



SEASON

MSU players Osobor, Battle, Brown, Belo garner Big Sky honors
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U.S. to focus bison restoration on expanding tribal herds

ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER — U.S. officials will work to restore more large bison herds to Native American lands under a Friday order from Interior Secretary Deb Haaland that calls for the government to tap into Indigenous knowledge in its efforts to conserve the burly animals that are an icon of the American West.

Haaland also announced \$25 million in federal spending for bison conservation. The money,

from last year's climate bill, will build new herds, transfer more bison from federal to tribal lands and forge new bison management agreements with tribes, officials said.

American bison, also known as buffalo, have bounced back from their near extinction due to commercial hunting in the 1800s. But they remain absent from most of the grasslands they once occupied, and many tribes have struggled to restore their deep historical connections to the animals.

As many as 60 million bison once roamed North America, moving in vast herds that were central to the culture and survival of numerous Native American groups.

They were driven to the brink of extinction more than a century ago when hunters, U.S. troops and tourists shot them by the thousands to feed a growing commercial market that used bison parts in machinery, fertilizer and clothing. By 1889, only a few hundred bison remained.

More **BISON** | A8



A bison is seen walking along a road on June 22 in Yellowstone National Park. (Associated Press)

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Haaland, of Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, is the first Native American to serve as a U.S. Cabinet secretary. She's championed tribal concerns on issues ranging from wildlife conservation to energy development, and put a spotlight on past mistreatment of Native Americans through a series of listening sessions about systemic abuses at government-run boarding schools.

She told The Associated Press in an interview last year that the decimation of bison by European settlers eliminated the primary food source for many tribes and opened the way for their land to be taken away.

The return of bison in some locations is considered a conservation success. But Haaland said they remain "functionally extinct" and more work is needed to return the animals to tribal lands and restore the grasslands they depend on.

"This holistic effort will ensure that this powerful sacred animal is reconnected to its natural habitat and the original stewards who know best how to care for it," Haaland said in announcing her order Friday, during a World Wildlife Day event at the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C..

"When we think about Indigenous communities, we must acknowledge that they have spent generations over many centuries observing the seasons, tracking wildlife migration patterns and

fully comprehending our role in the delicate balance of this earth," she added.

Across the U.S., from New York to Oklahoma to Alaska, 82 tribes now have more than 20,000 bison in 65 herds. Numbers have been growing in recent years along with the desire among Native Americans to reclaim stewardship of the animals.

Many of the tribes' bison came from U.S. agencies, which over the past two decades transferred thousands of the animals to thin government-controlled herds so they don't outgrow the land. The transfers often were carried out in cooperation with the South Dakota-based Inter Tribal Buffalo Council. The group's director, Troy Heinert, said Haaland's order is an acknowledgement of the work tribes have already done.

"The buffalo has just as long a connection to Indigenous people as we have to it," said Heinert, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. "They are not just a number or a commodity; this is returning a relative to its rightful place."

Past administrations have proposed or advanced bison conservation plans — including under former Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump — and tribes have long been part of that process.

Haaland's order puts Native American interests at the center of the Interior Department's bison program. It also adds a tribal leader, yet to be named, to a group that's exploring establishing new herds on both tribal and federal lands.

Bison reintroductions could put the Biden administration at odds with state officials in Montana. Republican lawmakers have resisted returning the animals to federal lands and opposed some previous bison transfers to tribes.

State lawmakers voted Thursday to advance a resolution opposing the reintroduction of bison to the million-acre (400,000-hectare) Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in northern Montana — an idea that's been floated by the Biden administration and has support among Native Americans.

"Bison were part of the culture 200, 300 years ago. We aren't going back to that," said Montana state Sen. Mike Lang, who sponsored the resolution. Lang said he doesn't oppose bison on tribal lands but added that as populations grow they can cause problems for ranchers and present a public safety threat.

About half of the \$25 million announced Friday will go to the National Park Service. The remainder will be split among the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Land Management and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

It includes about \$1 million to establish an apprenticeship program that will provide training to tribes on managing bison, including at national parks and national wildlife refuges, officials said.

The Interior Department currently oversees 11,000 bison in herds on public lands in 12 states.