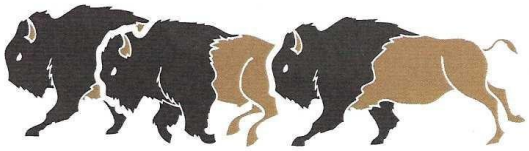

FORT BELKNAP
BUFFALO PROGRAM

Fort Belknap Indian Community Buffalo Program

FIVE-YEAR CONSERVATION PLAN

OCTOBER 1, 2026 – SEPTEMBER 30, 2031

Approved April 6, 2026
Ratified June 1, 2026
Most recent update: June 8, 2026

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Acronyms Used in This Document

ANC	Aaniiih Nakoda College
BIA	Bureau of Indian Affairs
BNGA	Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance
FBIC	Fort Belknap Indian Community
FBBP	Fort Belknap Buffalo Program
FNDI	First Nations Development Institute
ITBC	Intertribal Buffalo Council
ITGN	Intertribal Grasslands Network
NFWF	National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
NZCBI	Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute
RAP	Ranch Advisory Partners
THPO	Tribal Historic Preservation Office
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
WWF	World Wildlife Fund Great Plains Program

Acknowledgements

Fort Belknap Buffalo Program would like to acknowledge the members of the planning team.

We are:

Bronc Speakthunder, *Buffalo Program Manager*

Yvonne Stanley, *Buffalo Program Finance & Management Specialist*

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Tony Morsette, *Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance*

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Resolution No. 122-2026

Fort Belknap Indian Community

A RESOLUTION APPROVING AND AUTHORIZING 5-YEAR BUFFALO CONSERVATION PLAN

WHEREAS, the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council is the duly elected governing body of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community, Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, Montana, established pursuant to the Constitution and By-Laws of the Fort Belknap Tribes approved December 13, 1935; and

WHEREAS, under the Constitution and By-Laws of the Fort Belknap Indian Community, the Community Council is charged with the duty of protecting the health, security, and general welfare of the Fort Belknap Indian Community, and

WHEREAS, the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council (FBICC) is empowered under Article IV, Section 1 of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Constitution to protect and preserve the property, wildlife and natural resources of the reservation populations, to negotiate with federal and state and local governments on behalf of the FBIC to promulgate and enforce ordinances, and subject it to review, and delegate powers to subordinate boards and officers; and,

WHEREAS, the FBICC, through passage of tribal resolution #40-2025, had supported the Fort Belknap Buffalo Management Program in the development of a business plan to include a Buffalo business conservation, management, and financial plans; and,

WHEREAS, the Fort Belknap Buffalo Management Program has successfully completed the Fort Belknap Buffalo Conservation Plan, the FBICC has reviewed and passed motion to approve at committee and ratified action at regular council meeting; and,

WHEREAS, the Fort Belknap Buffalo Management Program seeks a formal tribal resolution to document official approval of the 5-Year Fort Belknap Buffalo Conservation Plan.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, the FBICC hereby approves tribal resolution formally adopting the Fort Belknap Buffalo Management Programs 5-Year Fort Belknap Buffalo Conservation Plan.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that nothing in the lease shall be construed as a waiver of the sovereign immunity of the Fort Belknap Indian Community.

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Council Officers are hereby delegated the authority and responsibility to sign any and all documents necessary to effect this action.

ATTEST:

Randall Werk Sr., President
Fort Belknap Indian Community Council

Audena Wing, Secretary/Treasurer
Fort Belknap Indian Community Council

122-2026

CERTIFICATION

I, the undersigned, as Secretary of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, Montana, do hereby certify that the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council is composed of ten (10) members of whom 10 members constituting a quorum were present at a meeting thereof, duly and regularly called, noticed, convened and held this 1 **day of** June **, 2026**; and that the foregoing Resolution of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council was duly adopted and approved the affirmative vote of 7 for; 2 opposed; 0 not voting; 1 temporary absent; 0 excused absent; and that the said Resolution has not been rescinded in any way.

DATE: 6/2/2026

Audena Wing
Audena Wing, Secretary/Treasurer
Fort Belknap Indian Community Council

Background on Buffalo and the Fort Belknap Indian Community

Brief History of the Land and Its People

The Aaniiih and Nakoda Nation, also known as the Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC), is located in north central Montana. Forty miles south of the Canadian border and twenty miles north of the Missouri River, the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is homeland to the Gros Ventre (Aaniiih) and Assiniboine (Nakoda) Tribes. The Reservation spans parts of Blaine and Phillips Counties and encompasses approximately 629,760 acres (comprised of 406,279 acres in Tribal trust, 192,408 acres' individual allotted trust, 20,150 acres' Tribal fee land, 6,498 acres' individual fee land, and 4,425 acres of state government land. The Tribes also hold mineral and surface rights to approximately 28,395 acres trust and Tribal fee lands in the submarginal lands west of the Reservation.[1] Fort Belknap is the fourth largest reservation in Montana.

The Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes established their respective territories when they signed the Fort Laramie treaties of 1851 and 1855 with the U.S. Government. The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation was created by Congress on May 1, 1888, and it is governed by the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council. The Council consists of a President and Vice President who serve four-year terms, plus eight members (four from each Tribe) who are elected every two years. Tribal government headquarters are located in Fort Belknap Agency at the northwest corner of the Reservation.

The Aaniiih and Nakoda Nation has 8,308 enrolled members, with more than one-half (4,214 enrolled members) living on the Reservation. There are 115 non-enrolled members living on Fort Belknap Indian Reservation[2]. The Reservation has four main communities: Fort Belknap Agency in the north; Hays and Lodge Pole in the southern part of the Reservation; and the Northeast Corner of the reservation (Dodson area). Harlem is a community just a few miles north of the Reservation where many enrolled members live as well.

Cattle ranching and farming are the main industries. The Reservation's rolling prairie hills, mountains, streams, culture, and wildlife, in addition to its proximity to the American Prairie Reserve and Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, make tourism another promising industry. Additionally, the Mission Canyon area offers popular attractions like the Natural

[1] Source: BIA 2016
[2] Fort Belknap Planning Department 2021 census data

Bridge, Wilson Park, Devil's Kitchen, and Needle Eye, and Kid Curry's Hideout. FBIC and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) are major employers.

Geography

Bordered to the north by the Milk River, the Reservation has marked geographic features. The Reservation primarily has prairie grasslands, but it hosts parts of the Little Rocky Mountains in the south and Snake Butte, a sacred site, in the north. As part of the North American Great Plains region, this semi-arid area is characterized by flat to undulating grassland underlain by glacial till and alluvial bottomlands, providing ideal habitat for grassland wildlife. The Reservation is within the Missouri River watershed, and it contains five reservoirs: Old Woman Reservoir, Weigand Reservoir, Government Field Reservoir, Seventeen Mile Reservoir, and Lake Seventeen. Peoples Creek, Little Peoples Creek, Lodgepole Creek, Three Mile Creek and Warm Springs Creek generally flow northward through the Reservation. Elevation on the Reservation ranges from about 2,300 to 5,000 feet.

Agriculture is the predominant land use on the Reservation with more than 60% of the land being used for farming and ranching activities (approximately 388,900 acres). Ranching activities account for 42% of the land and farming accounts for 23%.[3] Most of the grazing land on the Reservation is composed of native grassland and shrubland habitats.

Two large open-pit, cyanide heap leach gold mines were opened in 1979, just south of the Reservation. The Zortman-Landusky mines have since contaminated surface and groundwater resources, destroyed sacred sites, and degraded and eliminated wildlife habitat. Since 1992, the Tribes have worked through the U.S. courts to try to shut down and bring the mines into compliance with environmental and water quality standards.

Wildlife on the Reservation include the endangered black-footed ferret, black-tailed prairie dogs, pronghorn, bear, moose, grassland birds, white-tailed and mule deer, beaver, wild turkey, elk, mountain lion, Northern Leopard frog, and aquatic species like walleye, among many others.

Fort Belknap Buffalo Program

Our program, the Fort Belknap Buffalo Program (FBBP), has been in place since the 1970s, beginning with people who decided to give a place for the buffalo to roam on Fort Belknap.

[3] FBIC Final Agricultural Resource Management Plan and Programmatic Environmental Assessment

In 1974, the Assiniboine Treaty Committee purchased 30 buffalo, some coming from Theodore Roosevelt National Park in western North Dakota and some from the National Bison Range (which is now the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Bison Range, located on the Flathead Reservation). In 2014, Fort Belknap Indian Community signed the Buffalo Treaty, one of the first Tribes to do so. The Buffalo Treaty is a living agreement between Indigenous Nations to restore the buffalo to the land, the people, and our way of life. Since it was first signed in 2014, Indigenous Nations across Canada and the United States have continued to sign on, united in their shared commitment to restore buffalo to the land and renew cultural, spiritual, and ecological relationships.

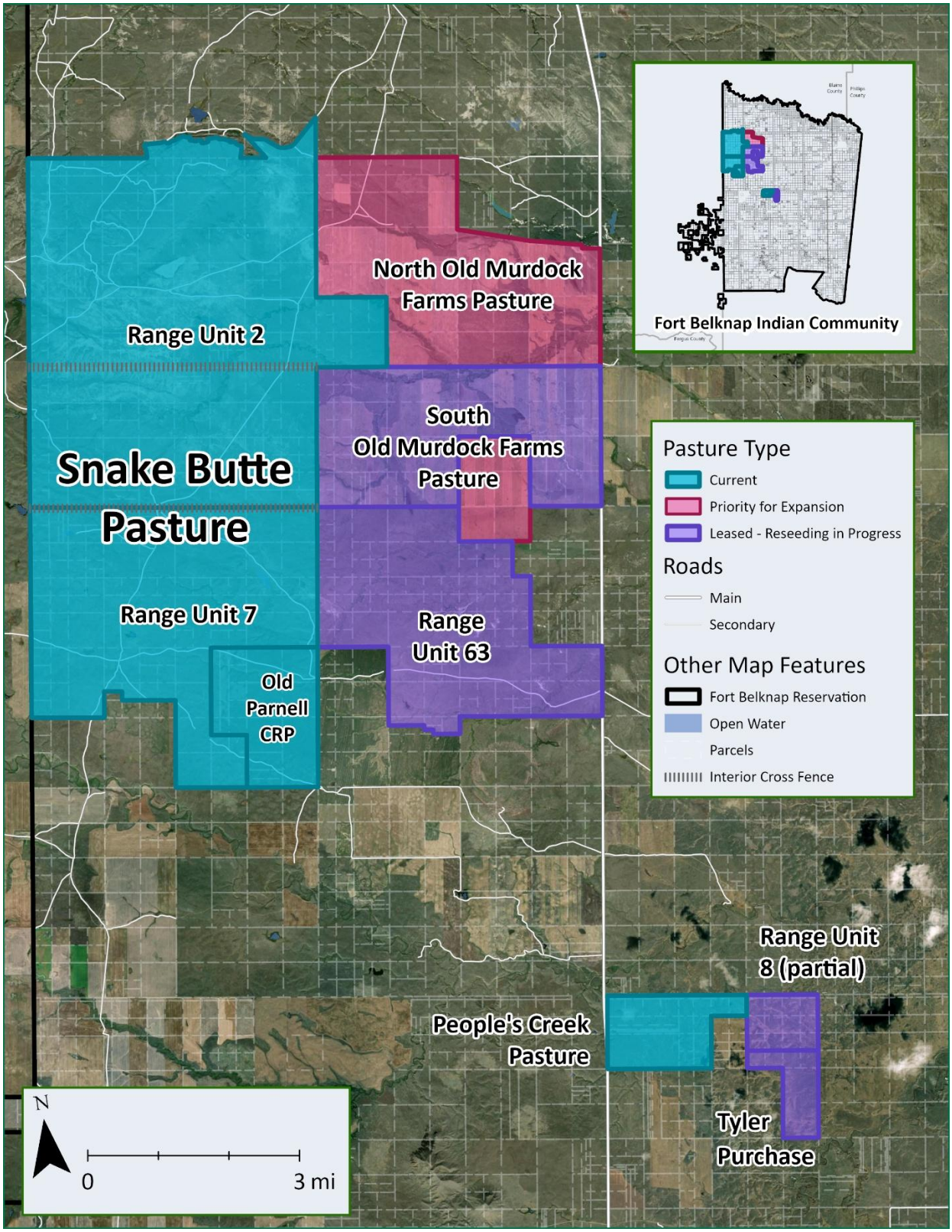
The Tribes currently manage two bison herds over 34,713 acres (see Table 1), with an average buffalo herd size of 700 on Snake Butte Pasture (the Snake Butte Herd) and 162 animals of genetically pure Yellowstone bison on Peoples Creek Pasture (the Yellowstone Herd) (see Figure 1). The Snake Butte Herd is managed for conservation and to provide income for FBBP's economic sustainability. The Yellowstone Herd is managed with an emphasis on providing education, research, and community engagement, as well as to interject genetic diversity into the Snake Butte Herd. Cultural practices are encouraged in both herds.

As illustrated in Figure 1, FBBP has leased lands east of the Snake Butte and Peoples Creek Pastures where World Wildlife Fund Great Plains Program (WWF) is reseeding cropland areas to restore grasslands where FBBP intends to introduce buffalo in the future. FBBP has also identified "priority" lands adjacent to Snake Butte Pasture, South Old Murdock Farms Pasture, and/or Peoples Creek Pasture that are priorities for future expansion (See Table 1, Figure 1, and Goal 2.2).

Table 1: FBBP Pastureland Acres by Current Pastureland, Leased Pastureland, Priority Pastureland, and Fencing Status

Name	Category	Buffalo Fencing Status	US Survey Acres
North Old Murdock Farms	Priority	Unfenced	5,497.48
South Old Murdock Farms - 5 parcel	Priority	Unfenced	960.05
South Old Murdock Farms - Other	Leased	In progress	4,461.64
Range Unit 63	Leased	In progress	5,465.11
Range Unit 8	Leased	In progress	509.89
Tyler Purchase	Leased	In progress	479.04
Peoples Creek	Current	Fenced	1,073.50
Range Unit 2	Current	Fenced	13,890.02
Range Unit 7	Current	Fenced	7,155.71
Old Parnell	Current	Fenced	1,677.84
		Priority Future Pasturelands	6,457.53
		Current and Leased Pasturelands	34,712.75
		TOTAL CURRENT, LEASED, AND PRIORITY PASTURELANDS	**41,170.28**

Figure 1: Map of FBBP's Current Pasturelands, Priority Lands for Expansion, and Reseeding Areas (map created by Tony Morsette, BNGA)



Buffalo, FBBP, Food Sovereignty, and Food Security

Buffalo, food sovereignty, and food security are connected, and FBBP serves as an important source of healthy food in the community. It is estimated that over 90% of the clientele of the food bank in Blaine County are Tribal members, and 98% of people who go to the Harlem food bank are Tribal members. With high levels of food insecurity on the reservation, buffalo meat can offer an important food source.

