**WILDLIFE RESEARCH PERMIT APPLICATION FORM**

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| **Check One Please:** | X | **New Project** |  | **Ongoing Project** |

**APPLICANT:** Allicia Kelly

**ADDRESS:** Environment and Natural Resources, South Slave Region Address: PO Box 900, Fort Smith, NT. X0E 0P0

 Phone #: (867)872-6423

 Fax #: (867)872-4250

 Email: Allicia\_Kelly@gov.nt.ca

**SPONSOR(S):** Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) - GNWT

**FUNDING SOURCE(S):** ENR-GNWT

 Laval University – Sentinelle Nord funding

# ADDITIONAL LICENCES

# REQUIRED: NWT Wildlife Care Committee Permit

#  Comités de protection des animaux de l'Université Laval

**PROJECT TITLE: Mackenzie Bison Collaring Program 2021**

# RATIONALE:

Wood Bison are a Species at Risk, listed as “Threatened” under NWT legislation (Conference of Management Authorities 2017) and under Canada’s *Species at Risk Act,* and assessed as “Special Concern” by COSEWIC (COSEWIC 2013).

ENR has monitored the Mackenzie bison population since it was re-introduced to the area in 1963. Population surveys and summer classification surveys are completed to provide population trend information. However in recent years, following the 2012 anthrax outbreak and large wildfires in 2014, bison have changed habitat use patterns and have been difficult to locate during anthrax surveillance flights and classification surveys, resulting in low confidence in anthrax surveillance and age- and sex-ratios due to low sample sizes in some years (e.g., n=31 cows classified in 2017, 13 cows in 2014 and 0 in 2015).

Bison have not been collared in the Mackenzie subpopulation since 1993 following that year’s anthrax outbreak. **Renewed collaring of bison was recommended by the Mackenzie bison working group and is a Key Action in the *Mackenzie Bison Management Plan*, which was developed by the Mackenzie Bison Working Group and completed in 2018**. The working group was composed of members from the Community Government of Behchokǫ̀, Deh Gáh Got’îê First Nation, Fort Providence Métis Council, the Hamlet of Fort Providence, North Slave Métis Alliance, NWT Wildlife Federation, NWT Métis Nation, Tłı̨chǫ Government, Wek'èezhı̀ı Renewable Resources Board, Yellowknives Dene First Nation and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR).

Bison location and movement information provided by collars will help address several identified knowledge gaps and help answer research questions, as detailed below:

Mackenzie bison management plan: Collaring of bison has been recommended by the Mackenzie Bison Working Group and is a Key Action in the *Mackenzie Bison Management Plan*. Knowledge gaps that would be addressed by collaring bison include: refining guidelines in the plan for setting sustainable harvest, modelling the population to increase knowledge of demography and population trends, understanding bison movements to help reduce collisions and conflicts in the community of Fort Providence, understanding habitat selection and range use to aid in managing habitat and Environmental Impact Assessment of future developments, estimating sightability on population surveys and calculating correction factors to be applied to estimates, understanding interactions with other species especially moose, wolves and caribou, improving surveillance and detection of anthrax, and providing data on frequency with which bison cross the Mackenzie River and enter the Bison Control Area and where they go when there.

Identifying Critical Habitat (CH) for wood bison is a requirement for species listed under Canada’s *Species at Risk Act* but that cannot be done because information on habitat use and selection by most wood bison populations, include the Mackenzie, do not exist. The national *Recovery Strategy for Wood Bison (*Bison bison athabascae*) in Canada* includes a schedule of studies to identify CH that includes collecting data such as would be obtained from collaring bison.

Locating bison for surveys: In recent years, following the 2012 anthrax outbreak and large wildfires in 2014, bison have changed habitat use patterns and have been difficult to locate during anthrax surveillance flights and classification surveys, resulting in low sample sizes for classification data (see above) or the cancellation of this survey (2019). Collared bison can be located using telemetry gear to increase survey sample sizes and confidence in anthrax surveillance.

Correction factor for population surveys: Boulanger *et al.* (2017) recommended continued use of distance sampling to estimate bison abundance but also recommended developing sightability models to correct for imperfect detection of bison on surveys, especially from fixed-wing aircraft. Collar-marked bison would enable ENR to estimate and correct for imperfect detection.

Understanding habitat use: Existing survey methods depend on visually spotting bison from an aircraft. This biases our observations to bison using open habitat types (e.g., large prairies or the shorelines of rivers and lakes). We know that wood bison also use forested habitats, but they are remarkably hard to see in this vegetation type despite their large size and dark coloring. Evaluating habitat use by collared bison will greatly enhance our understanding of how bison use open versus closed habitats and help improve survey design and anthrax surveillance. Understanding habitat use, habitat selection and range use will facilitate informed environmental impact assessments on future developments, identifying critical habitat and enable us to manage habitat to influence bison movements, e.g. to reduce collisions and community incursions.

Habitat selection compared to boreal caribou: Boreal caribou are monitored with collars within the Mackenzie bison range. Collar data from both species will allow us to compare habitat selection and seasonal range overlap between these two species (as well as with collared wolves).

