# Supplementary Data 2: Description of Case studies

Below are detailed descriptions of Plains bison (*Bison bison bison*) located at four Native American Reservations in Montana and South Dakota. The descriptions include establishment history, current status, community access, and each ‘Buffalo’ Program’s challenges. Native Americans refer to bison as buffalo and both terms are used in this paper.

## Fort Belknap (48° 8' 13.97", - 108° 34' 16.87")

### Population:

The Fort Belknap Indian Community includes the tribes of the Nakoda (Assiniboine) and the A'aninin (Gros Ventre), "People of the White Clay." There are approximately 7,000 total enrolled tribal members, with approximately 3,429 tribal members living on or near the reservation (Fort Belknap Community, 2021; Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs, 2021b).

### Study Area:

The reservation is located within northcentral Montana (2526 km2) (**Table 1**), and mostly consisting of mixed-grass prairie (**Figure 3)**. The community is a mixture of private and trust lands used mostly for cattle (*Bos taurus*) ranching operations and 92.7% are operated by tribal members (**Table 2**). Two herds of Plains bison occur in large pastures (4.7 and 88.3 km2) (**Table 2**). Approximately 87.7% of the reservation is unplowed and considered intact prairie (**Table 1;** World Wildlife Fund, 2018). Currently, bison are grazed on 93 km2 of tribal rangelands in two herds (**Table 2**), with an additional 1828 km2 of continuous parcels environmentally suitable for bison based on HSI estimates (**Table 2**).

### Background:

The first bison herdwas established in 1977 with the purchase of 31 bison from a private rancher. Today, the program manages two bison herds: 1) cultural herd: 100 bison from Yellowstone National Park (YNP) that are kept in a 4.7 km2 pasture (established 2013), and a 2) production herd: >800 bison that are kept in a 88.3 km2 pasture (origin Wind Cave NP, Theodore Roosevelt NP, and Custer State Park). The bison program is overseen by a tribally appointed buffalo manager. Both herds graze year-round in pastures without interior fences and are not regularly handled. All grazing leases go through Bureau of Indian Affairs, using their standard stocking rates for number of Animal Unit Months (AUMs) per month per lease (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2021). Other management decisions also consider the effect of weather (i.e., drought conditions) on quantity and quality of forage based on experience of buffalo manager –though there is no formal protocol in place for monitoring rangeland.

### Economic Development:

Program operating costs are offset in part by live sales of bison from the production herd, predominately bulls. The number of animals sold varies each year, depending on the stability of herd, as assessed by the buffalo manager, and the availability of a buyer. All live sales are processed outside the community, with 100% of meat leaving the community. The program also generates revenue from the sale of 10-20 non-tribal hunters licenses per year ($2,000-$7,500/each). There is a license lottery, but due to limited interest, outsiders instead purchase hunts on a first-come first-serve basis subject to availability of surplus bison.

Both pastures are important historical sites, occasionally included as points of interest for outside tour groups arranged by the Tribal Economic Corporation (fortbelknapcedc.org). There is currently no formal business plan for the buffalo program.

### Stakeholder Group:

Established in 2019, the Fort Belknap Buffalo Group aims to engage the community in decisions about the Buffalo Program. The group aspires to learn about the community’s vision for the herds and develop economic opportunities revolving around bison (e.g., eco-tourism). In 2020, the group conducted a community survey to better understand values, needs, and aspirations for the restoration of bison. Survey results suggest that community members desire more access to bison both for wildlife viewing and for consumption (fortbelknapbuffalo.com). The group will work closely with Aaniiih Nakota College’s new Buffalo Research and Education Center to further the group’s reach in the community.

