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GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

Roaming bison worrying tribe's ranch neighbors

By KARL PUCKETT • Tribune Staff Writer •
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Snowmobile-riding wranglers returned an **escaped herd of 200 bison** back to pasture on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation on Thursday.

It was **the most recent of several bison breaks this winter** by members of the tribe's herd of 450, with bison scaling deep snow and large drifts along 40 miles of fence line to roam free.

The repeated escapes have neighboring cattle ranchers worried about losing scarce supplies of hay during a particularly tough winter, Blaine County Attorney Don Ranstrom said.

Livestock producers also are concerned about fences being damaged and the spread of brucellosis, a disease that can cause female animals to abort.

"They're so big I refer to them as a woolly tank because they can walk through a fence without knowing it's there," Ranstrom said.

Male bison can weigh up to 2 tons and stand 6 feet tall, according to the National Wildlife Federation.

Thursday morning, the escaped 200 bison were spotted in the vicinity of Barney Olson Road, a north-south gravel road south of Chinook in Blaine County.

That's **several miles west of the reservation**.

"We don't want them out roaming on other people's property," said Mike Fox, a tribal council member who oversees the tribe's natural resources and law enforcement departments. "We're doing what we can with what we've got to keep 'em in."

Two snowmobile wranglers pushed the bison back to the pasture late Thursday afternoon. One machine broke down on the trail, leaving one driver to finish the job.

Saying the escapes are becoming a regular occurrence, Blaine County officials contacted the U. S. Attorney's Office and the Montana Attorney General's Office to inquire if the county has the

authority to impound the animals or request funds from the tribe to pay for any damages.

That's the first time the county has taken that step, Sheriff Glenn Huestis said. With the tribe being a sovereign nation, county officials said they don't know what legal standing they have.

"We're casting about to see if we could perhaps locate some assistance through one of those offices to obtain some sort of remedy for these folks," Ranstrom said.

Jessica Fehr, public information officer for the U.S. Attorney's Office, said the office's position is "we hope the parties can arrive at some sort of quick resolution." The office has no plans to get involved, she said.

Judy Beck, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Justice, said a staff attorney spoke with Blaine County officials, but received no formal question or request for assistance.

Bison have been a contentious issue among ranchers and the tribe.

The tribe keeps 450 animals on 22,000 acres, which have 40 miles of 6-foot-tall barbed-wire fence around them. It also runs Little Rockies Meat Packing Co., where bison are butchered, and a smokehouse for making jerky.

The Montana Department of Livestock said a rancher shot five bison in 2004, after they crossed onto his land adjacent to the reservation.

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In the most recent escape, Fox said he was aware of one instance in which the bison ate hay on private property. That landowner will be compensated, he said.

The bison are brucellosis-free, Fox added.
the main charge of the tribes bison
Last week, Fox testified before the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission that the tribe is interested in acquiring more bison. FWP is studying relocating wild bison from the Yellowstone National Park area to different locations in the state, a controversial idea in the ranching community.

Fox said he is concerned the escape from the pasture will influence the decision-makers.

"But it's kind of an unprecedented winter with this much snow," he said. "We realize we need a different management approach."

In the past, bison were allowed to roam in the pasture in the winter. That worked well when there wasn't much snow on the ground. But more snow has fallen in the past couple of winters, which has allowed bison to climb out of the pasture.

The tribe is looking into building a smaller winter pasture on flat ground so the bison can't get out even when the snow is deep, Fox said.

Ruben Horseman, a tribal member who lives 7 miles from the buffalo pasture, said some residents don't want more bison.

"We can't manage what we have," Horseman said. "We don't have the feed, and we don't have the resources."

On Thursday, crews plowed the road leading to the bison pasture, Fox said.

With the road now open, the tribe can put down hay for the hungry animals and also work on 20 areas where snow drifted over the fence, Fox said. Previously, tribal employees could only reach the bison by snowmobile, he said.

Bison have escaped three or four times this month, Fox said.

Huestis said members of his office flew over a 20-mile stretch of the western edge of the reservation Wednesday after hearing reports that bison had escaped from the pasture. Nine buffalo were spotted

outside the reservation. The report of 200 bison being loose came Thursday.

The tribe and the county have an agreement in which county authorities immediately call tribal officials when escaped bison are reported. The tribe then dispatches the wranglers. Huestis said the tribe has responded well in the past, but the continued escapes concern the county, he said.

In the past, bison have escaped and damaged idle land in the Conservation Reserve Program, causing CRP payments to be withheld from some ranchers, Huestis said.

"It (the escaping bison) is an ongoing yearly situation that keeps coming up this time every year," he said.

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