The 1996 Food and Agriculture Organization World Food Summit defined *food security* as existing when "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life". *Food sovereignty* implies the "rights of people to define how they will hunt, grow, gather, sell, [trade], and give away food with respect to their own cultures and own systems of management of natural resources".[4] Food sovereignty calls for control over the way food is celebrated, consumed, and managed.[5]

The greatest threats to food security across the United States are the high costs of healthy, nutrient-dense foods and limited availability and selection of foods.[6] Factors linked to food insecurity include lack of transportation, health challenges, discrimination, and low income.[7]

In Tribal communities, access to native foods, like buffalo meat, can increase food security.[8] Native foods can also serve as emergency food sources for Tribes, most recently seen as some Tribes harvested buffalo to feed their communities when the 2025 federal government shutdown interrupted food assistance across the nation, including Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, Crow Tribe, and Blackfeet Nation.[9]

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[4] Gurney, R.M., Caniglia, B.S., Mix, T.L., & Baum, K.A. (2015). Native American Food Security and Traditional Foods: A Review of the Literature. *Sociology Compass*, 9, 681-693.
[5] Bye, B. A. L. A. (2009). *Native food systems organizations strengthening sovereignty and (re)building community* (Publication No. 1473189) [Master's thesis, Iowa State University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
[6] Brown, Blakely & PhD, Curtis & PhD, Mark. (2007). Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Health-Associated Outcomes and Food Characteristics of Northern Plains Indian Households. Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition. 1. 37-53. 10.1300/J477v01n04_04.
[7] Feeding America. (n.d.) *Hunger and Food Insecurity*. Retrieved December 19, 2025, from https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america
[8] Sowerwine, J., Mucioki, M., Sarna-Wojcicki, D., & Hillman, L. (2019). Reframing food security by and for Native American communities: A case study among Tribes in the Klamath River Basin of Oregon and California.
[9] Matthew Brown and Graham Lee Brewer, T. A. P. and A. S. (2025, November 12). *Tribes that restored Buffalo are killing some to feed people because of the shutdown*. Montana Free Press. https://montanafreepress.org/2025/11/12/montana-tribes-using-bison-to-feed-people-during-shutdown/

Every year, FBBP distributes around 20 buffalo (with an average of 400 pounds of processed meat per buffalo) to the Tribe, distributed by the Commodity Center to seniors, plus distribution to powwow committees, Sundance, and other cultural events. Between January and July 2025 alone, the buffalo program supplied Day Eagle Hope Project with over 30,000 pounds of ground buffalo. Over the same period, FBBP sold ten buffalo to other Tribal nations' food programs, particularly Rocky Boy's Buffalo Child Ranch and Fast Blackfeet Food Bank.

Major FBBP achievements to date

FBBP has achieved many important social and environmental outcomes, including:

- Provided 244,000 meals of buffalo meat to the Fort Belknap Indian Community in 2025
- Hosted the First Annual "Buffalo Day" in August 2025, in collaboration with Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC), with 450 people participating and 80 participants on the tour of the buffalo herd
- Every year, since at least 2014, have provided buffalo meat for ceremonies and funerals
- Since 2014, provided hunting opportunities for at least 20 - 50 Tribal members each year
- Since 2023, field-based educational opportunities provided for 20 students through partnership with ANC
- Since 2023, field-based educational opportunities provided for interns through partnership with ANC
- Since 2005, collaborated with the Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department to provide 3,000 acres of habitat for endangered black-footed ferret
- Since the early 2000's, have met some of the demand for buffalo in the region by selling buffalo to Tribes like Fort Peck, Chippewa Cree, and Blackfeet
- Since 2022, partnered with three Tribal buffalo programs in the region to enhance buffalo management best practices, research, and education across Native Nations

Recent grant awards, including those listed below, have provided the opportunity for us to grow as a program:

- First Nations Development Institute – Stewarding Native Lands Program
- First Nations Development Institute – Buffalo Restoration on Tribal Lands
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation – America the Beautiful Challenge
- InterTribal Buffalo Council – Herd Development Grant

Partnership with ANC

Our partnership with Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC) has enhanced our ability to serve the FBIC. In December 2021, ANC received funding from the National Science Foundation for the Tribal Enterprise Advancement Center project. The project has established the ʔíítaanɔ́ńʔí/Tatag'a (Buffalo) Research and Education Center. The Buffalo Center conducts ecological research on the Fort Belknap buffalo herd and its associated grassland habitat and species, and it offers education programs to prepare future caretakers of tribal wildlife and associated natural resources and to increase community knowledge of, and support for, sustainable management of Fort Belknap's buffalo herds and buffalo habitat. As a result, FBBP has and will continue to receive wide-ranging support from planning guidance, survey design guidance, research design, testing, herd health, and advice and mentorship.

Following suit with the Fort Belknap Indian Community, ANC signed the Buffalo Treaty in 2023 to further their commitment to bison restoration.

Survey of Our Community

On August 13, 2025, FBBP surveyed 450 participants who attended our inaugural Buffalo Days event. One hundred people completed the five-question survey. The following are key results from the survey:

- 100% of survey respondents indicated they would be interested in receiving buffalo meat.
- When inquiring about their preferred cuts of meat, 30% of respondents expressed a strong preference for buffalo burgers, while another 30% favored organ meat, emphasizing the diverse culinary possibilities that buffalo can offer. Meanwhile, 20% of respondents chose roast, and the remaining 20% opted for short ribs, illustrating varying tastes and preparation methods.
- Over 60% of survey respondents indicated they lacked familiarity with proper techniques for preparing buffalo meat. This highlights a significant gap in knowledge within the community regarding traditional culinary practices.
- Only 10% of respondents indicated that they had ever taken part in a traditional buffalo harvest, with the majority of the people who indicated they had taken part being 50 years or older. This statistic points to a potential generational divide in both knowledge and experience concerning buffalo hunting and its utilization as a food source within the community. It raises concerns about the transmission of traditional practices to younger generations and the ongoing relationship with this culturally significant animal.

- 60% of respondents indicated they would like to learn more about the nutritional benefits and preparation methods for buffalo. This indicates a promising opportunity for educational outreach initiatives aimed at increasing awareness of traditional culinary practices and enhancing the community's overall familiarity with buffalo as a nutritious food source.

Interested Parties

Interested parties are individuals, groups, organizations, Tribes, agencies, and other entities that will impact and/or be impacted by a plan or program. Interested parties can often speed up, slow down, or even block planned work. For the purpose of this plan, the term "interested parties" includes both rights-holders and duty-bearers, as well as people and entities with other types of relationships with the FBBP.

FBBP recognizes it is key to continue partnerships because they bring funding and capacity to the Buffalo Program. FBBP wants to strengthen and maintain those partnerships to do shared work and toward visions.

FBBP coordinates efforts (or would like to do so during the next five years) with the following entities, among others:

People in Fort Belknap Indian Community

Elders – They are our knowledge keepers. They pass down what they have learned from their parents and grandparents. They hold our stories and songs.

Tribal member ranchers, producers, and farmers – We need to maintain healthy working relationships with Tribal member ranchers, producers, and farmers, as they are our neighbors and some operate on land adjacent to the buffalo pastures.

Youth – It's important that youth are able to learn about the role of buffalo so they understand why they are here, how they can benefit from buffalo, and care for them in the future.

Community members – Community member support is vital for the buffalo program. We also want to try to meet some of their needs with buffalo meat. We want to serve them, through outreach around updates about the buffalo program, buffalo meat benefits, and cooking.

Fort Belknap Tribal Entities

Tribal Council – Tribal Council oversees FBBP, and we report to them every month. We have to go through Tribal Council to make any major, and even minor, decisions. The Chairman of the Public Safety Committee provides direct oversight of the Buffalo Manager. The Chairman of the Land Committee has a lot of input on FBBP because they influence the ability of the program to expand.

Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife – They are a key partner, as they manage wildlife within the buffalo pastures. They are key partners in black-footed ferret and swift fox reintroductions as well as with some buffalo management activities. They have set up a natural resources online licensing system that provides customized reports on revenue. The FBBP could explore adding a buffalo hunting module onto their system. FBBP could request support from the Ft Belknap Fish and Wildlife Biologist for population and habitat monitoring and disease monitoring. The department could also assist the Buffalo Manager with identifying animals that coexist with buffalo, as well as the landscape and pasture condition, and provide a report on the habitat assessment.

Fort Belknap Land Department – The Land Department oversees our leases. We cannot expand our pastures without working with them and the BIA, and we need their advice and expertise.

Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) – If we come across any old sites, tipi rings, or anything culturally or historically sensitive, we are required to contact THPO. With any expansion or research project outside of an area they have not already assessed, they have to be informed so we are not disrupting any cultural sites or being disrespectful. For example, any soil disruption, like from fencing projects or water development, requires communication with THPO and their approval.

Commodities Program – The Commodities Program distributes buffalo meat obtained from the federal government. It could be possible for FBBP to distribute meat through the Commodities Program in the future.

Non-Tribal Entities in Fort Belknap Indian Community

Aaniiih Nakoda Tours – They periodically offer tours on the Yellowstone and Snake Butte pastures. They are working with the Nakoda-Aaniiih Development Corporation to develop tours to Mission Canyon and the Yellowstone pasture. They are also

collaborating with American Prairie on Antelope Creek Campground, where they are conducting a field school there with prairie ecology, bringing in traditional lifeways of the Aaniiih and Nakoda people. Junior Horse Capture, Aaniiih Nakoda Tours will reach out to the Buffalo Program when needed for tours of the Yellowstone Pasture. They are working to do more youth engagement. They are open to working with FBBP on how they might work together, including on a cultural hunt.

Senior Centers – We have four senior centers on Fort Belknap, one in each community. We have provided buffalo meat to them at various times throughout the years.

Pow wow committees – We have provided meat to the three powwow committees in the past, located in Hays, Lodgepole, and Fort Belknap. They request meat every year.

Schools – School groups have asked to participate in bison harvests at times. All the schools on the reservation have collaborated and had an event during Native American week when they participated in the buffalo harvest. FBBP was asked to provide meat to some schools in the future, especially through grant programs like Farm to Table. There is a school in Lodgepole that has freezer space and walk-in coolers that are not being used, meaning it could possibly be used for storing buffalo meat in the event of a bulk harvest.

Non-Tribal Ranchers, Producers, and Farmers – We need to maintain healthy working relationships with Tribal member ranchers, producers, and farmers, as they are our neighbors and some operate on land adjacent to the buffalo pastures.

Organizations promoting food sovereignty in Fort Belknap Indian Community

Commodities Program – See the Tribal Entities section for a description.

Tiwahe – They have different cultural classes for the community, including teaching people how to make dry meat, providing native cooking classes, etc. FBBP has provided buffalo meat to them, in the past, and we may provide buffalo for them in the future, since they do a lot of cultural projects.

Day Eagle Hope Project – FBBP and Fort Belknap Indian Community collaborated with Day Eagle Hope Project to distribute buffalo meat.

Montana State University Extension Office – They contribute to food sovereignty by helping agriculture producers and supporting the community by providing guidance in gardening, food classes, and providing an opportunity for education in homesteading. They teach people how to can buffalo meat and offer recipes and other education on eating healthier foods, including how to incorporate buffalo meat into diets.

Food banks – During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Buffalo Program provided meat to the four communities on the reservation. If the Tribe established food banks in the four communities, the buffalo program would be a big part of that.

Island Mountain's Nakoda Aaniiih Economic Development Corporation – They support food sovereignty through education and gardening. They do a lot of meat distribution in Hays and Lodgepole, usually with buffalo meat from American Prairie. They are Tribally funded.

State and Federal Entities

State of Montana – The State of Montana has many requirements for moving bison from the reservation, and FBBP is impacted by bison bills and testing requirements. Also, the State of Montana is in the process of trying to define whether bison are wild or domestic, which would impact the types of funding FBBP could pursue.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) – As we go forward in the re-classification of buffalo and how they are managed on and off the reservation, it is important USFWS are informed of any changes that could impact their agency. It is important to stay aware of federal wildlife policies and regulations and how they might impact FBBP. They could be a potential partner for science, communications, and marketing, in alignment with our goals and objectives.

Regional Tribal Entities

Tribal buffalo programs – We all participate in the Intertribal Grasslands Network (see more about this network below). We are partnering with Blackfeet, Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of Fort Peck, and the Chippewa Cree of the Rocky Boy Buffalo Project on the American the Beautiful Challenge federal grant, administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. We share information about the grant and management approaches, providing learning opportunities.

Non-Governmental Entities

Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC) ʔíítaanɔ́ńʔí /Tatag'a (Buffalo) Research and Education Center – As described previously, FBBP has and will continue to receive wide-ranging support from planning guidance, survey design guidance, research design, testing, herd health, and advice and mentorship.

ANC Nic?-Mni (Water) Center – They test wells and creek water providing vital information and giving guidance on mineral health, informing herd health.

Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (BNGA) – BNGA provides technical and financial resources to Tribal natural resources programs, including buffalo program. For example, BNGA funded the development of this plan.

First Nations Development Institute (FNDI) – They are a bison restoration funding partner, particularly for equipment, salary, and infrastructure. We have recently received a grant through FNDI, and we are applying for another one.

Intertribal Grasslands Network (ITGN) – ITGN is a consortium of Tribal Buffalo programs and Tribal College STEM Departments working to gain knowledge and foster educational opportunities that inform the sustainable management of buffalo and grasslands. With funds from NFWF ATBC grant, the Network has established a shared ecological monitoring program, in common across all sites, with annual field surveys assessing rangeland health and biodiversity of flora and fauna." ITGN's work is funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's America the Beautiful Challenge Award.

Defenders of Wildlife – Buffalo Managers have worked with Defenders of Wildlife for the last 20 years of the FBBP. They have been a vital asset for securing funding wildlife-friendly fencing and for lands now dedicated to the Buffalo Program. Defenders also supports prairie dog conservation and ferret recovery efforts of the FBIC, as well as the tribes' swift fox recovery program. Their staff knows the program ins and outs and can assist with grants and offer other types of support.

InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) – We are members of ITBC. ITBC has been awarded some grants that they are hoping to use to support member Tribes, regarding protocol for buffalo health. They also support Tribes with herd management grants. We recently received a herd development grant from ITBC, for

a watering tank and water, as well as new water well development and electricity for the new well. ITBC provides support from their biologist and other staff members, and they offer trainings (e.g., necropsy trainings).

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) – We get grants from NFWF, and we are partners with them on a variety of things. It's important to inform them and keep them engaged in the projects they are funding, like the grassland reseeding happening now on the reservation. For example, they are allowed to come and take samples for testing throughout the timeframe of their grant to us.

Ranch Advisory Partners (RAP) – RAP has completed assessments of our pasture, including calculating buffalo carrying capacity, helping us identify problems, and suggesting management actions.

Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute (NZCBI) – We work very closely with NZCBI on the America the Beautiful Challenge Grant that funds the Inter-Tribal Grassland Network's long-term ecological monitoring program at Fort Belknap and neighboring Tribes. We make reimbursements to our grant recipients (Defenders of Wildlife, Blackfeet Tribe, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, and Chippewa Cree Tribe). The Smithsonian has ongoing research that is vital to our management plan because we are using the project data to make decisions on different grasslands projects.

World Wildlife Fund Great Plains Program (WWF) – We work closely with their Bison, Ferret, and Science Programs. WWF's Bison Program has been supporting the FBBP for many years, including through funding buffalo activities and co-building our network of partners. WWF's Science Program has been conducting a ferret recovery study in Snake Butte.

Purpose of this Conservation Plan

The purpose of this plan is to summarize what FBBP intends to achieve, why, where, how, and by when. It does so by describing the:

- Vision and purpose for FBBP, and geographic scope of FBBP's activities
- Key species, habitats, and human well-being targets, and main factors affecting them
- Main strategies, and time-specific goals, activities, and indicators over a five-year period

Ultimately, this conservation plan aims to help:

- Clarify FBBP's intended medium and long-term impacts
- Link each of FBBP's activities to a goal
- Focus effort and resources of FBBP and our partners
- Inform financing needs
- Enable shared understanding among FBBP's staff, board, and constituents
- Help FBBP communicate with partners
- Increase transparency and accountability for FBBP

Relationship to Other Planning Documents and Processes

This conservation plan includes all main activities that FBBP plans to undertake over a period of five years. **A financial plan will be developed** that will estimate the total costs, existing funding, and resulting financial gap associated with the goals and activities in this plan. The FBBP may develop more detailed management plans for planning areas as needed, and those should be consistent with information in this plan (either by conforming to information in the conservation plan, or updating this plan as needed).

Documents informing this plan

The existing documents listed below provide the basis for many of the decisions and activities in this conservation plan, and most are located on the Tribe's website:

- Buffalo Program Protocols (2025)
- Fort Belknap Indian Community Fish and Wildlife Department Five-year Conservation Plan (2021)
- Land Management Plan of Operations of the Fort Belknap Indian Community (1999)
- 2005 - 2008 Grazing Ordinance
- Buffalo Herd Management Plan (2026)
- Fort Belknap Indian Community Agricultural Resource Management Plan (2018)

Future planning efforts

In the next five years, FBBP will complete:

- FBBP protocols listed under goals in this plan, as well as:
    - Buffalo Program truck and equipment protocol and policy
    - Firearms policy
    - Side-by-side and ATV policy
    - Herd policy and protocol
    - Harvest policy
    - Cultural sensitivity policy for all employees and volunteers

    - Safety plan and policy for employees and volunteers
    - Hunting policy and release
    - Additional protocols listed under goals in this plan
- Prairie Dog Management Plan
    - Fort Belknap Fish & Wildlife will take the lead on developing a prairie dog management plan with WWF, in the Snake Butte and Yellowstone pastures. They will consult with FBBP as they develop that plan. Seeking to have the plan ready in the Spring 2027.

Approach Used in this Document

The planning approach used to create this document is based on the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation [10], a set of open-source best practices for planning conservation initiatives. These standards were created in 2004 by several conservation organizations, most recently updated in 2025, and they have been used by hundreds of conservation projects and programs around the world. This Conservation Plan was developed by FBBP, with support from BNGA and WWF. Specific interested parties were consulted during the planning process, as the planning team spoke with elders, community leaders, previous Fort Belknap buffalo managers, and partners outside of FBIC.

Vision, Purpose, and Scope

Vision

The Fort Belknap Indian Community and its Buffalo program aim to ensure the sustainability of our buffalo initiative while fostering a deep connection among our community members, elders, and children to our traditions and our commitment to caring for the buffalo, which have cared for us. As Aaniiih and Nakoda people, we are dedicated to preserving the longevity and cultural well-being of our buffalo, grasslands, and ecosystems for future generations.

Purpose

We strengthen our cultural connection with the buffalo and showcase our efforts in conservation, restoration, and herd health. The foundation of the Fort Belknap Buffalo Program is centered on restoring healthy buffalo populations and revitalizing grasslands. We aim to rebuild our relationship with the land while promoting economic

[10] For additional information on the Open Standards, see https://www.conservationstandards.org/

growth, food sovereignty, educational opportunities, and cultural well-being for the Fort Belknap Indian Community, ensuring a bright future for our generations to come.

Geographic Scope

FBBP manages buffalo on Tribal trust lands within the Fort Belknap Reservation. The following tables contain breakouts of land types on the Reservation.

Land Types on the Reservation, and Approximate Acreage

The Fort Belknap Indian Community is in the region of the Northern Great Plains, with a landscape of prairies intermixed with farms and ranches.
Grasses of Fort Belknap are characterized as a mixed grass prairie ecosystem, featuring native short and tall grasses that once supported large buffalo herds and over the years have also been influenced by European varieties. The ecosystem features a diverse mix of grasses, including Western wheatgrass, green needlegrass, blue grama, buffalograss, side-oats grama, and needle-and-thread. The combination of grasses, sagebrush, and other native plants supports a diverse array of wildlife, including buffalo, a variety of grassland birds, antelope, badgers, prairie dogs, and snakes.

Most trust land within the Reservation remains in prairie grassland and shrubland and mountain land, while much of the fee simple land and prime farmland has been converted to agricultural cropland. A major challenge for natural resources management is that land ownership is fractionated in many places, meaning lands are often owned by multiple parties within a small area. Fractionated land tenure stems from federal policies during the early twentieth century Allotment Era (the Dawes Act) that opened up reservations to private land ownership. FBIC has since worked to consolidate and expand Tribally owned lands within the Reservation. The 2009 Cobell v. Salazar Settlement over federal mismanagement of Tribal resources directed money to the Tribes to purchase fractional land ownership. By June 2019, the Tribes purchased over 200,000 equivalent acres, consolidating more than 25,000 fractional interests from thousands of individuals.[11]

[11] U.S. Department of the Interior. (n.d.) *Buy-Back Program Partners with Fort Belknap Indian Community and Sends Offers to Landowners with Fractional Interests at Reservation*. Retrieved December 19, 2025 from https://www.doi.gov/buybackprogram/buy-back-program-partners-fort-belknap-indian-community-and-sends-offers-landowners

Table 2: Lands within the exterior boundary of Fort Belknap Reservation[12]

#	Land Type	Description	Approximate Size (acres)	% of Reservation
TRUST LANDS			**598,687**	**95%**
1	Tribal trust land	Owned by the Tribe and held in trust by the federal government (BIA)	406,279	64.5%
2	Allotted trust land	Owned by Tribal member individual(s) and held in trust by the federal government (BIA)	192,408	30.5%
FEE SIMPLE LANDS			**31,076**	**4.9%**
3	Tribal fee simple land	Private fee simple land owned by the Tribe in process of transferring to trust status	20,150	3.2%
4	Individual Indian-owned fee simple land	Private fee simple land owned by Tribal member individual(s)	6,498	1.0%
5	Individual non-Indian-owned fee simple land	Private fee simple land owned by non-Indian individual(s)	-	<1%
6	Government	State and DOI lands	4,425	0.7%
		TOTAL	**629,760**	**99.9%**

[12] Any current depiction of allotted and Tribal lands are likely inaccurate due to land buyback efforts over the past ten years. We have requested Tribal ownership data from the BIA. However, because of the recent government shutdown and subsequent layoffs, this process has been slow. One possible way to expedite the process is to submit a Freedom of Information Access request to the BIA. Once the request is granted, it would allow updated maps to be created and the remaining tables in the plan to be completed.

Table 3: Tribal Land Types off the Reservation, and Approximate Acreage

#	Land Type	Description	Approximate Size (acres)	% of Tribal Land off Reservation
1	Tribal trust lands	Owned by the Tribe and held in trust by the federal government (BIA)	21,395	75%
2	Tribal fee simple land[13]	Private fee simple land owned by the Tribe in process of transferring to trust status	7,000*	25%
		TOTAL	**28,395**	**100%**

Time Period for this Conservation Plan

Fort Belknap Indian Community and the FBBP operate on a fiscal year that runs from October 1st to September 30th. This five-year Conservation Plan is based on Fort Belknap Indian Community's fiscal year, for the period from October 1, 2026 – September 30, 2031.

Successful achievement of all goals in this plan will depend on the availability of sufficient sources of funding to implement all activities.

Situation Analysis

This section summarizes our priority planning areas, the priority species, habitat, and human well-being targets that FBBP seeks to protect and provide for Tribal members and others who reside in, live near to, or visit the Reservation. It also describes direct threats and contributing factors expected to significantly affect the planning areas over the next five years. (For information on FBBP's activities and intended impacts, see the *Strategies, Goals, and Activities* section.)

Priority species and habitat types for the purpose of this plan are species and habitat types that we would like to impact through buffalo management and restoration.

Human well-being targets are impacts on people and communities we have selected to focus on through our buffalo management and restoration efforts.

[13] Tribal fee simple land acres have been calculated from a Blaine County ownership map.

Table 4 provides a brief description of the key species, habitat types, and well-being targets we identified and on which we will focus the majority of our efforts. Focusing on priorities will ensure we can deliver on our goals, in service to FBIC.

Figure 2: Map of Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and Off-Reservation Tribal Lands (map created by Dana Nelson, Clemson University)

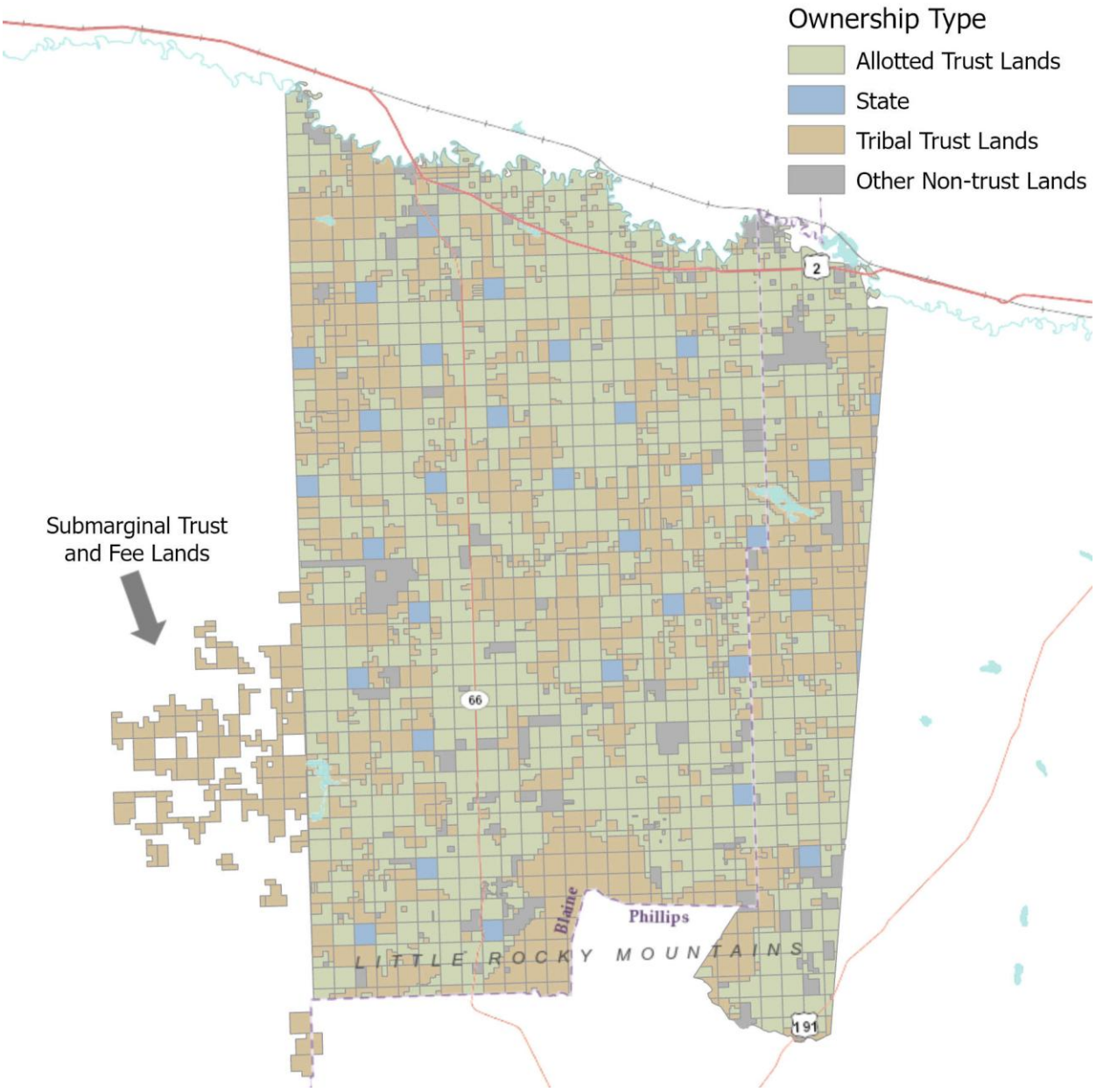

Table 4: Priority Planning Areas and Reasons for Selection

Priority planning area	Reason for selection related to social, economic, and cultural well-being of the Aaniiih and Nakoda people	Reasons for selection related to restoring or sustaining wildlife and biodiverse habitats
Buffalo	Traditionally, it is our duty to take care of buffalo because they have taken care of us for centuries. Buffalo are a way to reconnect with our culture. They tie us back to our roots and what we have endured to get to this point. Buffalo were almost eradicated. For us to have buffalo on our reservation, even on a smaller scale, it fits hand-in-hand with the people and our buffalo as being one. We support cultural events like sun dances and pow wows and cultural events. Individuals can request buffalo meat for cultural events because it is a traditional food. We provide meat for the elders and the community. Providing healthy meat is a non-revenue herd management aspect – costs money for the labor – but the benefits for the well-being for the community is great because we are providing healthy meat to a Native population that has health disparities. It is important that both our Gros Ventre and Assiniboine young people are able to interact with the harvesting and care of the buffalo. We need to	Buffalo restoration plays a role in defining nature itself, as other animals come to the pasture because of the buffalo. It's one big circle, which means other animals are there: birds, insects, etc. It's key to maintaining the local ecosystem. By restoring buffalo, the Tribe supports natural processes that have historically maintained grassland ecosystems over long time scales. These interconnected relationships, between buffalo, plants, soil, and other wildlife, help maintain ecosystem function, resilience, and biodiversity. In this way, caring for buffalo also supports the broader web of life that depends on healthy prairie systems.

	provide info to young people so the stories and song of the buffalo in both Nations can continue. Buffalo are critical for self-determination – Indian people making decisions about wildlife management without having to get permission from the state or federal government. The FBIC is wide open for Tribal decision-making and control because of the traditional and special importance of us collaborating on managing wildlife and buffalo.	
Grasslands	Restoring grasslands enhances Tribal land and trust land, allowing it to go back into production, bringing income to Tribes and individuals (e.g., former wheat cropped land).	Maintaining native grasses that are already in place helps ensure the grasslands stay intact. It also allows for the reintroduction of key species. Showing Tribal Council and the community that restoring abandoned croplands into productive grasslands that are sustaining traditional and medicinal plants, and inviting pollinators and other insects to thrive, and supporting our food system, may encourage them to restore more abandoned lands to native grasses. By making the shift away from the idea that grasslands have to be farmland, land can be put back into grass, which protects topsoil in high winds and restores the soil.

