

YOUR LIFE

Banking on Bison

An alternative livestock makes an attractive value addition for these producers.

BY DEBORAH R. HUSO



Bud Koeppen and his brother, Wallace, are third-generation farmers. In fact, Bud lives on his grandfather's farm, once a dairy made into a corn and soybean operation by the brothers' dad. When Bud and Wallace took over the operation in 1987, they continued their dad's way of doing things on the 160-acre farm, near Wheeler, Indiana. But, as Bud remarks, "There were some lean years."

Partly to help provide a buffer against the often volatile commodities market and partly to add some excitement to their agricultural operations, the brothers

decided to give bison a try. They had no experience with livestock, definitely not bison. However, Bud says when an acquaintance from the city started a bison herd near Rockville, he decided it was a farming skill that could be learned.

So in 2003, the two brothers ventured to St. Louis for the summer conference of the National Bison Association. They started networking and visiting other bison farms, and purchased their first 10 animals later that year in Minnesota. Shortly thereafter, they purchased another nine bison in Wisconsin because, Bud jokes, "You can never have too many buffalo."

Today, the brothers, co-owners of Broken Wagon Bison, have a herd of nearly 100, and their business is thriving.

MEAT MARKET OF TOMORROW. This is no surprise to Dave Carter, executive director of the National Bison Association. Once

upon a time, bison burgers were a novelty one could only get at a place like Wall Drug, South Dakota. But in 1966, Custer State Park held its first bison auction to trim down its herd, and by the 1970s and '80s, bison farms were popping up in the Dakotas and Colorado. With the cattle market on the downturn by the late '80s and into the early '90s, ranchers started looking at alternatives, Carter explains. Then, media mogul Ted Turner got into the bison business (his herd now numbers 51,000 animals across 15 ranches), and bison farming started gaining traction and market share.

What Do I Need To Know About Raising Bison?

Dave Carter and Bud Koeppen have a few words of wisdom for prospective bison ranchers:

Fencing is not the issue you might imagine. Carter recommends a good cattle fence that is 5 feet high. Working facilities are similar to those of cattle. Most producers use cattle chutes and squeezes, but Carter says you may have to modify cattle facilities to increase panel strength and ensure strong head catches.

You don't need barns. Bison don't like to be inside, and they are biologically designed to withstand severe weather.

Bison don't have much resistance to parasites. Koeppen deworms his animals three times a year. He and most other bison farmers use cattle vaccines off-label.

You must have a good mix of males and females. Carter says bison farmers don't do artificial insemination and "let romance happen in the pasture."

Be aware the cows don't have their first calf until they are 3 years old, but bison live a long time. A cow can be productive into her 20s.

Calving season is easier for bison than for cattle, as the animals aren't so large that cows need help.

Direct marketing and agritourism are an important part of the business. Customers like to connect with smaller, local producers. Koeppen says given the cost to raise the animals, it's been critical to his operation to get retail prices for the meat.

Commercial marketers are seeking additional supply. That provides a growing opportunity for producers who want to focus on cow/calf operations or want to sell finished bison directly into the wholesale marketplace.

Before you start your own operation, meet other producers, and join your state's bison association.



See the video at www.dtnpf-digital.com.

STABLE MARKET, ROOM FOR GROWTH. Carter says the bison market saw some instability in the late '90s, when animals started pricing really high, but more recent trends in consumer eating habits have stabilized it. He says since 2007, the increasingly mainstream interest in natural and sustainable food, better health and better taste has helped fuel a market uptick where demand for bison meat outweighs supply. "People have discovered this is a great-tasting product, and people want to know the story behind their food," Carter emphasizes. Bison meat is also low in fat and high in protein and iron, yet has a good cholesterol profile.

The latest National Bison Association market survey shows 93% of producers say they are short on trim, while 50% report being short on round, with 21% short on chuck. "The great thing about this business," Carter says, "is there are opportunities wherever you want to plug in."

Carter explains most bison producers sell their meat direct to the consumer. Currently, ground bison's retail price is around \$9 per pound, he notes. Animal prices are similar to cattle. A 400-pound weaned bison calf sells for about \$1,500, or \$3 to \$4 per pound.

The Koeppen brothers, who continue to raise corn and soybeans, say bison now makes up about 50% of their farm income, though they still produce about 100 acres of row crops. Meanwhile, the bison are on pasture 180 days a year, and the brothers engage in rotational grazing, moving the animals from one 5-acre paddock to another. Bud says bison can graze on less land than cattle because they are less selective eaters.

For Bud Koeppen (left), his brother Wallace and Bud's wife, Ruth, bison production has been almost like a pot of gold—generating 50% of their farm income each year.



Broken Wagon Bison sells 75 to 80% of its meat direct to the customer from its farm store, with two restaurants and one orchard as wholesale customers. The farm's proximity to Chicago has made all the difference, as has its willingness to accommodate tourists who pay \$10 per person to see the herd.

Bud admits there is just something about raising bison that makes him excited about farming again. And the animals make an impression—on producers as well as consumers.

Carter says that's why agritourism is such an important part of operations for most bison farmers. The public wants to see and know the animals. "Direct marketing is more typical in the bison business than any other livestock market," Carter remarks. "People love to see bison. I call the farm tours 'Buffalo TV.'" ●

EDITOR'S NOTE: Per the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), 48 states have achieved brucellosis-free status as of 2002. The only known focus of brucellosis is in bison and elk in the Greater Yellowstone Area. However, the three states surrounding Yellowstone National Park are brucellosis-free. For more information, visit bit.ly/2ftl8fw.

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