

SUITABILITY OF MONTANA WILDLANDS FOR BISON REINTRODUCTION ^{TWS}

Craig J. Knowles

FaunaWest Wildlife Consultants, POB 113, Boulder, MT 59632

Montana contains several large tracts of wildlands that would be suitable for bison (*Bison bison*) reintroduction. Four of these sites were selected for further consideration and were found to range in size from 187,458 acres to 895,503 acres. Each of the sites contained greater than 90 percent Federal and state ownership, and were largely uninhabited. Two sites would support resident bison herds in prairie/river breaks habitat and two sites would support migratory bison herds in mountain/foothills habitat. Bison could be obtained from Federal and state-owned bison herds that utilize similar habitats as the proposed reintroduction areas. All reintroduced animals would come from herds free of regulatory diseases, and would be certified as healthy by a qualified veterinarian. Reintroduction would begin with a soft release of five yearling bison at each site to establish a herd range within a specific area. Once established, additional bison could be added to the herds as necessary. Principles of modern conservation biology would be used to maintain genetic diversity.

within and between herds through periodic translocations and introductions. Bison herds would be allowed to expand to 50 adults at which point they would be managed through regulated public hunting. Wild bison are classified as a game animal in Montana and would be held in the public trust. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has management authority over disease-free wild bison and existing statutes are suitable for management of wild bison. Small bison herds are expected to be extremely cohesive, utilize habitats differently than cattle, distribute their range utilization over a broad area, and to be compatible with existing land uses and other wild ungulates.