Food sovereignty	Buffalo is a traditional food. The whole purpose of the buffalo is to support our people and give our community an opportunity to have healthy food that is traditional and also homegrown, so they are able to support themselves by supporting the buffalo. Buffalo are here for us to be able to support the food programs. Buffalo is a healthier meat option than beef, pork, or poultry. Our Native population has a high rate of diabetes and dialysis risk because our historical diets were designed to keep us healthy and strong and when we were assimilated and forced to live off commodities, the new diets negatively impacted us. Having buffalo in a community, considering those risks, is a blessing. We have harvested several buffalo for our food pantries. Buffalo meat helps meet the needs of people who need a supplement, who otherwise may not get healthy meat. Buffalo allow us to be able to provide a product back to the community at a lesser cost or for free, as a healthier option than the cheaper, processed foods many people have now.	Healthy, biodiverse grasslands support food sovereignty by sustaining the ecological conditions needed for buffalo and other food sources to thrive. When grasslands are degraded, declines in plant diversity, soil health, and forage quality can affect buffalo and reduce the reliability of other foods that depend on prairie ecosystems.
Culture	Having buffalo helps heal some of the trauma that our grandparents are still facing. It's a spiritual connection. By eating a piece of buffalo meat, I	Culture goes hand-in-hand with the buffalo and all the animals the buffalo draw, like insects, etc. We want to reap the benefits of what it used to be. The

	know it's how my ancestors survived. It's important to reintroduce buffalo back into the community because a whole generation of our elders were not around buffalo, or given buffalo. The culture is the base of all we are trying to do. The meaning for each Tribal department comes from the culture. Everything we do, we have to make sure we are not infringing on any cultural sites and that we are going the way we should traditionally. Trying to let buffalo be as "normal" as they can be in this environment. We represent both nations through the culture. It needs to be Fort Belknap-focused, but allowing some partners to assist. Culture is the key. Native Americans and buffalo go hand-in-hand.	buffalo and all the animals are keystone species and the animals being introduced into the pasture represent different ceremonies for both Tribes. The buffalo are protecting them, and they are protecting the buffalo. It's a big circle.
Education	We want to educate our youth on caring for the grasslands. We want to explain to the community why we manage the way we do, so people understand things like soil health, native grasses vs. introduced grasses, and how the latter create challenges on the landscape. We want to be able to tell people why grasslands transect and studies are important. Community members still question why we are doing different research projects that may not seem traditional. We want to explain that we are following	We aim to educate our community members and Tribal Council on how we are taking care of grasslands, buffalo, and wildlife within our Ft Belknap area. Providing education to the public allows us to keep them informed and allowed for suggestions and comments towards program operations.

	the buffalo and picking out their medicinal plants. We want to explain why keeping soil and grass healthy is needed to sustain the buffalo that then keep us healthy. It goes back to the medicinal plants. People need to know we are taking care of the buffalo and land for longevity. We need to keep the base of the education focused on traditional ecological knowledge of both the Aaniiih and Nakoda people, since that is the base of all our management and education, while also merging some aspects of Western science. Cattle producers could use information about soil and grassland health. Everything we are doing for buffalo can help cattle producers. Educating the community on what we are doing helps them learn about their homelands and helps them learn more about their management. There is a lot of information coming from different places.	
Black-footed ferret and swift fox	There is a kit fox society, and there is a weasel story. We are proud of the reintroductions of black-footed ferret and swift fox. The community feels pride in having the animals on their homeland and proud that their people have been able to support the program. It brings the community together.	We want to make sure that there is a healthy population of ferrets and swift fox to maintain diversity of wildlife in the pasture, so that the things that were missing can still be there. If you take one animal out of the equation, it affects other animals. It also affects people, since they are traditional animals.

		Reintroducing other animals to the pasture that make up the flagship species in our areas: black-footed ferret and swift fox. And its key to maintain them, as they all work together as key species which maintains grassland ecology, maintains buffalo, and helps insects to pollinate. It is important to maintain those species alongside bison because it is important for the longevity of the bison.

Direct Threats and Contributing Factors, by Planning Area

The main direct threats and contributing factors (i.e., indirect threats, root/underlying causes, or relevant opportunities) expected to significantly affect our planning areas over the next five years are described below. Direct threats and contributing factors are broken out according to the planning area to which they most relate. Following them are descriptions of the general contributing factors that affect more than one planning area.

Buffalo

Ongoing overpopulation of buffalo has been a threat to buffalo health in recent years, with not enough pastureland, grass, or water. During the COVID era, the reservation was closed to outside people, so FBBP could not make typical management decisions to manage at a steady state herd. Additionally, in 2018, a key FBBP staff member received life-threatening injuries that impacted their mobility and overall health for months, preventing them from managing the herd at their previous level of strength. With few staff resources overall, FBBP's capacity to manage their herds was severely curtailed. Finally, a state-imposed protocol required FBBP to follow protocols around brucellosis that made it difficult for FBBP to send buffalo where they needed for managing herd size, even though all buffalo tested negative for brucellosis.

Cattle, sheep, and wildlife can spread diseases to buffalo. *Mycoplasma bovis* and malignant catarrhal fever pose threats. Brucellosis threatens buffalo indirectly because testing, quarantining, and overall stigma around the disease impacts how

buffalo can be managed. It is important to note, Montana maintains an official brucellosis-free status for interstate trade, but the disease persists in wildlife (elk and bison) within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. To manage this, a Designated Surveillance Area in southwest Montana requires mandatory testing of cattle, as the disease occasionally spills over from wildlife to livestock

Farmers based around buffalo pastures spray chemicals that can get into the waters and the grasses, which can then show up in the buffaloes' systems. With invasive species increasing in the area, producers are using more chemicals. ANC Nic?-Mni (Water) Center is working with FBBP to test water, and the ANC Buffalo Center is testing buffalo and has a health report.

Wildfire and trash can both threaten buffalo. An outbreak of wildfire on pastureland could injure or kill buffalo, if they have no way to escape. Plastic and other trash left out by people can be consumed and harm buffalo.

With a closed herd, insufficient genetic diversity can also pose a risk to herd health, if not closely managed.

Unplanned buffalo harvests

Buffalo harvests via hunting, directed by Council without consulting with FBBP staff, also threaten buffalo herd sustainability because they often do not align with FBBP plans. Contributing to the unplanned harvests is the Council's insufficient knowledge of the process for allocating hunts. Community members who bypass FBBP and go directly to Council for hunting tags contribute to undermining FBBP management.

Grasslands

Lengthy periods of buffalo overstocking on FBBP pastures directly threatens grassland health because it has caused overgrazing. Insufficient staff numbers and not enough staff training have limited the ability of FBBP to complete buffalo roundups and herd size reduction, contributing to the overgrazing. Overgrazed grasslands suffer from intense degradation typically caused by livestock consuming plants faster than they can recover, leading to sparse vegetation, high erosion, and soil compaction. This process reduces biodiversity, promotes invasive species, and diminishes water infiltration.

Wildlife populations also compete with buffalo herds for grass, particularly during drought years, emphasizing need to increase understanding of presence of other species that share these lands and influence management decisions.

Invasive species and outbreaks of insects like grasshoppers threaten grassland health. The threat from invasive species is acute where ground has recently been disturbed, like the in the recently reseeded pasturelands, indicated in Figure 1. When reseeded grass has not yet been established, weeds can take over an area. Sometimes prairie dogs can prevent grass from getting reestablished in a recently reseeded area.

Finally, fire, depending on how it is managed, can threaten grasslands. While fire is needed on occasion to restore grasslands (e.g., through controlled burns), animals returning too soon to graze recently burned areas can lead to more invasive species. If fires burn too hot, they can create erosion.

Food sovereignty

Many factors threaten food sovereignty in the Fort Belknap Indian Community, yet this section highlights the resilience of the Fort Belknap Buffalo Program (FBBP) in its mission to supply healthy buffalo meat that the community desires. Settler colonialism significantly reduced the buffalo population across North America, disrupting traditional ways of life, but the spirit of the community endures. Despite the challenges posed by the federal food commodities program and changing taste preferences, there is a renewed interest in buffalo as a nutritious option. While some may have lost their taste for it, the growing desire to reconnect with this vital food source is inspiring. As more people seek to embrace buffalo meat once again, there is an opportunity to reclaim the knowledge of preparation and celebration of this remarkable food.

Limited local and regional processing capacity

A lack of sufficient access to buffalo meat threatens food sovereignty.

Another limiting factor is FBBP's inadequate access to meat processing facilities, especially facilities that are state- or US Department of Agriculture (USDA)-certified. FBBP does not currently have adequate facilities to process the meat ourselves. While ANC has a mobile processor they can loan to FBBP, we can only store eight full-size animals in it. We also do not have a place to cut or store the meat so our team can manage the amount and timing of meat that gets distributed.

Accessing regional processing facilities poses logistical challenges. At the time of writing, our staff must travel up to 600 miles, round trip, to get the animals to a processing facility, adding cost. While there have been some additions to processing capacity in the region, there is no capacity for a mass cull of buffalo locally, in the event that were needed for food sovereignty or another purpose. The price of processing continues to increase, and it's also

not clear which processing facilities will remain open in the years to come, or how far FBBP staff will have to travel for processing. The lack of adequate access to processing facilities prevents FBBP from being able to control revenue, save money, and consistently supply buffalo meat to the community.

Culture

Reduced numbers of people speaking the Gros Ventre (A'aniiih), an Algonquian language, and Assiniboine (Nakoda), a Siouan language, as well as the loss of our elders, and with them, a loss of our stories and songs that are important for us to carry on, threatens our culture. Elders are our knowledge-keepers. A lack of buffalo would make it impossible to practice our ceremonies.

Education

Federal oversight impacts our ability to do outreach, and we are seeing federal funding withdrawals impacting universities and our outreach. As described previously, loss of our knowledge-keepers threatens education, and so does the fact that some elders have never experienced a buffalo harvest. Finally, a loss of funding for educational programs and/or research on buffalo, grasslands, wildlife, soil, and water, especially with ANC and schools on the reservation, threatens education.

Black-footed ferret and swift fox

Disease, loss of habitat, and loss of funding are continued threats to black-footed ferrets and swift fox. Combating diseases like sylvatic plague can pose risks to humans, and yet is crucial for ferret recovery. Furthermore, some people express anger at the presence of prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets' food source, and the human-wildlife conflict threatens black-footed ferrets' survival.

The following are general contributing factors that affect more than one priority planning area:

Climate change

Climate breakdown is driving increased frequency and prolonged drought, impacting water availability and grassland health and driving buffalo habitat loss. Other natural disasters, like winter storms, fire, and floods, are increasing in frequency and severity. Average temperatures are also increasing, impacting buffalo health and driving more invasive species.

Limited land and infrastructure for managing buffalo, grasslands, and food sovereignty

FBBP does not have enough land to operate at its full potential for increasing food sovereignty and operating as a self-sufficient program at this current time.

FBBP also has limited infrastructure. In particular, they do not have a stable, centralized office and facilities for administration, visitor management, hunting tag issuance, or buffalo meat processing. In the last ten years, FBBP has had to move offices over five times, costing us weeks of lost work time and disrupting their planning and herd management. Not having set, recurring revenue to keep the program functioning without depending on grant funding is a weakness. As FBBP expands their pasturelands, even more infrastructure will be needed.

We also do not have enough equipment to manage effectively. For example, FBBP lacks the needed fencing to manage some herds through rotational grazing, and they lack sufficient water infrastructure (e.g., wells) for managing herds in times of drought and to maintain herd health even through favorable climate conditions. We also do not have heavy equipment for snow removal or feeding buffalo, at present.

Inability to retain revenue generated by FBBP

At present, the Tribal Council holds the authority to determine how much of the revenue generated by the FBBP remains with the FBBP. All too often, the Council redirects a substantial portion of FBBP revenue into the Tribe's general fund and, on occasion, allocates most of the funds generated by FBBP. This decision-making process, characterized by unpredictability and reliance on the changing priorities of Council members—who typically serve two-year terms—places a significant burden on FBBP staff, thwarting effective planning and program growth. As a direct consequence, FBBP's operating budget remains ambiguous, discouraging staff from innovating and expanding initiatives that would greatly benefit the community. Despite years of operation, the program has been hindered from reaching its potential and achieving self-sufficiency due to this lack of clarity. The inability to retain a meaningful share of FBBP revenue is further compounded by a fundamental lack of understanding the needs of the program. These issues have often been exacerbated by insufficient access to crucial data, such as current buffalo population figures. While FBBP has recently made strides toward more accurate data, the lack of effective communication channels has limited its ability to share vital information with the public and the Council.

