

**TESTIMONY BEFORE  
THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
ON S. 2301 A BILL TO IMPROVE THE MANAGEMENT OF  
INDIAN FISH AND WILDLIFE AND GATHERING RESOURCES**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Good Morning, Honorable members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. My name is Ervin Carlson and I am the President of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC), a non-profit organization comprised of 53 federally recognized Tribes across 18 States of the United States. I am honored to present this testimony on behalf of the ITBC member Tribes in support of passage of S. 2301. ITBC commends this committee's efforts to finally acknowledge and reaffirm the special relationship that exists between Native Americans and the fish and wildlife of this country. Native Americans have long believed they exist as co-owners of this earth with fish and wildlife. S. 2301 provides Native Americans an opportunity to develop the capacity and access the resources to protect, preserve and enhance fish and wildlife resources including buffalo. While ITBC strongly supports and endorses S. 2301, as it applies to all fish and wildlife resources, my following remarks are specific to buffalo as ITBC's primary objective is to assist Tribes with restoring and enhancing buffalo on Indian lands.

Historians estimate that approximately 30 to 80 million Buffalo thrived on the great plains of the United States for many centuries before they were hunted by the non-Indian to near extinction in the 1800's. Native Americans of the Great Plains thrived on the abundant buffalo prior to being relocated and restricted to Indian Reservations. For many generations, buffalo insured the survival of Native Americans of the Great Plains. Naturally, this co-existence of Native Americans and buffalo on the Great Plains resulted in the longstanding spiritual and cultural connection between Native Americans and buffalo. Buffalo provided Native Americans with food, shelter, clothing and essential tools and insured the continuance of their subsistence way of life resulting in a self sufficient existence that was devastated along with the destruction of the buffalo herds. The lifestyle of the Tribes, dominated by interaction with the natural world, was profoundly impacted by the needless loss of the buffalo that most Tribes still consider to be a holocaust.

While Native Americans of the Great Plains have been forced away from their customary subsistence lifestyle, their profound respect for buffalo remains. Buffalo remain an integral component of the cultural and religious beliefs and ceremonies of Native Americans.

The passage of time has not diminished the spiritual and cultural connection between Native Americans and buffalo and a strong desire exists among Native Americans to repopulate Indian lands with healthy buffalo.

## **BACKGROUND AND GOALS**

In 1992, seven Tribes committed to preserving the sacred relationship between buffalo and Native Americans established the ITBC as an effort to restore buffalo to Indian lands. ITBC focused its restoration efforts on reservation lands that often did not sustain other economic or agricultural efforts. Lands that were unproductive for farming or raising livestock were and still are suitable for buffalo. ITBC began actively restoring buffalo to Indian lands upon the receipt of limited grant funding from the Department of Interior. The organization began with the seven founding Tribes and approximately 1500 animals. Today, 53 Tribes have joined ITBC, 35 of them have buffalo herds of various sizes with a total of approximately 15,000 animals. However, the restoration efforts remain in infancy stages, as the buffalo herds have not yet developed to a degree to overcome the loss to the Tribal cultures, as many herds are comprised of very few animals and many herds remain vulnerable due to limited resources for proper management.

ITBC's primary focus remains on the restoration of buffalo to those Indian reservation lands that can sustain them to reestablish the sacred relationship between Tribes and buffalo. Although ITBC has been successful in its 10 years of existence with restoring buffalo in limited numbers to some Indian lands, many other Tribes desire the means to establish sound buffalo herds, but lack the resources to fulfill that desire.

Many ITBC member Tribes desire to raise buffalo only as a spiritual and cultural effort. These Tribes wish to cultivate their religious and spiritual connections to the buffalo and are not interested in commercial marketing of the buffalo for economic development efforts. However, some of these Tribes are interested in the harvest of buffalo only for the purpose of feeding Tribal members. Therefore, while ITBC's restoration efforts remain paramount, numerous ITBC member Tribes that have maintained viable buffalo herds are now interested in developing the means to provide buffalo to Native American populations as a healthy food source.

