

Canada-Alberta Draft Conservation Agreement for Wood Bison in Alberta



Wood bison is an iconic wildlife species¹ in Canada, having important ecological value as well as cultural and spiritual value for many Indigenous peoples. Wood bison is federally listed as Threatened under the *Species at Risk Act*. In Alberta, wood bison that occur in a specified area in northwest Alberta are listed as Endangered under the provincial *Wildlife Act*, and the Ronald Lake bison herd is listed as a Subject Animal (Figure 1). Wood bison is also a priority species under the *Pan-Canadian Approach to Transforming Species at Risk Conservation in Canada*, through which conservation efforts are concentrated on collaboratively identified priorities.

Wood bison currently occupy about 6% of their original range. The overall population has declined significantly, from an estimated 168,000 animals in the late 1800s to approximately 8,500 individuals today. Wood bison continue to face numerous threats, including habitat loss or degradation, unregulated hunting, and introduced cattle diseases (bovine brucellosis and tuberculosis) that are present in some bison found within, and adjacent to, Wood Buffalo National Park. Given the significant reduction in the total population and range of wood bison, and presence of introduced diseases, the federal recovery objectives for wood bison are, in the short-term, to maintain the population size, range and disease-free status of each disease-free local population (or herd) of wood bison in the original range of wood bison in Canada.

Wood bison recovery in Alberta has been hindered by the ongoing threat of bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis. These diseases are no longer present in domestic livestock and there is a concern that wild bison could be a risk to this industry. In 2010, Alberta began implementing a plan to manage disease risk for northern Alberta wood bison populations located outside of Wood Buffalo National Park². The Parks Canada Agency has also taken steps to manage disease risk.

In January 2020, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change announced that wood bison are facing imminent threats to their recovery. Specifically, an Imminent Threat Assessment [<https://species-registry.canada.ca/index-en.html#/documents/3616>] concluded that two disease-free herds in northeastern Alberta, the Ronald Lake and Wabasca herds, are subject to threats that could, in the near-term, jeopardize achieving the recovery objectives of wood bison, and thus require immediate attention. The imminent threats to the Ronald Lake herd include the presence of diseased bison in Wood Buffalo National Park, which could transfer tuberculosis or brucellosis to the nearby Ronald Lake herd, and proposed industrial development in the herd's range, which could cause extensive habitat and range loss. The imminent threat to the small Wabasca herd includes unregulated harvest, which could lead to herd extirpation.

Wood Bison Conservation Agreement

Both Alberta and Canada recognize the importance of addressing these and other threats to maintain disease-free local populations of wood bison. To this end, they have negotiated a draft conservation agreement using the provisions for agreements found in Section 11 of the *Species at Risk Act*.

The conservation measures identified in the draft conservation agreement are intended to:

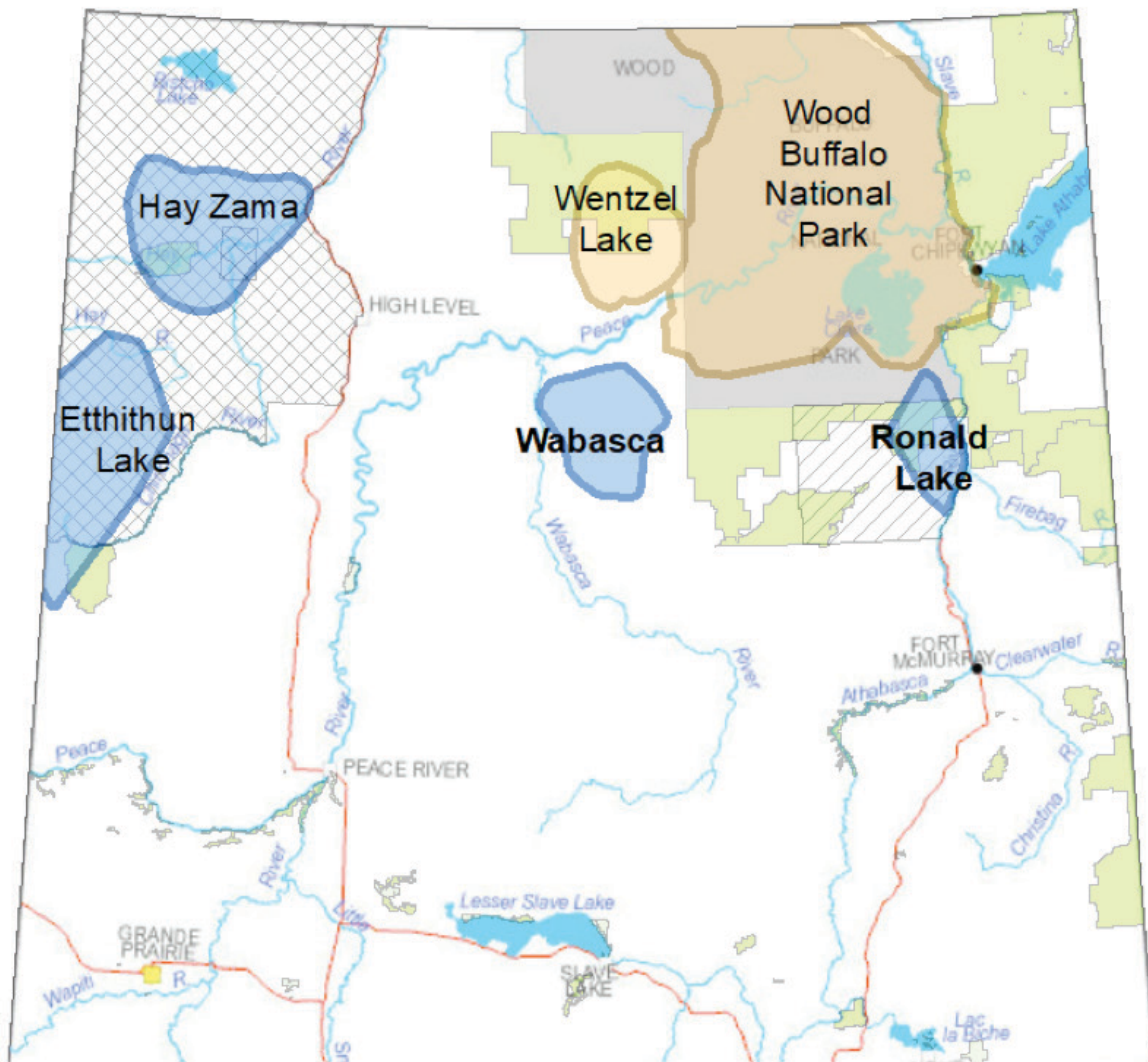
- Minimize future habitat loss and degradation;
- Reduce and eliminate the risk of disease transmission;
- Investigate and implement as required additional approaches to improve the population status of both herds from other threats; and
- Address information gaps, monitor populations, and assess effectiveness of the Conservation and Management Measures.

The draft conservation agreement also recognizes the importance of collaborating with Indigenous groups and stakeholders on the effective implementation of Conservation and Management Measures.

The draft agreement has been posted online for a 60-day public comment period.

¹ Wood bison (*Bison bison athabasca*) are a subspecies of American bison, but are considered a 'wildlife species' under the *Species at Risk Act*.

² <https://www.alberta.ca/wood-bison-disease-management.aspx>







-  Wood Bison Populations (Disease-free)
-  Wood Bison Populations (Diseased)
-  Northwest Bison Protection Area (Status - Endangered)
-  Ronald Lake Special Bison Area (Status - Subject Animal)
-  National Park
-  Wildland Provincial Park

Figure 1. Location of the bison herds within Alberta, and Areas indicated under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*.
Note that the federal-provincial conservation agreement only addresses the Wabasca and Ronald Lake bison herds.