

Burlington Prairie Bison Stewardship Plan

Attachment B – Bison Conservation License Agreement

1. Introduction

The Burlington Prairie Bison Stewardship Plan outlines the shared responsibilities of the American Indian Center (AIC), Ruhter Bison, and the Forest Preserve District of Kane County (District) in the care and management of the Burlington Bison Conservation Area. This plan fulfills requirements of the Bison Conservation License Agreement and integrates ecological, cultural, and safety goals into a unified framework.

AIC will serve as cultural steward and primary licensee. Ruhter Bison will serve as technical manager for day-to-day herd care. The District will serve as land manager, infrastructure provider, and oversight authority. Together, these partners will ensure bison are cared for, the prairie is restored, and the public benefits from safe, educational engagement.

2. Goals and Guiding Principles

- Restore and maintain high-quality grassland habitat through regenerative bison grazing.
 - Reconnect urban Native communities to bison as relatives, teachers, and keystone species.
 - Integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) with modern conservation science.
 - Provide safe, transparent protocols for herd management and incident response.
 - Create opportunities for education and engagement with both Native and non-Native communities.
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3. Herd Management

- **Initial Herd Size:** Approximately 8–10 animals will be introduced in 2025, sourced from The Nature Conservancy’s Nachusa Grasslands herd. Final composition will be determined at the time of transfer, with animals selected by Nachusa as most appropriate for relocation.
 - **Composition:** The initial group will likely consist of a cohesive social unit (such as cows, calves, and yearlings). Keeping familiar animals together supports herd stability, reduces stress, and encourages natural social behavior.
 - **Future Herd Growth:** Herd size may be increased incrementally as conditions allow, up to 15–20 animals when additional acreage (Field 2) becomes available. Stocking rates will be adjusted adaptively to maintain prairie health. Any surplus animals beyond the carrying capacity of the pasture will be managed in consultation with Ruhter Bison.
 - **Monitoring:** The herd and infrastructure will be visually monitored daily when feeding or observing, with more thorough checks of fences, gates, and waterers several times each week.
 - **Feeding:** Supplemental hay and grain will be provided during seasonal stress periods or drought, with all costs borne by AIC.
 - **Veterinary Care:** Veterinary services will be arranged by AIC as needed.
 - **Calves:** Calf ownership and management will follow the Services Agreement between AIC and Ruhter Bison.
 - **Handling:** All herd movement and sorting will use low-stress techniques.
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4. Grassland and Habitat Management

- **Invasive Species Prevention:** AIC will clean equipment before site entry, responsibly source hay, and address invasive species introductions through removal/control.
- **Adaptive Grazing:** Stocking rates and rotations adjusted annually based on vegetation surveys and forage conditions.
- **Land Management Practices:** The District and AIC will collaborate on prescribed burns, mowing rotations, invasive species control, and other practices to support long-term prairie health.

- **Long-Term Goal:** Use bison as active ecological agents to maintain biodiversity, soil health, and prairie function.
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5. Infrastructure and Maintenance

- **Fencing & Gates:**
 - District has installed solar perimeter fencing and a Cobett waterer.
 - AIC is responsible for repair and maintenance of fencing, gates, electric fence and energizers, livestock waterer, hydrant connections, storage structure, and any future infrastructure improvements or installations made by the Licensee.
 - **Water System:** AIC maintains hydrant connections and waterer; District maintains the well, pump house, and water control structure.
 - **Mowing & Debris Clearance:** AIC shall keep the storage area, exterior of fence perimeter, and maintenance lanes mowed and clear of debris, as required in the License Agreement.
 - **Corral System:**
 - Planned corral and holding pen designed for sorting calves, loading animals, and handling emergencies (per discussions among Ruhter, Parsons, and Chess).
 - Permanent panels (wood with barrier) combined with a portable Morand system.
 - District funds may support panels for a small system; design details to be finalized collaboratively.
 - **Storage & Roads:** District maintains the main preserve drive and public amenities; AIC repairs any damage caused by its operations.
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6. Safety and Incident Response

The **Bison Incident Response Plan (Exhibit C)** provides detailed procedures for escapes, mortalities, and emergencies. Key points include:

- 911 and Kane County Public Safety as first contact.
 - Public kept 500 yards back.
 - Herd managed with vehicles/ATVs positioned outside flight zones.
 - Clear chain of command with contacts for AIC, Ruhter, and District staff.
 - Lethal force protocols when public safety is at risk.
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7. Education and Community Engagement

- **Programs:** AIC will host workshops, tours, storytelling events, and school programs, engaging at least 1,000 people annually.
 - **Interpretation:** AIC and District will jointly develop interpretive signage and an online hub with ecological and cultural information.
 - **Community Partnerships:** Engagement will prioritize Native first-voice perspectives, integrating bison into broader food sovereignty and TEK initiatives.
 - **Evaluation:** Participation will be tracked through sign-ins, surveys, and program reports.
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8. Evaluation, Record-Keeping, and Reporting

- **Annual Review:** Stocking rates, forage health, herd condition, and habitat outcomes will be reviewed annually with District staff.
- **Program Reports:** AIC will report on education and outreach metrics.
- **Record-Keeping:** AIC and Ruhter Bison will maintain logs of herd health observations, grazing patterns, and incidents, to be available to the District upon request.
- **Adaptive Management:** Adjustments to grazing, herd size, and management practices will be made collaboratively.