# Collaborative research project: ENR is collaborating with Dr. Daniel Fortin at Laval University on a project titled “Interdisciplinary research to understand changing food-web dynamics and threats to food security in the northern boreal forest.” This project will use data from collared animals of different species (e.g. ENR already has collar data from boreal caribou and wolves) to ask questions about how species interact with and influence each other, and how that changes depending on which species are present in an area. Collar location data will be used to identify fine-scale movement rules of individual species, and we will then use these rules to make larger-scale predictions about the distribution dynamics of interacting large mammals. The research will also provide basic information on habitat selection, and identify areas prone to human-wildlife conflicts (e.g., collisions).

**TIME PERIOD:**

* Collar deployments in February or March 2021 (collars will be programmed to collect data for 6 years)
* Mortality investigations, monitoring of location data from GPS collars and other activities occur throughout the year.

**LOCATION AND NEAREST COMMUNITY:** The Mackenzie bison population is located west of Great Slave Lake, north of the Mackenzie River (Figure 1). The closest communities are Fort Providence and Behchokǫ̀.



Figure 1: Mackenzie Bison Range

**SPECIES STUDIED:** Bison

**PROJECT LEADER:** Allicia Kelly, Manager, Wildlife Research and Monitoring, ENR, South Slave Region

**PROJECT PERSONNEL:**

Terry Armstrong, Bison Ecologist, ENR Fort Smith, NT.

Liam Case, Wildlife Technician II, ENR Fort Smith, NT.

Naima Jutha, Wildlife Veterinarian, ENR Yellowknife, NT.

Brett Elkin, Director of Wildlife, ENR Yellowknife, NT.

Daniel Fortin, Professor, Laval University, Co-Principal Investigator of Sentinel North project

M.Sc. and PhD students co-supervised by D. Fortin

James Hodson, Manager, Environmental Assessment and Habitat, Yellowknife, NT.

Renewable Resources Officers –Fort Providence and Behchokǫ̀

Community Representatives

ENR Personnel as needed

# OBJECTIVES:

Note that these objectives address specific objectives in the *Mackenzie Bison Management Plan* andthe *Recovery Strategy for Wood Bison (*Bison bison athabascae*) in Canada.* A program to study Mackenzie bison using telemetry has long been supported and encouraged by the Mackenzie Bison Working Group and the comment that this work is still needed was made again in the March 2020 Working Group meeting. The *Review of Bison Monitoring Program for the Northwest Territories* (Boulanger *et al.* 2017) also recommended using integrated or multiple-data source models to further model bison demography and trends. These models would use data obtained from this collaring program, especially survival and recruitment rates. Other objectives include:

* Assess annual and seasonal habitat use and movements by adult female bison
* Document seasonal range use, annual home ranges and fidelity to calving areas
* Investigate habitat use and selection in relation to natural and human caused disturbance (e.g. wildfire, development) and landscape features (e.g. habitat type)
* Investigate movements in relation to highway 3 and the community of Fort Providence
* Compare habitat use and selection to that of boreal caribou and wolves, using collar data from the same geographic area
* Locate bison to increase sample sizes of summer classification surveys and anthrax surveillance
* Provide a correction factor for bison detection rates on population surveys and of dead bison in the event of an anthrax outbreak
* Monitor adult female survival and calf classification to track population trends (not implemented until year 2 or year 3)

# METHODS:

# Bison observations and traditional knowledge of historic and recent range use from land users will be used to determine the location of bison prior to collaring. Distribution of collars will be planned to target a random sample distributed across the range of the Mackenzie population. For remote areas, a fixed-wing aircraft may be used to locate groups of bison in advance of the capture helicopter.

# GPS collars will be deployed on up to 20 adult female bison (2x Telonics Iridium TGW-4780-3 and 18x TGW-4770-4) to monitor the movements, habitat use, and survival of these bison. Collars will be programmed to collect data over 6 years. After 6 years, any bison that is still alive will be recaptured to remove its collar. Recaptures are planned instead of using release mechanisms that allow the collar to drop to the ground at a pre-determined time because experience in the NWT’s Liard/Nahanni population and from bison collaring projects in other jurisdictions has shown that drop-off mechanisms are a weak point where collars break when used on bison. In the Liard/Nahanni population, 5 of 8 collars on bison cows broke at the site of the release mechanism within 1-11 months of deployment (mean 6.6 months). It is preferable to ensure that after an animal is captured, data is able to be collected over a long period of time.

# Collars will be deployed by an experienced crew consisting of a capture pilot, veterinarian and animal handler during February or March 2021. Bison may be captured on the ground (e.g. along roads) or from the air (helicopter). For ground access, when bison are identified in a location considered safe for darting, they will be approached quietly. Bison will be darted using a Pneudart remote drug delivery system (rifle) and lightweight darts. A reversible combination of drugs will be used to enable the animal to be reversed as soon as the collaring and handling is completed. A combination of Butorphanol, Azaperone and Medetomidine will be used to anaesthetize the bison, using a ratio and dosages that have been demonstrated to have relatively short and predictable induction times. The combination will be reversed by a combination of Atipamezole and Naltrexone.

