could permit small bison herds to recreate their natural role in areas where they are not now found. Such arrangements may help support the restoration or maintenance of other native species and habitats. The herds could also become important tourist attractions.

The initiative will operate through an interagency working group to coordinate management and science needs and activities related to Interior's bison herds and to carry out cooperative efforts with other parties. The group has representatives of Interior agencies, including the Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Geological Survey, and a tribal liaison from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as well as representatives of states within whose borders bison are found.

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which plays a major role in bison disease issues, and the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Defense, which are major public land managing agencies, have been invited to participate as well.

The Working Group is charged with several specific actions, including these key efforts:

- Retaining the genetic integrity of Interior's bison herds and maximizing their genetic diversity by implementing recommendations of the Department-sponsored bison genetics workshop held earlier this year;
- Involving tribal bison experts in the Department's activities, and assisting with tribal bison initiatives;
- Convening a bison disease workshop in fiscal year 2009 to develop guidelines and protocols for addressing diseases affecting bison and bison conservation efforts;
- Seeking bison conservation projects that involve partnership efforts;
- Increasing environmental education efforts on bison by actively seeking partners to showcase Interior lands with small bison herds, and seek to work with zoos to accomplish these objectives in areas where there are no Interior bison herds.

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