



BILLINGS GAZETTE

# Grants boost Eastern Shoshone, 100s of other tribal nation bison programs

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Wyoming's Eastern Shoshone Tribe has received a \$3 million grant to expand the Yellowstone Bison Conservation Transfer Program, the tip of a funding iceberg meant to return bison to tribes across the nation.

"There's a big effort to get buffalo out of Yellowstone to tribes," said Jason Baldes, the Shoshone Tribal Buffalo representative. "A lot of tribes are interested in those Yellowstone genetics to enhance the heterogeneity of other herds."

The injection of money will "supplement bison cultural herds along with the aim to create 20 new herds, which will stabilize and strengthen the efforts of each tribal nation and support cultural renewal while fostering ecological rejuvenation in northern short mixed-grass prairies," according to the grant announcement.

## Beautiful funds

The grant to the Eastern Shoshone Tribe is part of the \$122.4 million provided by the National Fish and Wildlife Federation through the [America the Beautiful Challenge](#).

About 42% of all 2024 ATBC funding is going to support indigenous-led projects.

The federation also awarded a grant of \$498,000, which when matched with \$164,300 will help pay for native-led restoration and stewardship of bison-grazed lands in Kansas, Minnesota, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Texas.

The work includes “conservation plans for 34 native buffalo producers, increasing access to farm bill programs and climate-smart practices, strengthening resilience and enhancing biodiversity on Native-managed grasslands, prairies and savannas,” according to the funding announcement.

## Wait, there’s more

Perhaps even more impactful, however, are three grants of \$21.25 million to the InterTribal Buffalo Council to restore and manage native grasslands ecosystems for tribal buffalo restoration in Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Florida, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming.

The **InterTribal Buffalo Council** now boasts a membership of 83 tribes that own 25,000 buffalo in 22 states.

The funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s **Regional Conservation Partnership Program** is directed at 126 tribes across the nation. The investments come from the Farm Bill and Inflation Reduction Act.

The conservation program also awarded \$4.95 million to the Buffalo National Grasslands Alliance in South Dakota to restore and protect tribally owned grasslands in the northern Great Plains. This funding is targeted at 16 tribes in the region.

“We anticipate these projects including prescribed burning, prescribed grazing, water facilities, range planting, and fencing,” according to a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of

Agriculture. “Additionally, part of the project will fund outreach to producers, outcomes assessment, and project management.”

“It’s incredible to witness the Indigenous-led momentum in restoring one of our most iconic species to their native habitats,” said Kaycee Prevedel, Sierra Club Wyoming Chapter Public Lands and Wildlife organizer.

## Collaboration

The grants come on the heels of the formation of the **Tribal Buffalo Lifeways Collaboration**, which includes ITBC, Native Americans in Philanthropy, The Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund.

In a July announcement the groups said, “This new, historic alliance was created to stabilize, establish, and expand tribal-led buffalo restoration, and foster cultural, spiritual, ecological, and economic revitalization within native communities.

“Together, the groups have committed to work with the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture to build on the momentum created by Indigenous leaders to bring lasting structural change and return buffalo to tribal lands at an unprecedented scale.”

To ensure the success of buffalo repatriation, the groups are seeking to improve infrastructure such as fencing, provide training to herd managers, and access to land through co-stewardship, leasing and acquisition, the groups said.

## Transfer program

**Yellowstone’s bison transfer program** began in 2019 when 55 Yellowstone bison were hauled to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana. Before being moved, the

animals have to pass through quarantine to ensure they are free of the disease brucellosis, which can cause pregnant ungulates to abort their fetus.

Live transfers are seen as a way to reduce the number of bison in the park without killing them – the main method used in the past. But the park’s quarantine facilities can only hold up to 200 animals and the state of Montana refuses to allow quarantine herds to be held outside of a designated monitoring area.

Over the past five years, 581 bison were donated to a tribal slaughter program and 1,707 were shot by mostly tribal members with treaty hunting rights outside the park.

Since its creation, Yellowstone’s transfer program has grown with more corrals built to hold animals for quarantine. So far, 414 Yellowstone bison have been trailered to the Fort Peck facilities. A portion of those bison and their offspring have been allocated to 26 tribes in 12 states, including Alaska, via the InterTribal Buffalo Council.

Yellowstone National Park’s goal is to keep its bison herd between 3,500 to 6,000 animals. This fall, the population was estimated at 5,449 animals, so a herd reduction of 1,375 was recommended by the Park Service.

Although the bison transfer program is praised by many as an alternative to slaughter, not everyone agrees.

“A lot of people wrongly believe that quarantine is an alternative to slaughter,” said Stephany Seay, of Roam Free Nation. “The fact is, many buffalo who go through that domestication program are slaughtered in the process or die from human handling.”

## Shoshone

Eastern Shoshone tribal member Jason Baldes has been a force for bison restoration on tribal lands. He was instrumental in the establishment of the [Eastern Shoshone Buffalo](#)

**Enclosure** in 2016. The 300-acre pasture is encircled by a 5-foot high, six-strand, wildlife-friendly electrified fence.

Beginning with a herd of 10 animals, the tribe has now grown its herd to 118 head. The 2.2 million-acre Wind River Reservation, located in southwestern Wyoming near Lander, is also home to 98 head of bison managed by the Northern Arapaho tribe on its 1,000-acre pasture.

The animals' return to the land has nourished the tribes culturally and spiritually while also providing a traditional food, Baldes said. The bison are also educating a new generation about the animals' importance.

"It is significant to receive these types of resources," Baldes said of the many grants awarded this year.

"This funding will help the Wind River Tribal Buffalo Initiative expand the Shoshone and Arapaho conservation herds," Prevedel said. "It will also help make more buffalo available to tribal nations throughout the country as they work to bring buffalo back as wildlife, ensure greater food sovereignty and security, and restore cultural connections."



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