For aerial captures, animals will be darted directly from a helicopter using the same Pneudart system. Pursuit of individual bison will be kept short (≤1 min of active running during the helicopter chase), and will be terminated if the target animal show signs of fatigue (stumbling, open mouth breathing). Once a target animal has been identified, a dart will be shot at a large muscle mass (rear leg primary target, shoulder secondary target) using a remote drug delivery system. Darted animals will be monitored remotely until induction occurs, with the helicopter keeping a safe distance to minimize movement and stress of darted bison. Once a bison goes down, the helicopter will land a safe distance from the bison that does not disturb the animal.

The bison will be approached from the rear on foot, and any bison remaining in the area will be quietly moved off. The bison will be placed in sternal recumbency with its head extended and airways cleared. A blindfold will be placed over its eyes, and the dart will be removed before proceeding with further work. The animal will be visually and manually assessed to check for any capture-related injuries at the beginning of the handling, and monitored for vital signs during the anaesthesia (temperature, pulse, respiration).

The animal will be processed as quickly and safely as possible, with noise at the site kept to a minimum. Age and sex of the animal will be recorded, and the incisor bar will be examined to estimate age and photographed for future reference. Samples to be collected include blood (2 red tops and 2 EDTA tubes), feces (handful from rectum), and hair samples (coin envelope full, plucked from shoulder area). The collar will be fastened securely around the animal’s neck, allowing for an open-palmed hand to move freely between the next and the collar material. Pictures of the animal’s head with collar ID visible are taken.

Once collaring and sampling is complete, the pilot and handler will back off to the helicopter, and one person will administer the reversal agents (Atipamezole and Naltrexone). Handling generally lasts 20 minutes or less. Pursuit and handling times will be recorded.

In the event of an injury or other health issues during capture and handling, the animal will be assessed by the veterinarian. If euthanasia is required in the field, the bison will be shot (rifle or shotgun) in the head or heart in accordance with guidelines on field euthanasia using firearms. If there are any human safety concerns over shooting, the bison will be chemically immobilized and humanely killed. The ENR veterinarian will conduct a full necropsy, and collect samples for laboratory necessary given specific details of the individual situation. The animal carcass will be returned to Fort Providence so that any meat can be salvaged and distributed, or destroyed if drugs have been used.

# Starting immediately, animals will be monitored by GPS satellite locations. If a bison dies during or within 30 days of capture, a full necropsy will be undertaken whenever possible. Documentation will include a detailed history and digital images of the field necropsy to assist the veterinary pathologist diagnosing of the cause of death.

# CURRENT CONSULTATION:

The *Mackenzie Bison Management Plan* was developed by the Mackenzie Bison Working Group, which was composed mainly of community members. The working group recommended that ENR develop a collaring program for Mackenzie bison and reiterated that in the March 2020 working group meeting. Ongoing consultation will continue with communities (Deh Gáh Got’îê First Nation, Fort Providence Métis Council, Tłı̨chǫ Government, Wek’èezhı̀ı Renewable Resources Board, North Slave Métis Alliance and Yellowknives Dene First Nation) through the application for a wildlife research permit. Community observers will continue to participate in fixed-wing aerial surveys to estimate bison abundance and other surveys as opportunity permits. Information is also shared at the biennial regional wildlife workshop.

# FUTURE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PLAN:

A meeting will be held or report provided each year to each community or their representatives to provide information on bison monitoring and to receive feedback and input from communities. Monitoring results are also presented at the biannual regional wildlife workshop.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL PARTICIPATION:

Community observers will continue to participate in fixed-wing aerial surveys and other surveys as opportunity permits. There are not opportunities for local participation during bison captures.

Distribution List:

Deh Gah Gotie First Nation

PO Box 226

Fort Providence, NT X0E 0L0

Tel: 867-699-7007

Fax: 867-699-3134

Email: receptionist@dehgahgotie.ca

Fort Providence Métis Council

PO Box 319

Fort Providence, NT X0E 0L0

Tel: (867) 699-4320

Fax: (867) 699-4319

Email: finance\_pvmetis@northwestel.net

Lands Administration Officer
Tlicho Lands Protection Department
Tlicho Government
Box 412
Behchokǫ̀, NT X0E 0Y0
Tel: (867) 392-6381
Fax: (867) 392-6389

Email: jolinehuskey@tlicho.com

Land and Environment Coordinator

Yellowknives Dene First Nation

P.O. Box 2514
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P8
Tel: (867) 669-9002
Fax: (867) 766-3497

Email: mmackenzie@ykdene.com

Lands and Resource Manager
North Slave Métis Alliance
P.O. Box 2301
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P7
Tel: (867) 873-6762
Fax: (867) 669-7442

Email: general@nsma.net

Ms. Jody Pellissey

Executive Director

Wek'èezhı̀ı Renewable Resources Board

102A 4504 49th Ave.

Yellowknife NT X1A 1A7

jpellissey@wrrb.ca