### Community Access & Education:

Tribal members have access to bison meat through purchasing hunting licenses at a reduced rate and through donations**.**

* Hunting: Approximately 20-30 tribal members enroll in an annual raffle to hunt a bison from either production or cultural herd. The number of available hunts depends on the number of surplus cows or bulls available for a given year. Raffle winners reserve their hunt at a reduced rate of $500 per hunt (10-15 hunts/yr). The program currently manages all aspects of the raffle and sale of hunts.
* Donations: Each year, 10-20 bison are harvested for donation to senior centers, school events, or special tribal ceremonies (2000-4000 kg/year). The program annually services four senior centers (~200 seniors), minimum of two bison annually per center (200-400 kg/year), as well as three major Pow Wows and two Sun Dances. In 2020, in response to COVID-19 Pandemic, 10 additional bison were harvested for special community food pantries. Bison harvests for educational programs occur by request, dependent on interest and the availability of surplus animals.
* Tribal members have free access to visit the production herd at Snake Butte and can visit the cultural herd upon request. The cultural herd pasture is within view of a main road, but the production herd is only accessible via rural farm roads and is more difficult to access.
* Youth Programs: Groups from the community Cultural & Language Immersion schools (k-6) as well as the Native American League visit the bison pastures usually once per year (i.e., school field trips for Native American Week), but the bison program is not currently involved in coordinating visits or participating in activities on a regular basis. Recently, schools, mostly high schools, arrange for a bison carcass to be brought to school, so students could go through the traditional process of preparing and cooking the meat. The newly adopted school activities, intended to become yearly activities, were temporarily disrupted due to COVID-19 pandemic.
* The Aaniiih Nakota College (ANC) of Fort Belknap has recently established a ʔíítaanɔ́ɔ́nʔí/Tatag ́a (Buffalo) Research and Education Center.  The center will 1) conduct educational and outreach activities which include formal academic training to ANC students, 2) conduct informal education to college students and community members through the Fort Belknap Buffalo Group, 3) work with the Buffalo Program to explore the social connection of the community and the buffalo and opportunities for economic development. The overarching goals of the center are to connect the community with the buffalo program and to develop occupational opportunities and capacity through training the younger generation.

### Limitations & Needs:

Currently, the program expansion is based on the ability to produce sustainable revenue. The Fort Belknap Indian Community, with this tribal program, covers the majority of operating costs (i.e., equipment, fence maintenance, partial leases) along with support from partner NGOs, and the Department of Interior (DOI) has also previously supported the program. There is a need to develop an economic plan for the program to become self-sufficient and support multiple long-term staff. A strategic management plan is currently being developed by the buffalo manager.

The coordination with the community and herd management could be expanded and made more efficient with the creation of an administrative assistant position and 2-3 additional year-round staff members to assist with managing the herds, ecotourism, and hunts. Currently, there is no widespread outreach for identifying staff interested in making a long-term investment in the program, and no formal training or safety programs in place for current crew of seasonal staff assisting with roundups and hunts. At present, the program lacks capacity for conducting regular ecological monitoring or disease testing, apart from some intermittent collaborations with the community college.

Of note, more and more land leased for farming has gone fallow (~12 km2 currently, potentially up to 32 km2) and could be used to expand pastures used by both herds via Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) cost-share programs to restore grasslands. However, growth is currently limited by limited revenue from live sales and non-tribal hunts to cover cost of leasing and establishing new fencing.

Currently, 100% of bison meat sales are controlled by outside markets, due to outside buyers for live sales and reliance on outside processing plants. There is a need for a local meat processing plant to help reduce costs.

## Fort Peck (48° 21' 55.9794", -105° 27' 49.14")

### Population:

The Fort Peck Reservation is home to two tribal nations, Nakoda (Assiniboine) and Dakota Sioux Tribes, with approximately 13,000 enrolled tribal members, of which 6,800 tribal members live on or near the reservation (Fort Peck Community; Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs, 2021c).

### Study Area:

Located in northeastern Montana bordering the Missouri River and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (8,564 km2), and predominately composed of mixed grass prairie and cropland. Approximately 54.4% of the reservation is unplowed and considered intact (**Table 1**) (World Wildlife Fund, 2018). About 30.2% of the agricultural lands are operated by tribal members, the rest leased to non-tribal operators (**Table 2**). Currently, 97 km2 of tribal rangelands have bison herds (**Table 2**), with an additional 3,037 km2 of continuous parcels suitable for bison reintroduction based on HSI estimates (**Table 2**).

