



# United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

Washington, DC 20240

Representative Sharon Stewart Peregoy  
Chairwoman, Montana American Indian Caucus  
P.O. Box 211  
Crow Agency, Montana 59022-0211

Dear Chairwoman Peregoy:

Thank you for the April 27, 2021, letter encouraging an active partnership between the Department of the Interior (Department) and Montana Tribes toward a goal of restoring large herds of wide-ranging wild bison. The Department recognizes the deep and rich significance of bison to Tribes, and the unique ability of federal bison and federal lands to support cooperative bison restoration and shared stewardship. We too desire an active partnership with Tribes as we move forward to assess and pursue restoration opportunities.

The 2020 Bison Conservation Initiative (BCI-2020) reaffirmed the Department's commitment to shared stewardship for ecological and cultural restoration of federal bison herds. Moreover, BCI-2020 articulates a commitment to precisely the types of bison restoration efforts that you reference. With regard to specific prospects for bison restoration in Montana – on Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) and the Rocky Mountain Front through the Iinnii Initiative – the Department is committed to working with all stakeholders, with particular recognition of the unique of federal-Tribal relationships.

### **Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge:**

In order for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to consider bison reintroductions at CMR, we must first engage with Tribal partners and other stakeholders, ensure clear understanding of all perspectives, and use what is learned to determine how best to work with Tribes and stakeholders going forward. Phase 1 of this effort is currently underway, and we are focusing on identifying the most effective ways to engage Tribes, Tribal groups, and other stakeholders to ensure meaningful dialogue and productive interaction on the topics of bison and bighorn sheep reintroductions, and other wildlife and wildlife habitat management issues on CMR. Phase 1 is expected to conclude in September 2021, at which point the FWS plans to move immediately into Phase 2. Phase 2 will focus on dialogue around substantive issues related to these topics and the formation of one or more working groups to dig deeper into specific issues and/or develop specific proposals on some of the identified topics of interest. As we move forward, I assure you that our efforts towards bison conservation and potential reintroductions will follow the established goals and principles found in BCI-2020, including shared stewardship and cultural restoration, and will support ecocultural restoration.

### **Rocky Mountain Front:**

The National Park Service (NPS) and Glacier National Park are honored to continue active partnership and support of the Iinnii Initiative. Led by the Blackfoot Nation in Montana and the broader Blackfoot Confederacy, the Iinnii Initiative is a compelling example of Tribally led bison restoration that the Department and NPS actively support. The ultimate vision of a transboundary bison herd that would

originate on Blackfoot lands and roam freely onto the east side of Glacier National Park, as well as north to Waterton National Park, First Nations', and other lands in Canada, is one that is as meaningful as it is attainable. The NPS is an active participant to the long-established working group of Tribal, state, federal, and non-governmental organizations. Formerly known as the agency working group, that group was recently given the Blackfoot name *Iin Noohk Kanak Ka Tsi Kksi*, meaning Buffalo Society. It has been reinvigorated over the past year and is actively working toward resolving the remaining fundamental challenges of Tribal cattle grazing leases, fencing, and completion of baseline studies on both reservation and NPS lands. Once resolved, the NPS view of the ultimate return of bison will be just as articulated in the goals and principles of BCI-2020, the free movement of native wildlife across boundaries. Bison would reclaim their place among the iconic grizzly bear, wolf, elk, and other native wildlife that share this landscape. Such a herd would be viewed by the Department as a great conservation success, fully in-line with a principal goal of BCI-2020 to support establishment of "multi-jurisdictional bison herds in order to emphasize large herds on large landscapes to support ecological and cultural restoration." Both the Iinnii Initiative and Buffalo Society working group are appropriately led by the Tribes themselves. The Department and the NPS remain committed to active, good-faith investment of time, funding, and expertise to support this transboundary work. To that end, the NPS is presently cooperating toward actions to fundamentally set the stage for wild bison to return to the landscape. Investments and cooperation among the NPS and the Blackfoot Nation are underway on several projects towards understanding current vegetation conditions, the existing transboundary elk herd, and documenting sensitive cultural resources that could be affected by returning bison.

The Department views collaborative bison restoration as a rich opportunity to act on the Biden Administration's priorities for the United States; from addressing climate change and social injustice to promoting food security and economic development for struggling communities and Tribal Governments. The ongoing joint Tribal listening sessions with the Department of Agriculture are vital to the Department's understanding and respect for the Tribal vision of bison conservation and management. The third listening session will focus on partnerships with federal agencies and access to federal bison. The Department is eager to support the linkage of ecological and cultural restoration of bison in active partnership with Tribes and for the American public. With the conclusion of the FWS initial engagement process and the third listening session, the Department will information needed to evaluate next steps, including the formation of working groups in these specific areas of opportunity.

We appreciate your interest in bison conservation and look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with you on this important issue

Sincerely,

Shannon Estenoz  
Assistant Secretary  
for Fish and Wildlife and Parks