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Bison enthusiasts gather at Ted Turner's ranch to celebrate success, consider challenges

BRETT FRENCH For the Star-Tribune Jul 14, 2017



The Flying D Ranch is a vast swath of foothill grasslands that bumps up against the Spanish Peaks, seen in the background.

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The 113,000-acre ranch is home to a portion of Ted Turner's bison. "Our core business is grass," said Mark Kossler, vice president of ranch operations for Turner Enterprises Inc.

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FLYING D RANCH — Tom Pierson may earn his living as a Bristol, Wisconsin, roofing contractor, but his heart is with a small herd of bison he's raising.

"They're just majestic," he said. "I like coming down the driveway and seeing my herd. And they are very low maintenance. I have no handling facility and no veterinarian bills."

Pierson was standing on the banks of a chattering Cherry Creek on Ted Turner's Flying D Ranch at the base of the Spanish Peaks, just southwest of Bozeman, last Friday. Across the creek a small group of domestic bison and a nearby herd of wild elk grazed in belly-deep grass. Behind Pierson were old cabins, outbuildings and a cook shack used by the

ranch as a hunting camp. On this hot summer day, though, it was host to about 600 people visiting as part of the International Bison Conference.

The other NBA

With more than 1,100 members, the National Bison Association — which organized the five-day conference at nearby Big Sky Resort — is a group of ranchers, processors and bison enthusiasts spread across all 50 states and 10 foreign countries. Some are small producers like Pierson with 10 bison on a 60-acre farm.

“If you only have a few it’s called yard art,” he joked.

On the other end of the spectrum is Ted Turner’s collection of ranches. Altogether Turner’s outfit manages 53,000 bison, said Mark Kossler, vice president of ranch operations for Turner Enterprises Inc. On the 75 square miles of the Flying D alone are 1,800 bison calves this summer.

“We do have more bison under ownership than anyone,” Kossler said.

Turner also owns bison that have tested free of any cattle cross breeding — some descended from Yellowstone National Park bison that the ranch held in quarantine, and another from the Castle Rock herd on Turner’s 585,000-acre Vermejo Park Ranch in New Mexico, which are also Yellowstone descendants. Those clean genes make the bison even more valuable.

In the beginning

Turner began ranching bison in 1990. Now 78 years old, the one-time media magnate presided over the gathering at the Flying D with all of the patience of a man secure in the knowledge that his dream of bison ranching has come true.

“We got a lot done in a limited amount of time,” Turner said, a fact that he admitted being proud of.

A star with the NBA members, he was constantly posing for group photos and welcomed the gathering to his ranch for the second time; the first was in 2011.

“Do you know the story?” asked Sally Ann Ranney, Turner’s companion and a longtime wildlife and environmental advocate. “This is pretty good.

“He started with three bison and now has 53,000,” Ranney said. “He’s wanted to save bison since he was a little boy. He had a vision that someday he would have a ranch to hunt and fish and raise bison.

“He’s really charted the course for the bison’s recovery and the whole industry.”

When asked about where he sees the industry going in the future Turner said, "The future is right now, and it's good."

Flying D

That would certainly seem to be the case if you looked around the sprawling expanse of the Flying D, one of four ranches Turner owns in Montana.

"This place is pretty fabled," said Jim Matheson, assistant director of the National Bison Association. "It's like your own little Yellowstone."

That comparison is almost true. There's even a pack of wild wolves roaming the ranch that occasionally feed on the bison and elk. And the elk, about 22 to 24 percent, have been exposed to brucellosis, a disease that can cause pregnant bison, elk and cattle to abort.

"It's just a big issue because there's no effective way to treat brucellosis in an elk herd," Kossler said.

Vaccinating cattle against brucellosis is only moderately effective, he added, and is even less successful on bison. He advocates a declassification of the brucella abortus virus to allow more scientific research. Right now it is classified as a "select agent" and can only be handled by laboratories with the highest level of containment security.

"Research would begin immediately if it was declassified," Kossler said. "Everyone knows we need a better vaccine."

Until then, the bison are tested and when shipped to slaughter in Colorado are locked in the trailer with special tags on the doors.

Full circle

The likelihood that a bison from one of Turner's ranches may end up on a diner's plate at one of his Ted's Montana Grill restaurants is about 40 percent, said Danny Johnson, Flying D Ranch manager. About 8 to 10 percent of the ranch's bison will be culled each year for processing.

Such restaurant introduction to bison is seen as important to the industry.

"It really helps us out because they do such a quality job," said Matheson of the NBA. "These guys do a fantastic job in that first bison-eating experience."

After some tough times in the early years, bison is now seen well positioned to take advantage of consumers' greater interest in a healthy, antibiotic-free, hormone-free, grass-fed alternative to beef, chicken and pork.

"I think there's been a real awareness of a healthy red meat alternative," Kossler said. "Bison has high acceptance levels and people seek it out now."

But to continue to grow the market, Laurie Demeritt, CEO of The Hartman Group, which tracks trends in the food industry, told the NBA attendees that they need to think about how to make bison easier to prepare and expand into snack foods while stressing its organic advantages, even to young consumers who are more willing to be adventurous in their eating.

"The premium marketing is growing at three to four times the market rate, leaps and bounds ahead of the mainstream marketplace," Demeritt added. "So there's a lot of growth potential here if you can position yourself."

Overseas bison

Until then, producers like Damen Wells from northern New South Wales, Australia, is diversifying his bison operation in a country that so far hasn't been too inviting to the introduced species. In addition to selling shredded bison tacos, he also has a zoo and tepees for glamping.

Wells has thrown in with Bitterroot Bison of Missoula to learn some best practices to share with the eight members and six breeders in the American Bison Association of Australia.

"The bison community is helpful, they share their knowledge," Wells said.

Back home though, Australian bison breeders are struggling with a government that sees the animals as potentially feral pests and has banned any new imports, threatening the 400 animals that are there with a genetic bottleneck.

Back in the United States, there's more concern about a declining number of young people interested in agricultural work, and a push to get more bison in the hands of American Indian tribes that once thrived when bison were plentiful before Europeans settled in the West.

Even considering the many challenges the native animals face, for Laurel veterinarian Don Woerner, the gathering of bison enthusiasts did his heart good. Woerner had his display of bison history set up along with his taxidermy bison that shows the animal's bones on one side and hide on another. The bison, named Ernie, was a rescue animal from a sanctuary that now serves to educate the public.

Sitting on a lawn chair in the shade as small bands of bison moved across the grassy valley and hills, Woerner smiled widely.

"It's really encouraging to see all of these people so enthusiastic about bison," he said.

For Pierson, the Wisconsin bison rancher, his small herd is about fulfilling a dream, only on a scale much smaller than Ted Turner's.

"I didn't want to look back and wish I would have done it," he said.