



Bison Genetics – The New War Against Bison

by Kathleen O'Neal Gear and W. Michael Gear

Introduction

Though written for a bison producers' Winter 2010 newsletter, the importance of the Gears' article concerning the status of bison as a non-amenable species and perhaps even as meat animals cannot be overstated.

For consumers, if some bison are scientifically reclassified as cattle, this may *automatically* place them in the USDA data bank as an amenable, rather than a non-amenable, species.

Based on current U.S. production standards and meat processing laws, the significance of this is three-fold:

1. Production methods of amenable species (such as currently done with cattle, sheep, goats and swine), may include elements of dehorning, confinement, castration, artificial insemination, feedlotting, cross-breeding, cloning and patent ownership.

2. Meat processing standards for amenable species may actually encourage feedlotting (some meat processors financially penalize producers for lighter carcasses from non-grainfed animals), mandatory inspection, where and how the meat may be stored, sold and/or distributed.

3. Amenable species and brucellosis

Other than what we all read in the papers and see in the news, many are unaware of the history of brucellosis and bison. Occasionally we read about Yellowstone National Park and cattle ranchers being upset because bison carry a disease called brucellosis. They are concerned their cattle will become infected with brucellosis when bison migrate out of the park every winter in search of food.

Some interesting brucellosis points are rarely mentioned:

- a. elk are also carriers of brucellosis and are allowed to enter and leave the park freely and
- b. cattle originated the disease, bringing it with them from Europe. Bison developed a tolerance for it in order to survive. The cattle basically can become reinfected from other animals which have developed the ability to carry the disease without becoming sick.

- c. Brucellosis control methods:

- (1) Amenable species. Currently, the law for controlling brucellosis in amenable cattle is to slaughter the entire herd of cattle.

- (2) Non-amenable species. However because bison are non-amenable, they are tested to confirm the presence of the disease. Culling is based on individual test results. Should bison ever become reclassified as cattle and brucellosis discovered, the entire Yellowstone and other herds would be required by law to be slaughtered rather than individually culled.

Amenable meat classification has long been favored by commercial meat producers and commercial distribution channels, since mandatory USDA inspection costs are paid by taxpayers. For at least a decade, commercial bison interests lobbied heavily in Washington to reclassify bison as amenable, while the majority of small ranchers and producers have been against it.

The non-amenable meat classification of bison benefits small producers and ranchers, as well as the bison. Though small ranchers pay USDA inspection fees out of pocket, we do this based on our individual choice, uniqueness of our markets and access to small meat processors, rather than on a mandated or regulated basis.

Through their research, the Gears have introduced critical new information and thinking concerning issues of bison species purity. We are proud to share this timely information as we move ever forward to produce and honor this native-heritage species. In these days of testing, cloning and patenting, Lindner Bison favors reasonableness, thoughtfulness, vigilance and caution. And sharing new information as it becomes available.

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