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Wild Bison Recovery Endangered: Government Fails to Add Threatened Plains Bison to Species at Risk List

The Honourable Stéphane Dion, Federal Minister of the Environment, has failed to add Plains Bison to the list of species protected under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is frustrated by this decision, which will hamper recovery plans for Plains Bison in the grassland region.

"This region is part of World Wildlife Fund's Global 200 list of most threatened ecosystems," says Cliff Wallis, AWA Past-President and grassland expert. "Canada's refusal to list Plains Bison under the Species at Risk Act limits the ability to use this keystone species in recovery efforts and will also hamper recovery plans for several other species at risk."

While AWA applauds the recent listing of the vast majority of species recommended by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), the Minister should have accepted COSEWIC's recommendation, which listed Plains Bison as a threatened species in May 2004.

The Environment Minister's primary reasons for not listing Plains Bison was the difficulty of distinguishing wild and domestic plains bison and the potential economic implications for the Canadian bison industry. But it is not relevant to distinguish wild bison from domestic ones. It is, however, very important to distinguish genetically pure bison from cattle contaminated bison, which occur in most domestic herds. This testing does not seem to be that problematical for scientists and a few cattle genome-free bison herds have been identified in Canada and the U.S.

"This is the sort of political interference in listing species at risk that the AWA was most concerned with when we commented on drafts of the Species at Risk Act," says Wallis. The game farming industry is in crisis in Canada and bison ranching has been suffering an economic downturn. About half of the 50 or so pilot bison ranching projects on public lands in Alberta are no longer operating.

"The Minister has chosen to listen to the concerns of a handful of bison producers over the thousands of Canadians who want to see wild bison back in the prairies," says Wallis. "The Minister's decision panders to decades of the type of unsustainable agricultural land use in Canada's threatened grassland region that has led to this region having one of the largest concentrations of species at risk in Canada."

AWA is pleased that the Minister has not closed the door on the listing and will be working with the public to develop an approach for the recovery of wild Plains Bison. However, AWA strongly feels that this decision not to list Plains Bison ties one hand behind the Minister's back in recovery efforts.

"We are committed to working with the Minister to find a path forward on this issue," says Wallis. "AWA is equally committed to securing a listing under the Species at Risk Act until such time as we have recovered significant populations of plains bison in the grasslands of Canada. This is where they rightfully belong along with the whole suite of prairie species that evolved with them."

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