### Background:

Established in 2001 with purchase of 100 bison from Fort Belknap. Today, the program manages two bison herds: 1) cultural herd: 370 bison from YNP (Wyoming, USA), Wind Cave NP (South Dakota, USA), and Elk Island NP (Canada), grazed on 43.4 km2; 2) production herd: 300 bison from Department of Interior (DOI), grazed on 53.7 km2. Both herds graze year-round in pastures with relatively few interior fences and are not regularly handled. The bison program is overseen by a tribally appointed buffalo manager under Fort Peck’s Tribal Fish and Game Department, with a few seasonal staff assisting as needed (i.e., Tribal Fish and Game wardens). In 2018, Fort Peck opened a quarantine facility for surplus of certified brucellosis-free bison from YNP. The YNP bison that are authorized for transfer to Native American sovereign lands must quarantine in the Fort Peck facility for one year to ensure they do not carry Bovine brucellosis, caused by *Brucella abortus* (Turner, 2020). Fort Peck management plan is to retain 30% of the YNP bison, with the remaining 70% transferred to other Native nations through the InterTribal Bison Council. However, currently the community is unable to keep 30% of the animals because pastures are at maximum stocking capacity. The program covers cost of leasing fees on allotted land using revenue generated from non-tribal hunts, but the tribes waive fees on all trust land parcels. The buffalo program is advised by the Fort Peck office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) concerning rangeland health and estimation of AUMs. Grassland bird monitoring was conducted on the bison pastures from 2012 to 2014 (Ellison 2014 Unpubl. Report). No other monitoring is conducted, but some measures of bison herd health has been conducted by staff at Fort Peck Community College.

### Stakeholder Group:

The Pté group was founded in 2015 by a diverse group of Fort Peck community members and outside buffalo (bison) advocates. The group is currently comprised ofteachers, spiritual leaders, elders, language instructors, council members, buffalo program staff, and outside partners from WWF and faculty from Montana State University**.** The groupmeets on a monthly to bi-monthly basis. The group advocates for bison by developing, enhancing, and perpetuating the community’s relationship to bison through coordinating cultural and educational opportunities and honoring the Buffalo Treaty as signatories (www.buffalotreaty.com). The group has a special sub-group focused on food sovereignty issues.

### Economic Development:

Program operating costs are offset by sale of hunting licenses to non-tribal members, who pay to enter a raffle ($20/entry, up to five entries per person) for the opportunity to hunt a bison from the production herd (40 total hunts), plus an additional fee to reserve their spot. The price of a hunt depends on size and age-class ($2,500-$5,000), with trophy bulls (2-3 animals per year) sold through an online auction ($5,000 base bid). In 2018, the program adopted an online license system that manages the sale of all non-tribal hunts, which has increased the revenue generated from each hunt. The tribe does not currently have an official business plan.

### Community Access & Education:

Tribal members have access to bison meat through occasional tribal sale, purchasing hunting licenses at a reduced rate, and through donations**.**

* Commercial sale: From surplus production herd bison, 30% go to outside markets, 70% return to community, but there is currently no local meat processing facility which raises costs. All bison are harvested on-site.
* Hunts: Tribal members enter the raffle free of charge and winners pay a substantially reduced fee to reserve their hunt. Bison hunts are also donated, on a case-by-case basis, to local schools and cultural programs.
* Donations: Bison meat donations increase public access to traditional foods and contribute to cultural education programs. Approximately 4-7 bison (1600 kg) are donated each year to schools, medicine lodges, and tribal departments for use in educational and cultural events. However, there are currently no policies or guidelines for how these donations are allocated (WWF Pamphlet – Buffalo Meat Production).

The cultural herd at Turtle Mound Buffalo Ranch is accessible to the public, with approximately 3,000 visitors every year.

* Head Start Buffalo Program Curriculum: Developed by the Pté stakeholder group, Head start programs learn the history and cultural significance of bison in the classroom, followed by a springtime visit with cultural herd. During visits, program staff take smaller groups, with a chaperone, into pasture to observe the bison up-close.
* Tribal resolution that each high school (6 schools) participate in one bison harvest, honored for past 7 years. Participating students created a documentary about the harvest and cultural significance, intended to be a means of sharing the experience with other schools or communities that don’t have similar programs.
* Elderly rest homes bring residents to visit the cultural herd, observing that being close to the bison promotes the wellbeing and emotional healing of their clients.
* The tribe is in the process of creating a trail with educational kiosks and story poles around the cultural herd pasture, and building a small ecolodge (20 rooms, with shared kitchen and common area) for use in family educational activities.