Lack of Revenue Diversity and Quantity

Moreover, the challenges facing FBBP are intensified by a lack of revenue diversity and insufficient overall funding. The limited revenue streams available—primarily driven by the volatile bison market—expose the program to significant financial risks. With buffalo live sales and hunts being among the few sources of income, maintaining daily operations becomes an uphill battle. To secure a sustainable future for FBBP and fully realize its potential to benefit the community, it is essential to address these financial vulnerabilities and foster a deeper understanding of the program's value and its critical role in our shared future.

Communication gaps

Gaps in communication flow between FBBP, Tribal Council, and the community threaten the viability of the program. Fort Belknap's Tribal Council Chairman and Vice Chairman change every four years, and Council members change every two years, and so it can be difficult to communicate what is happening with the buffalo and how they are being cared for, contributing to a negative image of FBBP and jeopardizing its operations. Some of the lack of understanding has also come from FBBP operating without a conservation plan, a contributing factor FBBP is addressing through this document.

Keeping the public informed and engaged with what FBBP is doing also proves challenging. It can be difficult to get sufficient information out to the public, resulting in the spread of misinformation and misconceptions about buffalo and FBBP. Some communities participate more than others at community meetings, and it is not clear why. It can be difficult to reach people when not many people come to meetings. Furthermore, not everyone is on social media, especially older generations, which can make communication more challenging.

Inadequate policies

At times, gray areas around whether buffalo are classified as livestock or wildlife pose challenges. Additionally, there is a lack of policy around revenue sharing between the Tribe and FBBP, as well as lack of clarity around FBBP managing buffalo relative to Council's direct oversight.

Lack of information and timely follow-up by BIA

BIA has, at times, delayed access to information needed by FBBP which, in turn, creates issues with obtaining new leases and expanding buffalo pastures. In times when the federal government shuts down, delays create challenges in our ability to make informed decisions.

Strategies, Goals, and Activities

The following sections summarize FBBP's main strategies, the goals associated with each strategy, and activities that will help achieve the goals.

When seasons are indicated, they are in accordance with meteorological season dates:

- Spring: March, April, May
- Summer: June, July, August
- Fall: September, October, November
- Winter: December, January, February

Strategies

The following are main strategies, or thematic functions:

- Species management
- Grassland management
- Food sovereignty and security
- Policy
- Community awareness and education
- Sustainable financing
- Management and administration

Strategy 1: Species management

Goal 1.1

Every year, maintain at least 150 head of buffalo in Yellowstone Herd and at least 700 head of buffalo in the Snake Butte Herd, on at least a combined 34,713 acres, while ensuring buffalo numbers do not exceed the carrying capacity of the grasslands.

Note: Additional details on carrying capacity determination, how buffalo demographics will be managed and buffalo selected for harvest, and other aspects area detailed in the FBBP Herd Management Plan.

Activity #	Activity
1.1.1	Every year, determine the carrying capacity of FBBP's grasslands (Animal Unit Months), the amount of buffalo needed to maintain a healthy herd, and how many buffalo will be harvested.
1.1.2	Every year, determine how many harvested buffalo FBBP will allocate to a) community partners for use in ceremonies, and by Senior Centers and schools.

1.1.3	Every year, determine how many buffalo FBBP will donate, live-sell, and harvest to generate revenue to sustain the program.

***This number may change as a result of financial planning.

Goal 1.2

Every year, implement the herd management plan.

Activity #	Activity
1.2.1	At least every six months, and in partnership with ANC, use a drone to get accurate herd counts.
1.2.2	Every six months, test the buffalo for parasites and nutrients and then implement mineral or feed supplements as needed.[14]
1.2.3	Every year, manage buffalo genetics by moving bulls and cows between herds and acquiring bulls and cows from external herds.
1.2.4	Every year, work with Tribal Lands Department, NRCS, and the Fish & Game program to develop contingencies for drought to protect grassland resources in the buffalo pastures.
1.2.5	Every year, determine which buffalo to cull and when (e.g., via hunting) and then follow plan.

Goal 1.3

Every year, manage visitor access to the buffalo pastures.

Activity #	Activity
1.3.1	By October 2026, create a safety protocol around visitor access to the pastures and reduce impacts on the buffalo.
1.3.2	Every year, provide input into Fort Belknap Fish & Wildlife's safety protocols around visitor access to the pastures and impacts on the buffalo.

Goal 1.4

Every year, ensure there is adequate freshwater to ensure herd and grassland health on all pastures.

Activity #	Activity
1.4.1	By October 2026, partner with Defenders of Wildlife to complete mapping of existing water sources for both the Snake Butte and Peoples Creek herds and infrastructure.
1.4.2	By April 2027, install a new well or pipeline in Range Unit 63.
1.4.3	By May 2027, partner with Defenders of Wildlife to complete a water strategy that includes water repairs and habitat restoration projects and funding needs.

[14] More detailed information and herd testing and feed supplements is located in the Herd Management Plan.

1.4.4	By Fall 2027, add two, solar-powered wells, install four stock tanks, and develop one water storage tank in the Snake Butte pasture to provide freshwater, in close communication with Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department.
1.4.5	By Fall 2027, install a pipeline off the existing well, plus two stock tanks, one tank in the main Peoples Creek Yellowstone pasture and another tank in the new pasture.
1.4.6	By Fall 2028, install a pipeline off the holding facility well that will run into the reseeded acres also add a stock tank in the reseeded acres.

Goal 1.5

Every year, ensure prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets are thriving amongst the buffalo within the Snake Butte and Peoples Creek pastures, while also maintaining prime grass areas and sufficient grass for the buffalo herds inside the pastures.

Activity #	Activity
1.5.1	Beginning in October 2026, create a map with layers of buffalo pastures and prairie dog town and black-footed ferret locations and adjust the map every year to reflect changes.
1.5.2	By October 2026, establish an MOU with partners to share prairie dog, ferret, and buffalo map data.
1.5.3	By Spring 2027, work with Council and the Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department to collaboratively create a set of standard operating procedures for addressing potential conflicts between prairie dogs and buffalo management.
1.5.4	Every year, meet quarterly with the Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department and associated conservation partners, like ANC, NZCBI, Defenders of Wildlife, and WWF, to ensure we are working together to help meet each program's goals and to ensure we are not working in conflict.
1.5.5	Every year, work with Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife, WWF, NZCBI, and other researchers to understand cycles of prairie dogs and, with Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife and Council, assess the need for lethal and nonlethal management.

Goal 1.6

Every year, manage prairie dogs in the Old Murdock Farms recently reseeded areas to ensure the new grass is established and weeds are kept at a minimum.

Activity #	Activity
1.6.1	Beginning in October 2026, collaborate with Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department and partners to explore options for keeping prairie dogs out of the

	reseeded area (e.g., fencing, stands of tall grass to create a barrier, relocation).

Goal 1.7

Every year, promote coexistence between swift fox, sage grouse, antelope, deer, elk, moose, and buffalo in the pastures.

Activity #	Activity
1.7.1	Every week, complete fence checks and gates to ensure pastures are containing buffalo.
1.7.2	Every year, add and maintain wildlife-friendly fencing on all buffalo pastures so the swift fox, antelope, and deer can go in and out of the buffalo pastures, in partnership with Defenders of Wildlife and WWF.
1.7.3	Every year, seek updated information from partners on locations of swift fox, sage grouse, antelope, deer, elk, and moose relative to buffalo pastures to inform buffalo management.

Strategy 2: Grassland Management

Goal 2.1

Every year, maintain adequate grass to sustain rotational grazing, prevent overgrazing, and limit supplement feeding during winter.

Activity #	Activity
2.1.1	Every year, use the Animal Unit Month-based model as a guide and maintain herd size based on the availability of sufficient grass in each pasture, using culling, harvesting, destocking or other methods to manage herd size.
2.1.2	Every year, explore and apply controlled burns to pasturelands as needed to manage overgrowth and weeds.

Goal 2.2

By Spring 2028, expand all buffalo pastures from 34,713 to 41,170 acres.

Activity #	Activity
2.2.1	Every year, identify the number of possible acres for grazing expansion through reseeding of a current unit or allocation of a new unit.
2.2.2	By February 2027, expand the buffalo pasture by securing a 10-year lease on the available 4,462-acre South Old Murdock Farm Pasture acres (of which ~4,000 acres have recently been reseeded).
2.2.3	By Spring 2027, secure leases on the remaining 5 individual allotments on the South Old Murdock Farm Pasture acres.

2.2.4	By Spring 2027, explore the cost of cleanup of old weeds and preparation for reseeding of the North Old Murdock Farm Pasture acres.
2.2.5	By Fall 2027, reseed the remaining 5 individual allotments on the South Old Murdock Farm Pasture acres.
2.2.6	By Spring 2027, secure leases on the North Old Murdock Farm Pasture and then explore potential for reseeding those unseeded acres.

Goal 2.3

Every three months, explore opportunities for acquiring more land for buffalo, including the Gilbert Ranch.

Activity #	Activity
2.3.1	Beginning in October 2026 and then every quarter, meet with current and potential partners to ascertain funding for acquiring the land through lease.
2.3.2	By March 2027, propose a plan for FBBP to use Gilbert Ranch.

Goal 2.4

In 2026, 2027, and then every two years, commission a range condition assessment from Ranch Advisory partners, in collaboration with WWF and NZCBI.[15]

Goal 2.5

Every month, follow the Land Department's policies and use Ranch Advisory Partners' analysis of range conditions and recommendations for stocking rates to make management decisions, and involve NRCS as needed.

Strategy 3: Food sovereignty and security

Goal 3.1

Every year, provide at least 10 buffalo (~6,000 pounds of buffalo meat), equating to 125,000, 4-oz meals, per year to community members, ensuring that only healthy, prime bison meat goes to community members to protect community health.

Activity #	Activity
3.1.1	Once per year, harvest buffalo and work with local processors to make cuts of meat and work with local partners (e.g., Tiwahe, Tribal programs and nonprofits) to distribute the meat, or distribute the meat directly.

[15] See Appendix for NZCBI's Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research on FBBP Pastureland.

Goal 3.2

By Spring 2027, and then every six months, provide buffalo meat to the Hays, Lodgepole, Agency, and Dodson Senior Centers.

Activity #	Activity
3.2.1	By October 2026, determine demand for buffalo meat and speak with the four Senior Center directors about their interest in and protocols for serving buffalo meat and use information gathered through meat distribution to schools to help determine whether to distribute state-inspected or USDA-inspected meat to Senior Centers, or distribute other safe and properly stored meat.
3.2.2	If demand and interest, by October 2026, determine a way to cover costs for buffalo meat donated to the Senior Centers.
3.2.3	Every year, continue reaching out to Senior Centers to adjust and grow buffalo meat distribution.
3.2.4	Beginning in Summer 2027, and then at least every six months, distribute buffalo meat to interested Senior Centers.

Goal 3.3

By March 2031, get buffalo meat into the White Clay Immersion School, the Life's Learning Lodge, Head Start, Harlem Public Schools, Hays/Lodgepole Schools, and Dodson Public School and educate students and staff about the health aspects of eating buffalo meat.

Activity #	Activity
3.3.1	By October 2026, collaborate with MSU Extension to determine what protocol to follow, so buffalo meat can be used by schools. Find existing resolution from the Tribe.
3.3.2	By October 2026, donate some buffalo meat to Hays/Lodgepole Schools and Dodson Public School, and through the trial run, determine the process for getting more buffalo meat into schools and how many buffalo to raise and cull for schools.
3.3.3	By October 2026, reach out to the immersion school, learning lodge, Head Start, and possibly child care centers and see if serving buffalo meat would work for them.
3.3.4	By October 2026, present to the Harlem Public School Board to demonstrate success of distributing buffalo meat in Hays/Lodgepole Schools and Dodson Public School.
3.3.5	By 2027, determine a way to receive some payment for providing buffalo meat to schools.
3.3.6	Beginning in 2027, and then at least every six months, distribute buffalo meat to interested schools.

3.3.7	Every year, continue reaching out to schools to adjust and grow buffalo meat distribution.

Goal 3.4

Every year, work with Tribal programs and nonprofits to support educational opportunities for community members about how to prepare buffalo.

Activity #	Activity
3.4.1	By October 2026, work with partners to provide community members with recipes for preparing buffalo.
3.4.2	Every year, provide meat for a cook-off at the mid-winter fair and provide recipes.

Strategy 4: Policy

Goal 4.1

By Fall 2028, in communication with Tribal Council, determine FBBP's protocol for emergency food distribution (e.g., end of SNAP funding, etc.).

Goal 4.2

By October 2026, establish data sovereignty for FBBP, in partnership with ANC.

Activity #	Activity
4.2.1	By October 2026, collaborate with ANC, WWF, NZCBI, and other relevant partners to create a data sovereignty plan for the research the partners are conducting in the pastures and the reintroduced species on Fort Belknap.

Goal 4.3

By Fall 2029, create a safety protocol for FBBP staff and for people using the buffalo pastures.

Goal 4.4

By October 2026, rescind the resolution requiring FBBP to provide buffalo hunts to individuals and keep communicating that all requests must go through FBBP and not the Tribal Council.

Goal 4.5

By October 2026, and then every year, make partners' roles clear regarding drafting of Tribal resolutions.

Activity #	Activity
4.5.1	Every year, determine when the best times are for non-governmental organization partners to be invited to support seeking Council approval for FBBP projects.

Strategy 5: Community awareness and education

Goal 5.1

Every month, communicate with the Ft Belknap community so they understand cultural ties to buffalo and know how the FBBP is practicing herd health, benefiting the community, partnering with Tribal and external organizations, about the Buffalo Procurement Protocol, and that the buffalo and buffalo pastures are healthy.

Activity #	Activity
5.1.1	By October 2026, share on the Tribe's website and report to the Tribe's Public Relation's Officer that people should report escaped buffalo to the FBBP Director, providing the Director's phone number, and the Fort Belknap Police Department.
5.1.2	By October 2026, share the buffalo harvest protocol with the community by posting it on Facebook, posting it on the Tribe's website, providing informational packets at the FBBP office, and announcing it on the radio.
5.1.3	By October 2026, launch a FBBP website and maintain it every month so people can easily find information about the program and communicate their interests and questions with FBBP staff.[16]
5.1.4	Beginning in October 2026, and then every year, host tours of the buffalo pastures for community members and visitors.
5.1.5	Every quarter, provide updates on the radio about FBBP, including urgent announcements, buffalo harvest updates, and number of meals provided to the community.
5.1.6	Every quarter, share announcements and updates on FBBP in Circle Speaker.

