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Plains Bison Assessed as Threatened

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In May 2004, COSEWIC (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada) assessed the status of the Plains Bison, an animal that was a keystone species in Canada's grasslands. COSEWIC has assessed its status as "threatened", meaning Plains Bison is likely to become endangered if limiting factors are not reversed.

Marco Festa-Bianchet, chair of COSEWIC said that it was important to "redouble our efforts to protect species at risk and their habitats. The bison is not at imminent risk of extinction, but because of its biological characteristics and how many there are, if the situation continues as it is now, it could become endangered."

Plains bison were a major modifier of the grassland ecosystem and were essential to a myriad of other life forms and ecological processes. A little more than a hundred and fifty years ago, Plains Bison numbered in the tens of millions. Less than a thousand free-ranging Plains Bison occur today in Canada and only a handful occur in a semi-wild state in the grasslands.

The biggest wild herd of Plains Bison occurs at Pink Mountain in British Columbia, an area that is extralimital to its historic distribution. A herd at Prince Albert National Park has been slowly increasing in population. Captive herds are found in a small area of Waterton Lakes National Park and Elk Island National Park, the source population of the most genetically pure Plains Bison. The Nature Conservancy has just established a herd on thousands of acres of native grassland in southwestern Saskatchewan.

The greatest threat to Plains Bison is the scarcity of habitat since most of its former habitat has been converted to cropland. A few sizeable areas of native grassland would be suitable habitat but are currently used for other purposes including military training, livestock grazing and oil and gas development. Other problems include the presence of cattle genes in most domestic bison herds and the risk of contracting cattle-borne diseases.

COSEWIC's recommended designation has been forwarded to the federal Environment Minister who must determine if it will be added to the federal list of species at risk. Canada's *Species At Risk Act* comes into full effect in June and requires government officials to develop recovery plans for all wildlife listed as threatened or endangered.

If the Plains Bison is legally designated by the Government of Canada, it would free up government funds for restoration of Plains Bison habitat. It's a good signal that grasslands and the big species that once lived there are finally getting the attention they deserve.

Restoration of Plains Bison habitat will contribute to a larger conservation vision espoused by groups like AWA, which has been working with the Northern Plains Conservation Network (NPCN) to secure a large continuous area of wild grassland stretching through the Northern Great Plains of the United States and Canada from Nebraska to southeastern Alberta (see <http://npcn.net>).

The NPCN is committed to working with all interested parties, including indigenous peoples, ranchers and local communities to restore the full complement of wild species and ecosystem processes to this region. The NPCN believes large-scale prairie conservation has the potential to halt the economic decline of many prairie communities with a greater emphasis on landscape preservation, wildlife-related tourism and sustainable forms of agriculture.





The whole plains area is looking for new economic opportunities. There's room for people, for wildlife and for tourism. Plains Bison could be a big piece of the ecological and economic future of the Northern Great Plains.