### Limitations & Needs:

* An important program goal is to increase community access to bison meat. Currently, approximately 30% of bison culled go to outside processing facilities, with remaining 70% handled locally. Bison managers recognize that processing more meat locally would reduce costs, which in turn may increase access to bison meat, which is presently prohibitively expensive for many (World Wildlife Fund –Buffalo Meat Production).
* Program is unstable due to heavy reliance on a few experienced people, with limited capacity for conducting regular ecological monitoring. The program needs regular training of staff in bison management and animal health to ensure resiliency of program.
* The program seeks to assess the influence of bison on cultural restoration and to increase the community’s accessibility to bison. Results of survey indicate community members desire greater access to interactions with herds and acquisition of bison meat.

## Blackfeet (48° 37' 47.95", -112° 50' 55.58")

### Population:

Blackfeet Nation is home to the Blackfeet tribe. There are approximately 15,560 enrolled tribal members, and about 7,000 living on or near the reservation (Blackfeet Nation, 2021; Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs, 2021a)

### Study Area:

Located innorthwestern Montana and borders Glacier Park and Canada (6,317.5 km2). It is a mixture of grasslands, shrublands, and the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. Approximately 76% of the reservation is unplowed and considered intact (**Table 1**) (World Wildlife Fund, 2018), and about 55% of the agriculture lands are operated by tribal members (**Table 2**). Currently, buffalo occur on 36 km2 of Blackfeet Nation rangelands (**Table 2**), with an additional 3,669 km2 suitable for buffalo reintroduction based on HSI estimates (**Table 2**).

### Background:

Established over the years 1970-1979 when buffalo were reintroduced onto the Blackfeet Reservation from Custer State Park (South Dakota, USA). In 2016, a second herd was established with the addition of 88 calves from Elk Island National Park, Alberta, CA were returned to their original home territory within the Blackfeet Nation. Today, the program manages two herds: 1) Elk Island herd: 75 buffalo rotated through two pastures (4.7 km2); 2) a larger herd of 550 buffalo, rotated through six pastures (32.5 km2). The Buffalo Program and Iinnii Initiative are two programs that co-exist in their efforts to restore buffalo on the Blackfeet reservation. The initiative consists of the coordinator and a managing partner (Wildlife Conservation Society). The Buffalo Program consists of a director, secretary, and three full-time field technicians. Herds are grazed on rotation, moved between pastures with all-terrain vehicles (ATV) or occasionally by horseback. Their management techniques work to maintain the best interest of the buffalo, limiting human interactions with herds where possible Every spring, herds are rounded up to receive their brucellosis vaccine (i.e., BANGS) and assess herd health. In an effort to reduce the treatment of buffalo like cattle, the program refrains from using ear tags. Only in special cases will calves be tagged prior to being auctioned off in the spring and separate bulls from cows. Field technicians also assess timing of rotations and number of animals to cull based on experience. Decisions on which animals to cull consider family dynamics, usually selecting stray bulls, or the very old (non-matriarchs). Since 2020, Blackfeet Community College students have been conducting ecological monitoring (grassland plants, soil health, and biodiversity) in a portion of the buffalo pastures in collaboration with Montana State University, with hopes of expanding the program to all pastures.

### Stakeholder Group:

The Iinnii Initiative was established in 2009 by four tribes that make up the Blackfoot Confederacy (Amskapi Pikunii, Kainai Nation, Piikani Nation, and Siksika Nation). The Iinnii Initiative works in collaboration with the Blackfeet Buffalo Program and aims to connect with youth, engage the community, dissolve boundaries, and promote healing through centralizing buffalo in community life. The initiative works on the confederacy level to centralize buffalo engagement and conversations with its members and community. Activities are coordinated by one core staff person, and supported through partnerships with a variety of regional NGOs and private donors. The Iinnii Initiative’s goal and mission to dissolve boundaries and create space for buffalo has been essential to Blackfeet Nation restoring buffalo within their homeland.

### Economic Development:

The Buffalo program generates enough revenue to cover all operating costs through the annual auction of spring calves. Some additional funding is acquired through selling culled animals to schools or tribal organizations. At present, ecotourism activities occur occasionally depending on the availability of staff, but there is no regular programming in place. The program is in the process of updating their management plan to address new goals and allow for more economic opportunities.