[16] On the website, share information about the program and its accomplishments, including updates, staff information, our location, history of the meat provided, papers written about the buffalo program, grants awarded, history of the buffalo, links to other Tribal departments and program partners, upcoming events, buffalo number estimates per pasture, including calf crops, percentage/number of buffalo harvested and why, hunting information (an application for hunts, hunting protocols, hunting prices), and a form for contacting the program.

5.1.7	Every year, host the Annual Buffalo Days event for community members to see what FBBP is doing and to participate in traditional lifeway and cultural activities, inviting Council and partners as well.
5.1.8	Every year, collaborate with MSU Extension to meet with schoolchildren and different groups that want to visit and learn about what we are doing, as well as present to children in schools.

Goal 5.2

Every year, work with ANC, MSU Extension, Tiwahe, and other groups to ensure people are educated about bison and promoting more positive and healthy connections to the buffalo, especially for the younger generations, and to increase support for having buffalo on the landscape.

Activity #	Activity
5.2.1	Every year, partner with ANC and other interested partners to co-host five community meetings a year and utilize monthly radio broadcasts to educate people so they know the buffalo are cared for and what the projects are that are being done for herd health, and all the cultural ties.
5.2.2	Every year, partner with ANC on providing educational opportunities to the community, including Buffalo Days.
5.2.3	Every year, pool resources with like-minded partners to offer more community events.

Goal 5.3

Every year, find out what needs, concerns, and suggestions community members have about FBBP.

Activity #	Activity
5.3.1	By October 2026 and then every year, develop, distribute, collect, and analyze a survey for understanding community needs, concerns, and suggestions, including to understand demand for meat on the reservation, then address the results.
5.3.2	By November 2026 and then every year, host a public meeting to understand community needs, concerns, and suggestions.
5.3.3	Every year, interact with people and obtain input at the mid-winter fair, Earth Day, and other community events about the FBBP work and community needs and concerns.
5.3.4	Every year, meet with other Tribal buffalo programs to give and gain ideas for enhancing community engagement programs.

Goal 5.4

Every quarter, communicate with Tribal Council members about FBBP's plans and activities and advocate for retaining revenue generated by FBBP.

Activity #	Activity
5.4.1	Every quarter, present updates (including buffalo numbers), successes (like fencing, water development, rounding up buffalo), and upcoming events to Council at the Public Safety meeting.
5.4.2	Every Fall, host Councilmen at the pasture.
5.4.3	Every year and after every election, meet one-on-one with Council members and the Chief Administration Officer, and more often as needed, to advocate for FBBP to orient new Council members within a month of each election, bring attention to new issues before Council meetings, communicate authority to determine buffalo harvests (protocol), and provide updates on how FBBP is contributing internally & externally.

Goal 5.5

Every year, maintain a relationship with ANC so that the FBBP can get information gathered by ANC, and so the Buffalo Program provides ANC with training, knowledge, and information.

Activity #	Activity
5.5.1	Every month, mentor ANC faculty and students outdoors on buffalo management, buffalo health, grassland reseeding, and other relevant topics.
5.5.2	Every year, and as needed during extreme weather conditions, obtain free well testing from the ANC Water Center to assess the presence of pathogens, minerals, and bacteria in the buffalo pastures, and get recommendations on addressing any water quality issues flagged by them.
5.5.3	Every year, work with ANC faculty to customize research that will assist our program so we can make sure we have healthy animals and are providing healthier meat to people, so we can provide information to the community about the animals, like about what they are eating and their overall health, and to get research data to help make management decisions based on herd and grasslands health.
5.5.4	Every year, provide ANC with opportunities to do their research.

Goal 5.6

Every year, work with ANC in training and mentoring the next generation of buffalo keepers. This includes:

Activity #	Activity
5.6.1	By October 2026, and then every year, assist with the ANC Buffalo Herd Health and Management class.
5.6.2	Every year, coordinate the monthly ANC Ecology Seminar Series.
5.6.3	Every year, recruit interns from the college for assisting with the Buffalo Program.
5.6.4	Every year, assist ANC with implementing relevant National Science Foundation grants by mentoring students, providing opportunities for learning and internships, and giving presentations.
5.6.5	Every year, coordinate with partners regarding active and potential projects and for potential funding.

Strategy 6: Sustainable financing

FBBP will explore and/or seek revenue from the following sources every year: grants, carbon sequestration, buffalo byproduct sales, live buffalo sales, finished buffalo sales, meat sales, hunts by non-Tribal members, hunts by Tribal members, and harvested buffalo sales. To achieve revenue from buffalo and buffalo byproducts, FBBP will first ensure they can maintain a steady state herd size and that they provide an annually-determined number of free buffalo to community partners for a) ceremonies, b) Senior Centers, and c) schools.

Goal 6.1

By October 2026, establish and work closely with a buffalo board to gain added expertise and recommendations to FBBP, assist in maintaining FBBP's alignment with the conservation plan, and to increase connections with the community.

Activity #	Activity
6.1.1	By October 2026, obtain Council approval for going forward with establishing the buffalo board.
6.1.2	By October 2026, establish what qualifications and characteristics FBBP desires in board members (e.g., traditional, bison experience, education, neutrality, supportive).
6.1.3	By October 2026, create and distribute board member applications.

6.1.4	By October 2026, establish an applicant review panel, then review applications and decide who will serve as board members.
6.1.5	By October 2026, create board bylaws (include term limits and that board members will not be compensated).

Goal 6.2

By November 2026, set up a revenue agreement with the Council that will provide FBBP with a base level of funding that will allow FBBP to retain a higher percentage of revenue each year to maintain daily sustainability of FBBP operations.

Activity #	Activity
6.2.1	By October 2026, draft revenue agreement document to include assurances for base and revenue percentage retainage.
6.2.2	By October 2026, obtain Tribal attorney legal and Chief Administration Officer review.
6.2.3	By October 2026, place draft revenue agreement on Finance Committee meeting agenda for consideration of approval.
6.2.4	By November 2026, ratify the agreement at regular Council meeting.

Goal 6.3

By March 2030, establish FBBP as its own entity so FBBP can maintain all of its revenues.

Activity #	Activity
6.3.1	By March 2030, use the Tribe's legal and financial guidance to create steps using the authority of the FBIC's corporate charter, and then take needed steps.

Goal 6.4

Every quarter, look for new funding opportunities and apply for grants to Fund FBBP.

Activity #	Activity
6.4.1	Every quarter, collaborate with the Tribal Planning Department to apply for USDA and other relevant grants.

Goal 6.5

Every quarter, secure private funding opportunities to allow for more flexibility In management and less reporting requirements.

Activity #	Activity
6.5.1	By October 2026, discuss the scope of potential fencing funding with Defenders of Wildlife and WWF and determine what steps need to be taken to install fences.
6.5.2	Every year, pursue collaboration and partnerships, including with companies like Fahlo.

Goal 6.6

By Fall 2029, FBBP will explore and possibly begin generating revenue by selling buffalo byproducts (e.g., tallow, hides, sinew, horns, bones, and manure) that come from FBBP-harvested buffalo.

Activity #	Activity
6.6.1	By Spring 2028, identify community members who make products from buffalo byproducts.
6.6.2	By Fall 2028, find potential buyers of buffalo byproducts.
6.6.3	By Spring 2029, determine which byproducts to sell, establish a policy on byproduct sales, with sensitivity to culture and beliefs about buffalo, and determine harvest timelines for buffalo byproducts (e.g., harvesting for hides that have winter hair).
6.6.4	By Fall 2029, contract with meat processors for return of selected byproducts.

Goal 6.7

Every year, FBBP will explore and possibly begin generating revenue by selling live buffalo (direct off pasture and/or finished buffalo).

Activity #	Activity
6.7.1	Every summer, find buyers and/or auction live buffalo.

Goal 6.8

By Fall 2027, FBBP will explore and possibly begin generating revenue by selling finished buffalo.

Activity #	Activity
6.8.1	By Spring 2027, assess the feasibility of finishing buffalo and selling finished buffalo, including costs, timeframes, potential revenue per head, potential market, and what FBBP would need to do to get to the point of finishing

	buffalo. As part of feasibility assessment, explore collaborating with other Tribes to sell finished buffalo and/or buy buffalo from them to finish. *If selling finished buffalo is feasible:*
6.8.2	By Spring 2027, find buyers of finished buffalo.
6.8.3	By Fall 2027, explore buying buffalo and begin finishing buffalo.
6.8.4	By Spring 2028, sell finished buffalo.

Goal 6.9

By Fall 2030, and once FBBP's office and processing facility is established, FBBP will explore and possibly begin generating revenue by selling buffalo meat (e.g., burger and jerky).

Activity #	Activity
6.9.1	Every year, research potential customer base by assessing interest in a variety of products, including meat sticks, jerky, burger, etc.
6.9.2	By January 2027, create draft food codes for the FBBP.
6.9.3	By May 2027, work with partners to finalize food sovereignty codes for FBBP.
6.9.4	By June 2027, develop a logo and slogan for the products.
6.9.5	Beginning in August 2027 and then every month, advertise product within a 300-mile radius.
6.9.6	By October 2027, enter into a contract with a local retailer who will sell the products.
6.9.7	By September 2028, find state-certified and/or USDA-certified processors that are able to work with the amount of meat the program is producing.

Goal 6.10

Every year, sell buffalo hunts to non-Tribal members.

Activity #	Activity
6.10.1	By October 2026, communicate to all hunters that hunting tags are only valid from the fall to late-winter hunting season for the year issued.
6.10.2	By October 2026 and then every year, establish expectations for hunters around mutual respect and cultural sensitivity.
6.10.3	Every year, maintain current clients purchasing non-trophy hunts.
6.10.4	Every year, advertise trophy hunts at higher prices.
6.10.5	Every year, train additional staff to guide hunts.
6.10.6	Every year, provide clients with positive, guided hunting experiences, as assessed by post-hunt surveys.

Goal 6.11

Every year, sell buffalo hunts to Tribal members.

Activity #	Activity
6.11.1	By October 2026, communicate to all hunters that hunting tags are only valid from the fall to late-winter hunting season for the year issued.
6.11.2	By October 2026, establish a lottery for selling hunts to Tribal members, to increase fairness and transparency.
6.11.3	Every year, communicate availability of hunt sales.

Goal 6.12

Every year, sell buffalo that FBBP staff have harvested.

Strategy 7: Management and administration

To increase management and administrative capacity to fulfill the conservation plan by ensuring sufficient staff are hired, trained, and retained. Management and administration includes all general functions (general management, financial administration, operations, maintenance, human resources, legal, fundraising, etc.) and inputs for those functions (staff, land leases, infrastructure, heavy equipment, field equipment, office equipment, etc.) that are not covered by the other strategies.

Current Staff Positions and Organization

FBBP currently has four, full-time, permanent staff positions and one, full-time seasonal position.

Positions:

Buffalo Director

Bronc Speakthunder (Permanent; full-time)

Duties: Manages the program on a day-to-day basis and make sure everything is running efficiently. Supervises all program staff. Coordinates with Tribal programs and external partners. Fundraises. Facilitates the buffalo hunts. Ensures herd health. Manages all sales. Manages herd and pasture health. Reports to Council on a monthly basis. Provides guidance to other buffalo programs, assisting with problem-solving. Learns and adapts, using new approaches to managing the program.

Finance and Management Specialist

Yvonne Stanley (Permanent through December 2026; full-time)

Duties: Responsible for accomplishing federal grant objectives and obligations within the guidelines established by FBIC Grants and Contracts policy, finance policy and National Fish & Wildlife Grant award and special conditions. Serves as an administrative assistant to the Buffalo Program and, under policy supervision of the FBIC Buffalo Manager, act as coordinator for sub recipient goals and responsibilities. Provides project oversight and coordination on the America the Beautiful Challenge projects for respective tribes and submits timely reports to the grantor. Prepare and submit financial reports to the FBIC Council and funding agencies. Plans, organizes, integrates and aspects of the FBIC Buffalo Program and activities.

Buffalo Technicians

James Cochran (Permanent through December 2026; full-time)

Duties: Responsible for the day-to-day maintenance and care of the tribal buffalo herd and accomplishing federal grant objectives. Oversee the buffalo hunting and buffalo sales. Keep accurate records of buffalo herd composition, sales and harvest data. Organizing and summarizing ecological survey data collections. Collaborate with partners on AtBC to complete annual ecological surveys and buffalo herd monitoring.

Shaun Ball (Permanent through December 2026; full-time)

Duties: Responsible for the day-to-day maintenance and care of the tribal buffalo herd and accomplishing federal grant objectives. Oversee the buffalo hunting and buffalo sales. Keep accurate records of buffalo herd composition, sales and harvest data. Organizing and summarizing ecological survey data collections. Collaborate with partners on AtBC to complete annual ecological surveys and buffalo herd monitoring

Field Technician

Cody Fortin (Temporary, usually working through spring, summer, and fall; full-time)

Additional Staff Positions Needed

FBBP needs to add positions to reach the following staffing:

- 1 full-time, permanent Office/Tech Assistant
- 1 part-time, permanent Herd Health Manager

- 1 full-time, permanent Meat Processing and Marketing Assistant
- 2 temporary, seasonal, full-time Buffalo Technicians (each year)
- 5 temporary, full-time Short-Term Laborers for short-term projects (each year)

Consultants

FBBP will need to contract people to provide:

- Veterinary assistance
- Technical assistance

Goal 7.1

Every year, provide management, financial administration, human resources, and operations oversight to effectively and efficiently fulfill responsibilities of the FBBP.

Activity #	Activity
7.1.1	By October 2026 and then every year, complete cultural sensitivity training for handlers and staff that encompasses both Tribes.
7.1.2	Every year, sufficiently staff the FBBP so it can perform its responsibilities.
7.1.3	Every year, assess training needs for all FBBP staff and assist with training needs.
7.1.4	Every year, review, update, and document roles and responsibilities of each position in the department.
7.1.5	Every year, complete individual advancement plans for each employee, which include training plans.
7.1.6	Every year, purchase and maintain vehicles and heavy equipment, as needed and based on available funding.
7.1.7	Every year, purchase and maintain office equipment (e.g., computers, software, printer/copy machines, other office supplies, phone, and internet services).
7.1.8	Every year, purchase and maintain field equipment.
7.1.9	Every year, provide financial and administrative oversight for FBBP, based on specific project requirements.
7.1.10	Every year, monitor and report on progress against goals and activities in FBPP's conservation plan.
7.1.11	Every year, draft and submit interim and final financial and technical reports for active grants.
7.1.12	Every quarter, provide monthly updates to Council about FBBP's activities, including a written report and other relevant documents.
7.1.13	Every year, pay for necessary FBBP infrastructure to realize core functions (utilities, insurance, etc.).