### Community Access & Education:

The Blackfeet tribal members have access to buffalo meat through a range of distribution programs. Approximately 90% of buffalo removed from the herd annually are harvested and go back to the community through donations to immersion schools, elderly homes, tribal ceremonies, or sale to tribal organizations, school, or events. The remaining ~10% is auctioned off as live sales.

* Individuals or organizations fill out an in-person form to receive buffalo meat for elders, both individuals and in elderly homes, diabetic patients, fundraising events, ceremonies, public school activities, other tribal departments (i.e. FAST Blackfeet – focused on education of traditional foods; www.fastblackfeet.org). Under some cases, buffalo meat is given at no charge, in other cases the program, or tribe, will cover a portion of processing expenses on a case-by-case basis. For example, all costs are covered by the tribe for immersion schools requesting bison meat.
* Tribal members can participate in a raffle, organized in partnership with the Blackfeet Fish and Game department, to win a buffalo hunt. Number of hunts included in raffle varies each year, dependent on number of animals needing to be removed from the herd.
* At present, the Buffalo Program only partners with other tribal organizations who specialize in food sovereignty. In 2021, 2,000 meals were provided to the community during “Healing Days”. A total of three buffalo were harvested for that single event. Buffalo harvested for community distribution programs are processed locally through small tribally owned businesses.

The Buffalo Program and Iinnii Initiative work closely with other tribal organizations and community groups to facilitate cultural experiences and educational opportunities centered on restoring their people’s relationship with buffalo. In May 2019, the Buffalo Program hosted their first Iinnii Days celebration, intended to eventually be an annual community event. The 3-day event celebrates the buffalo through ceremony, educational activities, and other cultural experiential learning opportunities. Participants can camp on the grounds of the event close to the buffalo’s winter pastures. The event culminates with the Buffalo Program driving the herd to their summer pastures, which community members are invited to watch and may request to directly participate in subject to the permission of program staff. In addition, schools and community groups visit the buffalo herds throughout the year, subject to availability of program staff.

### Limitations & Needs:

* Iinnii initiative programs could benefit from a larger staff to expand their reach and increase efficiency of coordination with community partners. They are currently dependent on outside funds which presents challenges to supporting a team of long-term staff.
* Program has an interest in conducting ecological monitoring in all buffalo pastures. At present, apart from recent student research at Blackfeet Community College, no regular ecological monitoring is in place due to reliance on outside expertise.
* Ecotourism is a potential revenue stream, but has not been fully explored, and is limited by capacity of staff.
* Harvested buffalo meat is processed by local businesses but there is a need for increased availability of meat within the community, and efficiency of distribution, through the establishment of a larger meat processing plant.
* The need for updated and high functioning equipment is essential to the buffalo programs mobility, communication and overall well-being of the Buffalo Program.

## Rosebud (43° 12' 2.68", -100° 44' 21.61")

### Population:

The Rosebud Indian Reservation is the home of the Sicangu Lakota (Rosebud Sioux), one branch of the Lakota Nation, with approximately 21,245 tribal members living on or near the reservation (Rosebud Indian Reservation).

### Study Area:

The Rosebud reservation, the size of 3,622 km2, is in southern South Dakota and borders the northern extent of the Nebraska Sandhills. It is composed of mixed-grass prairie, pine and red cedar groves, sub-irrigated meadows, and wetlands. Approximately 90.7% of the reservation is unplowed and considered intact (**Table 1**) (World Wildlife Fund, 2018). About 37.8% of the agricultural lands are operated by tribal members and the rest is leased to non-tribal operators (**Table 2**). Currently, 112 km2 of tribal rangelands are allocated to one bison restoration herd at the Wolakota Buffalo Range (**Table 2**). Habitat suitability assessments indicate that there are 4,354 km2 of continuous parcels ecologically suitable for bison (**Table 2**).

### Background:

The Wolakota herd wasestablished in 2020 with transfer of 100 bison from Badlands NP (South Dakota, USA) and Theodore Roosevelt NP (North Dakota, USA). At present, the program manages a single herd of 800 bison, having recently expanded due to donations from private operators and multiple Department of Interior (DOI) herds. Currently, the herd is grazed within a 83.77 km2 pasture which will soon expand to 112 km2 (Wolakota Buffalo Range) following the final installment of a new wildlife friendly (smooth top and bottom wires) perimeter fence in late 2022. The program is currently working with contracted experts (Ranch Advisory Partners) to develop a rotational grazing plan between the existing 35 pastures (ranchadvisory.com). The bison program is overseen by Rosebud Economic Development Corporation (REDCO) (sicangucorp.com), the economic arm of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in collaboration with Rosebud Tribal Land Enterprise, the tribe’s land corporation, which made the original 15-yr rangeland lease available. The project is being advanced by a partnership with WWF and with support from the DOI ([www.rosebudbuffalo.org](http://www.rosebudbuffalo.org)).

The Wolakota Project has received DOI transfers of surplus bison. As a genetically diverse herd, the project hopes to annually transfer a portion of future surplus bison to other Native nations’ restoration efforts. The project conducts annual ecological monitoring (soil health, vegetation, grassland birds) in collaboration with World Wildlife Fund and Ranch Advisory Partners (Ranch Advisory Partners). Main riparian areas are fenced as exclosures from bison, and grazing is allowed to these areas every third year.

### Economic Development:

The program is currently supported by grants and private investors, but has a formal business plan designed to eventually cover all operating costs through the sale of surplus bison. Once the herd reaches carrying capacity (approximately 1,500 bison) an estimated surplus of 300-400 bison will need to be culled annually and could then be sold to external markets with an estimated net profit of $200,000-$300,000 annually. Bison will not be sent to feedlots, instead will be field harvested with appropriate prayer. However, REDCO is still determining how many surplus bison will be retained annually to support their local food sovereignty initiative, as well as how many bison might be transferred to support other Native nation bison restoration efforts.

### Stakeholder Group:

There is currently no community-led stakeholder group. All decisions are made through REDCO and Rosebud Farm Company, an agricultural business subsidiary of REDCO, charged with managing the Wolakota project. REDCO's executive team and board contribute to all decision making for the duration of the project. Regular technical assistance is provided by Ranch Advisory Partners, contracted by WWF.

### Community Access & Education:

REDCO is still in the early stages of determining how many surplus bison will be retained annually to support their local food sovereignty initiative. A pilot program, titled Community Herd Sharing Program, is being developed in collaboration with the Sicangu Community Development Corporation (SCDC) (Sicangu CDC), a sister non-profit focused on restoring community-driven systems centered on Lakota values (sicangucdc.org). The program will allow SCDC to initially harvest two bison per year and use the meat to provide meals for the students at their Lakota immersion school. In addition, community members would have the opportunity to buy a share of bison produced, to either harvest for consumption or relocate to personal plots elsewhere to establish additional small herds. All shareholders would be required to commit to REDCO’s standards for sustainable regenerative management, with a commitment to providing a low-stress handling environment, year-round grazing, and respect and praying with animals during harvest. The project is also in the process of constructing a building to serve as the ranch headquarters, a gathering place for visitors, workshops, and ceremonial harvests (Rosebud Economic Development Corporation). In addition, Wolakota has partnered with Sicangu CDC's Lakota immersion school to host field trips and traditional knowledge sharing opportunities on-site, which included a pilot summer camp in 2021 that focused on holistic wellness

### Limitations & Needs:

Recognizing that the Wolakota herd is newly established, and from numerous sources, it would be beneficial to conduct satellite tracking and genetic analyses to learn more about the herd’s social and reproductive integration dynamics. An analysis of the diet of the Wolakota herd would hold cultural value for the Tribal knowledge keepers at Rosebud, as consumption of bison is also seen as consumption of the medicinal plants bison have consumed. In addition to assessing the health of the rangeland from a Western science perspective, REDCO also seeks to measure the impact that the reintroduction of bison has on the spiritual and medicinal health of the land over time by collaborating with Sicangu spiritual leaders. Finally, building skills and capacity both for the organization and the community remains a priority. There is an urgent need to train additional land managers in regenerative practices and low-stress bison handling. There is also an organizational need to expand staffing to expand community engagement programming, which is currently being handled by the ranch managers.

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