7.1.14	By 2030, update FBBP's conservation and financial plans.

Goal 7.2

By October 2026, develop a FBBP employee policy and procedures for holding employees accountable to a certain standard.

Goal 7.3

By October 2027, establish a facility at South Murdock Farm that will house an office, a visitor center, equipment storage, and serve as a place to process up to three buffalo, a cooler for whole buffalo, and a freezer for processed meat. Adjacent to the facility will be a holding area for 50 - 100 animals.

Activity #	Activity
7.3.1	By October 2026, complete the required paperwork and receive approvals for building the office.
7.3.2	By October 2026, obtain all required clearances from EPA, THPO, and TERO.
7.3.3	By Spring 2027, build the office.
7.3.4	By Summer 2027, establish a processing and cold storage facility that is large enough for keeping recently harvested meat from at least ten buffalo cold, while also having freezer space for the processed meat and hides, along with a rail between the work area, cold storage, and freezer.

Goal 7.4

By May 2028, explore establishing a handling facility in the southwest corner of Old Murdock Farms to facilitate trapping buffalo for culling purposes.

Activity #	Activity
7.4.1	By October 2026, with Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department partners, visit the southwest corner of Old Murdock Farm to assess the potential exact site location for the facility relative to existing black-footed ferret, prairie dog, and swift fox locations and prairie dog management options.
7.4.2	By January 2027, determine how many acres the handling facility would ideally be.
7.4.3	By May 2028, assess the potential for accessing funding to establish the handling facility and determine whether to proceed.

Goal 7.5

By October 2027, centralize data within FBBP.

Activity #	Activity
7.5.1	By January 2027, acquire a server for the FBBP office to store data.
7.5.2	By March 2027, determine what kind of data is needed (e.g., resolutions, leases, historical revenue, finances, soil samples, etc.).
7.5.3	By August 2027, get data from all partners.
7.5.4	By October 2027, compile and review FBBP records, including history documents from the Tribe about FBBP, land descriptions from the Land Department, and documentation on existing leases from the BIA.
7.5.5	By October 2027, determine which additional data is needed.

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Appendix

Acknowledging People Who Commented on the Draft Plan

We would like to acknowledge the people who provided written and/or verbal feedback on the draft plan:

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Overview of NZCBI's Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research on FBBP Pastureland

Smithsonian
National Zoological Park
Conservation Biology Institute

Inter-Tribal Grasslands Network

Last revised: 2025-5-9

Prepared by: Hila Shamon, Olivia Cosby, & Jessica Alexander

1 Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research Network

A collaborative effort to establish the first indigenous-led Inter-Tribal Long-term Socio-Ecological Research Network. The concept of **Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research** (LTSER) documents essential ecological knowledge, empowering future generations to understand our relationship with the natural world, especially in light of climate change. Established LTSER networks at regional and global scales contribute valuable knowledge that informs policy and large-scale management decisions. Additionally, LTSER platforms serve as educational hubs for experiential learning, student research, and training grounds for future wildlife professionals and rangeland practitioners. Ultimately, LTSER networks have the potential to enhance our present connection with nature, foster community ties, and prepare us for future challenges.

1.1 Vision

- Long-term resiliency of grasslands ecosystem services, biodiversity, and buffalo (American bison, *Bison bison*) populations on Tribal lands in the face of climate and anthropogenic changes.
- Innovative ecosystem management practices that enhance people's connections to their surroundings and well-being and strengthen people's sense of place and identity to heritage.

1.2 Mission

- Establish a collaborative, tribally led research network encompassing Northern Great Plains Tribal communities and their colleges, promoting socio-ecological research.
- Provide educational opportunities to foster the growth and training of future natural science educators, land/resource managers, and scientists within communities.
- Strengthen relationships between students, community members, and buffalo programs across the Northern Great Plains region.
- Facilitate the sharing and dissemination of knowledge between communities and colleges, leveraging cross-community expertise to enhance long-term resiliency.
- Document and monitor the effects of local and regional changes on socio-ecological systems, examining their impact on the overall well-being of people and the environment, particularly in the face of climate change.
- Offer recommendations and support for addressing current and future environmental challenges.

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- Develop novel adaptive management practices based on indigenous values to support the long-term resiliency of buffalo reintroduction efforts on tribal and public lands.

2 Communities and Buffalo Programs

2.1 Fort Belknap (48.2000° N, 108.5340° W)

2.1.1 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 3,429 tribal members living on or near the reservation (Fort Belknap Community, 2021; Governor's Office of Indian Affairs, 2021b).

2.1.2 Study Area:

The reservation is located within northcentral Montana (2526 km^2) and mostly consists of mixed-grass prairie. 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. Two herds of Plains bison occur in large pastures (4.7 and 88.3 km^2). Approximately 87.7% of the reservation is unplowed and considered intact prairie. Currently, bison are grazed on 93 km^2 of tribal rangelands in two herds, with an additional 1828 km^2 of continuous parcels environmentally suitable for bison based on HSI estimates.

2.1.3 LTSER Site: Fort Belknap Buffalo Program:

The first bison herd was established in 1977, purchasing 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 km^2 pasture (established 2013), and a 2) production herd: >800 bison that are kept in a 88.3 km^2 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 the Bureau of Indian Affairs, using their standard stocking rates for several 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 the quantity and quality of forage based on the experience of the buffalo manager –though there is no formal protocol in place for monitoring rangeland.

2.2 Fort Peck (48.0089° N, 106.4486° W)

2.2.1 Population:

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

2.2.2 Study Area:

Located in northeastern Montana bordering the Missouri River and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (8,564 km^2) 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, and the rest leased to non-tribal operators (**Table 2**). Currently, 97 km^2 of tribal rangelands have bison herds (**Table 2**), with an additional 3,037 km^2 of continuous parcels suitable for bison reintroduction based on HSI estimates (**Table 2**).

2.2.3 LTSER Site: Fort Peck Buffalo Program:

Established in 2001 with the purchase of 100 bison from Fort Belknap. Today, the program manages two bison herds: 1) cultural herd: 370 bison from YNP, Wind Cave NP (South Dakota, USA), and Elk Island NP (Canada), grazed on 43.4 km^2; 2) production herd: 300 bison from Department of Interior (DOI), grazed on 53.7 km^2. Both herds graze year-round in pastures with relatively few interior fences and need to be 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). 2018 Fort Peck opened a quarantine facility for a surplus of certified brucellosis-free bison from Yellowstone National Park (YNP). YNP bison 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's 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 the 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 undertaken, but some measures of bison herd health have been conducted by staff at Fort Peck Community College.

2.3 Blackfeet (48.6666° N, 112.9176° W)

2.3.1 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)

2.3.2 Study Area:

Located in northwestern Montana and borders Glacier Park and Canada (6,317.5 km^2). 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 (World Wildlife Fund,

2018), and about 55% of the agricultural lands are operated by tribal members. Currently, buffalo occur on 36 km^2 of Blackfeet Nation rangelands, with an additional 3,669 km^2 suitable for buffalo reintroduction based on HSI estimates (REF).

2.3.3 LTSER Site: Blackfeet Buffalo Program

They were 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 km^2); 2) a larger herd of 550 buffalo rotated through six pastures (32.5 km^2). The Buffalo Program and Iinnii Initiative are two programs that co-exist in their efforts to restore buffalo on the Blackfeet reservation. The initiative comprises the coordinator and a managing partner (Wildlife Conservation Society). The Buffalo Program comprises a director, a 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. To reduce the treatment of buffalo-like cattle, the program refrains from using ear tags. Only in exceptional cases will calves be tagged before being auctioned off in the spring and separate bulls from cows. Field technicians also assess the timing of rotations and the 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, hoping to expand the program to all pastures.

2.4 Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation (48.2503° N, 109.8008° W)

2.4.1 Population

Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation, also referred to as Rocky Boy Reservation, is one of the Native American reservations in Montana, United States. It was established through a congressional act on September 7, 1916. It was named after Ahsiniiwin, also known as Stone Child (initially mistranslated as Rocky Boy), the Chippewa band chief who had recently passed away. Initially intended for landless Chippewa (Ojibwe) Indians in the American West, the reservation eventually became home to many Cree (Nēhiyaw) and Métis individuals. Presently, the Cree population surpasses that of the Chippewa on the reservation. The Chippewa Cree Reservation, recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), encompasses this area. The reservation boasts 3,323 enrolled members, accounting for 55% of the tribe's 6,177 enrolled members.

2.4.2 Study Area

Rocky Boy Indian Reservation is situated in Hill and Chouteau counties in north-central Montana. Its total land area spans 171.4 square miles (444 km^2), including significant off-reservation trust lands.

2.4.3 LTSER Site: Rocky Boy Buffalo Program

In 2021, the Tribe allocated 1,200 acres (490 ha) to a buffalo herd pasture, which was established to promote cultural and food sovereignty. The Pasture, located approximately a mile from Box Elder, Montana, is enclosed by 7.1 miles (11.4 km) of fencing. The herd initially consisted of five bison donated by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and six bison donated by American Prairie. In 2022, an additional ten bison were received from American Prairie to strengthen the herd.

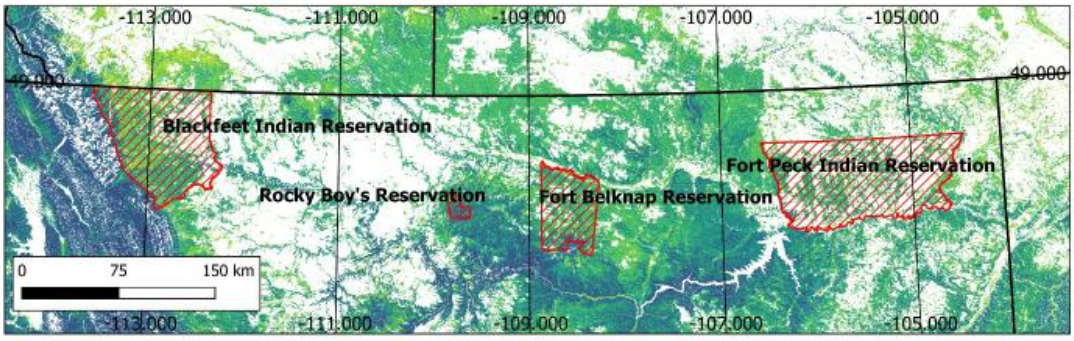

Figure 1. Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research Network sites overlaying bison habitat suitability index (REF).

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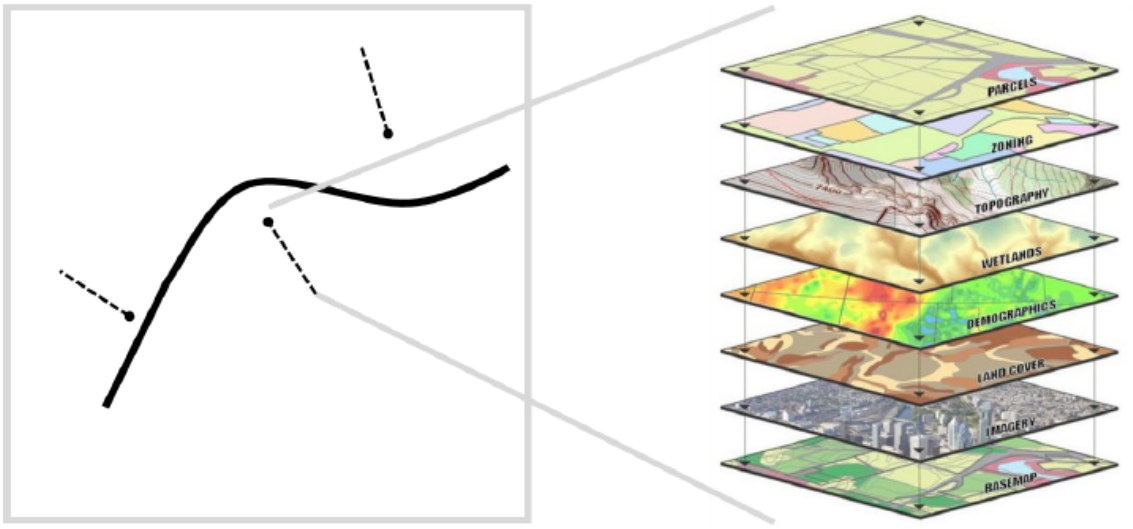
3 Long-Term Ecological Surveys

3.1 Transect Design

We will randomly select 10-30 50-meter transects at each site. Transects will be limited to 100-2000 meters from 2-tracks and roads. We will extract environmental information for each transect at 30, 250, and 1000-meter resolution. Data includes:

1. Clay, sand, and silt content
2. Climate data for the last 20 years (annual precipitation, min/max temperature, snow cover)
3. NDVI, RAP vegetation cover, and biomass for the months of May-August for the last 20 years (Landsat)
4. Elevation, slope, aspect, and ruggedness



We will 'layer' all ground surveys along these 20 transects selected for each LTSER Site (e.g. Buffalo Pastures). Data will be collected annually between June-August.

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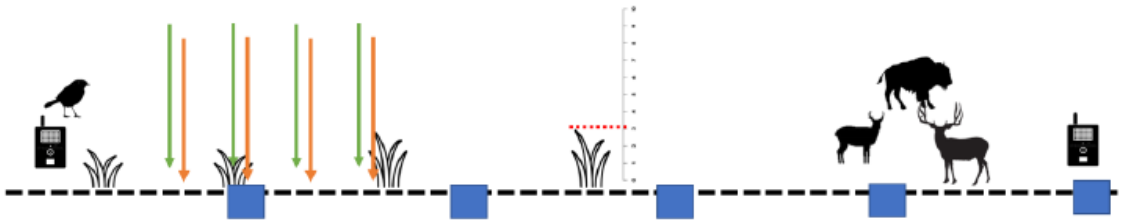

50-meter transect:

20 transects × 50m transects per site

- Vegetation line point transects
  - including ungulate scat
- Pasture meter × 10 (every 5m)
- Soil cores – C, N, P × 5 (every 10m)
- Nutrients × 10 (every 5m; grass only)
- **Ungulate activity via camera traps** × 2
- **Grassland bird diversity via audio recorders** × 1

3.1.1 Process for establishing individual transects entails:

a. Begin at the start point and secure the "0" end of the tape reel. This will be the southern end point
b. Hold the tape reel and walk north, unwinding the tape as you go until you reach "50 meters".
c. Transect line should be as straight, taut, and as low to the ground as possible.
d. Transects run South (0') to North (50')
e. Mark North and South Transect ends with metal point markers

3.1.2 Soil

Soil carbon (C), nitrogen (N), and phosphorus (P) are indicators linked to nutrient limitation and plant productivity in terrestrial ecosystems. C, N, and P are considered important stoichiometry because they are the basic elements that form the structure and function of all living things, which are coupled strongly in their biochemical processes. The stoichiometric characteristics of C, N, and P affect ecosystem functions and nutrient cycling.

Soil collection:

a. Soil will be collected every 5 years in the summer (May – July). Each transect (sampling area) requires the collection of 5 soil cores, which should be placed inside the bag provided. Make sure to label each sample bag with the Site, Date, and Transect Number.
b. To ensure a representative sample, the surveyor will use a soil probe to collect 10-cm-deep soil samples at 5 locations along the transect spaced approximately 10 ±2 meters apart. It is crucial to maintain a consistent sampling depth. Though soil chemistry test

results are typically unaffected by soil moisture levels, wet soils can influence the depth at which a core sample is taken. Therefore, it is advisable to let the soil drain before taking samples following heavy rains. If the soil is too wet for tilling, it is also too wet for sampling.

c. Before collecting the soil, surveyors will remove any surface residue to ensure only soil is being sampled. The surveyor will insert the probe straight into the soil until they reach the 10-cm mark. When pulling out the probe, the surveyor will make sure the soil core remains intact inside the probe. If the surveyor encounters a situation where the core is incomplete or falls out, the surveyor should discard the half core and resample.

d. At each sampling point, surveyors will empty the complete 10-cm soil core into the labeled bag provided. Repeat this process for 5 samples per transect. Soil samples can be pooled into one bag. Field teams should store samples in a dark cool place (e.g., cooler or insulated bag in backpack).

e. All sample bags should be stored in a cool, dark place until they are ready to be shipped or processed. Sample transportation will be coordinated by Smithsonian. If field teams are unable process the samples within 24 hours, they must be stored in a refrigerator.

f. Soil samples should be dried at 60^{o}C for at least 48 hours

Duration: once every 5 years between May - July

3.1.3 Vegetation

a. Vegetation structure and cover

We will use a line-point intercept method to survey vegetation structure and cover along each designated transect. Surveyors will always begin at the 0-meters end of the transect and work along one side of the measuring tape for the duration of the survey. Sampling will occur at 1-meter intervals, beginning at the 0-meter mark (51 total sampling points). At each sampling point, surveyor will use a vertically placed meter stick to record the highest point of every vegetation functional group intercepted along the transect line: grass, forbs, shrub, sedge, tree, cactus. Record the highest point every functional group intercepted vertically. When placing the vertical meter stick, surveyors must be careful not to shift the surrounding vegetation. Surveyors will also record mammal scat at each point. If vegetation is dead, surveyors should still record.

Duration: once a year between May- July

b. Pasture meter (biomass) *After surveyors complete the line-point transect*

Surveyors will, once again, always begin at the 0-meters end of the transect and always stay on the east side of the measuring tape. Sampling will occur at 2-meter intervals, beginning at the 0-meter sampling point. At point 16 and 36 meters, surveyors will clip all the vegetation under the pasture meter disc and place it in the paper sample bag. Surveyors should not sample vegetation if there are shrubs at the target point. If shrubs are present, instead sample at another 2-meter point. All sample bags will be clearly labeled using the

transect/sample code – **"site_transect ID_yyyy-mm-dd_sampleID_biomass".** In the lab, clip vegetation in approximately 1-in sections and spread sample bags out on a well-ventilated surface until they can be dried. They should be dried at 60^{0}C for at least 48 hours.

Duration: once a year between May- July

c. **Vegetation chemistry** *After surveyors complete measuring biomass with the pasture meter* Surveyors will always begin at the 0-meter end of the transect and always stay on the east side of the measuring tape. Sampling will occur at 5-meter intervals, beginning at the 0-meter sampling point. At each sampling point, surveyor will clip a handful of green grass and place in a paper sample bag. Avoid collect forbs or dead grass. Samples will be pooled in ONE bag per transect. All sample bags will be clearly labeled using the transect/sample code – **"Site_transect ID_yyyy-mm-dd_grasschem".** In the lab, clip vegetation in approximately 1-in sections and spread sample bags out on a well-ventilated surface until they can be dried. They should be dried at 60^{0}C for at least 48 hours.

Duration: once a year between May- July

3.1.4 Animal communities

3.1.4.1.1 Mammal surveys via camera traps

To document presence of other mammal species at each of the LTSER sites, we will set up 5-10 cameras along interior and exterior fences. Deployment sites will be chosen prior to first deployment to ensure that traps are spread out as much as possible, and cameras will deployed in the same site every year. We will attach the camera-traps to fence posts using a fabric belt strap so it is facing perpendicular to the fence line, into the pasture, and parallel to the contour of the ground (not tilted down or up).

Check camera settings prior to traveling to the field:

- Set cameras on medium-high sensitivity.
- Set date and time (military time).
- Set trigger time to 0 sec.
- Set image burst to 5.
- Temperature in Celsius.

Camera trap setup

- Cameras will be set on fence post 50 cm above ground.
- Cameras face into the pasture and perpendicular to the fence line.
- Remove vegetation immediately in front of the camera to limit false triggers
- Turn the camera on and wait for the countdown to complete (~10 sec).

- Allow the camera enough time to take your picture before moving on. Ensure pictures of staff at beginning and end of deployment to confirm the camera was functioning for the entire survey period.

Record the following data for each camera

Login to Survey123 and fill out **LTSER_cameratrap_2023setup** form:

- Tech Name
- Date and time
- ITGN SITE (Blackfeet, Fort Peck, Rocky Boy, Fort Belknap)
- Trap ID
- GPS location (WGS 1984, decimal degrees)
- Camera ID
- SD card ID
- Comments

Camera pick-up form

- Tech Name
- Date and time
- ITGN SITE (Blackfeet, Fort Peck, Rocky Boy, Fort Belknap)
- Trap ID (ex. BF_01)
- GPS location (WGS 1984, decimal degrees)
- Camera ID
- SD card ID
- Camera working (TRUE, FALSE)

3.1.4.1.2 Camera-trap Documentation

To keep track of what has been processed and which SD cards correspond to a given location, we will manage a spreadsheet in a shared Google Drive entitled "Camera Trap Progress". Field teams will fill out this information while saving photos to an external hard drive and/or uploading wildlife photos to Wildlife Insights (wildlifeinsights.org), a platform for tagging and managing camera-trap data. You will also need to look at the image folder to verify the start date and record the end date, which will be either the pick up date or the date that the camera was disrupted or malfunctioned. Field teams will then record a description of any issues observed following their review of images in the notes section of the spreadsheet so we can correctly calculate sampling effort. Once a deployment is uploaded (all images from a single camera for a given sampling period), field teams will mark a "Y" for yes in the "In Wildlife Insights?" or "Saved to Hard Drive?". Record hard drive ID if saving to an external hard drive.

Uploading to Wildlife Insights

The basics of Wildlife Insights will be covered in a different document, but here we provide protocols for uploading images to a specific project. A separate document will cover identifying wildlife images.

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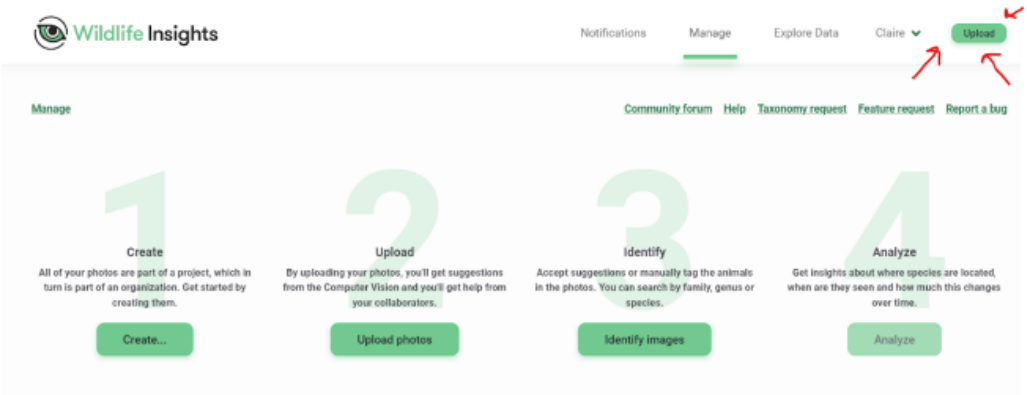
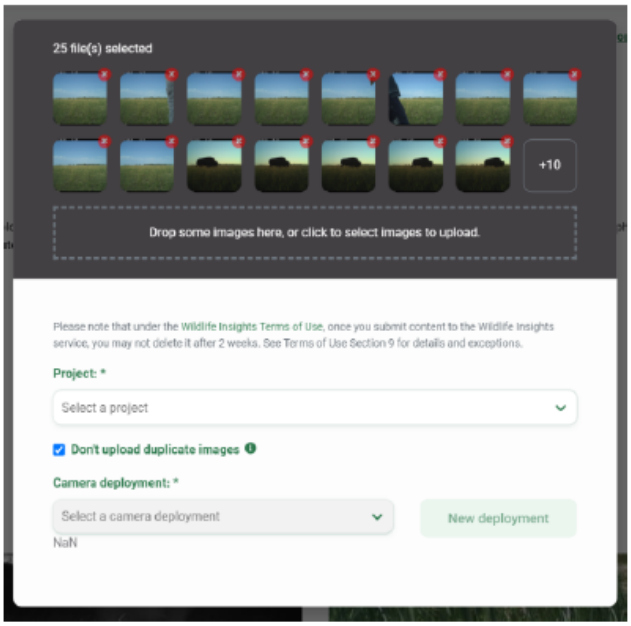
Step 1: Click the upload button on the top right of the screen after logging in



Step 2: Upload images from the file on your computer/hard drive. You must select all images in the folder and hit "open". The window will look like this with the number of images in the upper left corner:



Step 3: Select "IT-LTSER *202X*" from the Project drop down menu and the camera trap ID from the Camera deployment drop down menu.

3.1.4.2 Bird surveys via audio recorders

- Field teams will place an audio recorder above a camera trap at selected points along interior fence lines.
- To prevent condensation, prior to each deployment a silica desiccant packet will be placed in the space below the battery holder where the MicroSD is installed, not over the switch or button. A fresh silica packet will be installed with each deployment.
- To setup the audio recorder, surveyors will follow the Song Meter Micro Quick Start protocol.
- We will use the Song Meter Micro to sample bird calls. The audio recorders will be set to record the first 10 minutes of every hour. These ten-minute sampling periods will be split to 1-minute increments, with a set sample rate of 12,000Hz.

3.1.4.2.1 Survey123 form

- Setup
  - Tech Name
  - Date and time
  - ITGN SITE (Blackfeet, Fort Peck, Rocky Boy, Fort Belknap)
  - Trap ID (ex. BF_01)
  - GPS location (WGS 1984, decimal degrees)
  - Recorder ID
  - SD card ID
  - Comments
- Recorder pick-up form
  - Tech Name
  - Date and time
  - ITGN SITE (Blackfeet, Fort Peck, Rocky Boy, Fort Belknap)
  - Trap ID (ex. BF_01)
  - GPS location (WGS 1984, decimal degrees)
  - Recorder ID
  - SD card ID
  - Recorder working (TRUE, FALSE)

3.1.4.2.2 Audio Data Management

Data will be copied to a provided external hard drive. Each SD card will be copied to a separate folder and labeled: "LTSERSITENAME_TRAPID_LAT_LONG_YYYYMMDD".

3.2 Climate

Data and observations are essential for monitoring the climate system and detecting and attributing climate change, assessing the impacts of climate variability and change, and

supporting research toward improved understanding, modeling, and prediction of the climate system. We will place 1-2 weather stations at each Buffalo Pasture to monitor the local climate. The data will provide accurate, consistent, long-term weather data on temperature, precipitation, relative humidity, wind speed, PAR (photosynthetic light), and soil moisture. KestrelMet 6000 Weather Station.

Duration: year-round

The above illustrates the weather station setup. Image © Kestrel Instruments

1. **3.2.5 Bison Diet**

Field teams will collect fecal samples from fresh bison scats to assess diet chemistry and species composition.

Collection of Fecal Samples:

a. During the growing season (May-August) field teams will collect 10-30 fecal specimens from each ITGN site (e.g., Buffalo Pasture).
b. Field collections will be conducted on a single day to ensure that specimens are associated with different individual animals
c. Field team will drive trucks towards where the bison herd is congregating in the pasture to help encourage animals to disperse. This will increase the likelihood of finding fresh scats in a concentrated area of the pasture.
d. Specimens will only be collected from fresh scats that are dark and moist in appearance.

e. From each scat, surveyors will make two collections, one for each test. With one hand, wearing latex gloves, surveyors will stir center of scat with a popsicle stick and fill the provided vial at least 2/3 full. The vial is pre-labeled with a barcode and a code starting with a letter and followed by 6 digits. Then collect about 1/2cup scat from the same deposit and put it in a Ziploc bag. Label the bag: YEAR-MO-DY_Site_ScatChem_ID. Scat chem sample ID corresponds with the ID on the associated DNA sample vial. Discard the glove and popsicle stick after each pair of samples.

f. Once the scat samples are collected, open the Survey123 Lab Samples form (right). Select your site/Pasture name, then select NA for transect ID. Touch the Timestamp and Location bullseye to collect time and location. Enter Tech Name (select Other and fill out name as needed) and select Fecal DNA under the Sample type drop down menu. Enter the 7-digit alpha-numeric code from the DNA sample vial into the Scat Sample ID and hit the check mark. Do the same for the Scat Chemistry sample and enter the same scat sample ID as the associated DNA sample. Save entries in the Outbox while in the field and send data on return to lab/office.

g. Place DNA sample vials into gallon Ziploc bags. Place scat chemistry samples in plastic grocery bags or similar. Both samples will be placed in cooler with ice packs while in the field and then transferred to a freezer until shipping or retrieval by SI personnel.

Duration: June-August

Remote sensing

Remote sensing time-series data collections for NPP, biomass, NDVI trends.

Duration: data will be downloaded once a year; monthly mean time-series.