Native Americans currently suffer from the highest rates of Type 2 diabetes and they also suffer at extreme rates from cardio vascular and various other diet-related diseases. Studies indicate that Type 2 diabetes commonly emerges when a population undergoes radical diet changes. Native Americans have been forced to abandon traditional diets rich in wild game, buffalo, and plants. Based on current data, it is safe to assume that disease rates of Native Americans are directly impacted by a genetic inability to effectively metabolize modern foods. Range fed buffalo meat is low in fat and cholesterol and is compatible to the genetics of Indian people. ITBC strives to develop an educational initiative to reintroduce buffalo into the diets of Native Americans to combat the high rates of diet-related diseases.

Additionally, ITBC strives to develop processes to facilitate providing Tribally raised range-fed buffalo to Native Americans dependent on federal food distribution programs. Currently, buffalo meat provided to Native Americans living on Indian reservations is often not natural range fed buffalo but grain-fed buffalo raised by non-Indians. Grain feeding buffalo compromises the health benefits of the buffalo food products. Without adequate funding, ITBC cannot insure that Native American populations are provided range fed buffalo produced by Native American Tribes.

In addition to buffalo restoration and providing range-fed buffalo to Native American populations as a healthy food source, some ITBC member Tribes are interested in utilizing buffalo for Tribal economic development efforts. Thus, ITBC has now undertaken efforts to insure that ITBC member Tribes have opportunities to develop economically sustainable buffalo herds through the development of marketing initiatives. The current sizes of Tribal buffalo herds limit achieving economic sustainability of the herds and of the buffalo projects providing Tribes with economic benefit. However, with adequate funding to develop sustainable herds, commercial marketing of buffalo remains an important goal for many ITBC member Tribes.

Since its inception in 1992, ITBC has participated in the longstanding debates of the Greater Yellowstone Inter-Agency Brucellosis Committee (GYIBC), an organization established to address the risk of Yellowstone National Park buffalo transmitting brucellosis to livestock. Yellowstone National Park buffalo possess pure bison bison genus genetics, unlike other North American strains that indicate cross-breeding with cattle. ITBC desires to transfer excess Yellowstone buffalo to Tribal lands as part of ITBC's restoration efforts. However, Yellowstone buffalo have been determined to be at risk of brucellosis and the current policy of the GYIBC has been to kill buffalo that wander out of the Yellowstone Park for feeding purposes.

ITBC has recently obtained a non-voting seat on the GYIBC with the intention of supporting alternatives to address the Yellowstone buffalo brucellosis concern including the development of more effective vaccinations and quarantine facilities for testing and treatment. ITBC remains hopeful that Yellowstone buffalo, upon successful treatment to diminish brucellosis concerns, may be transferred to Tribal lands.

### **SUPPORT FOR S. 2301**

ITBC supports the passage of federal legislation that acknowledges the significant relationship between Native Americans and the fish and wildlife resources located on Indian lands. Native Americans co-existed with fish and wildlife in this country for many centuries. The rights of Tribes to continue with hunting, fishing and gathering wildlife resources has been recognized and guaranteed in treaties between Tribes and the United States. S. 2301 will acknowledge the inherent sovereign authority of Tribes to manage fish and wildlife resources within their respective jurisdictions and provide Tribes with the means to develop and achieve meaningful management objectives.

Legislation specifically authorizing Tribes to manage fish and wildlife resources is consistent with the promotion of Tribal self-determination. Additionally, ITBC believes S. 2301 will foster the sound management of Tribal fish and wildlife resources that in turn will have a positive effect on Tribal economies. S. 2301 solidifies the trust duty of the United States to insure proper management of Tribal fish and wildlife resources.

S. 2301 will provide critical funding to allow Native American Tribes to investigate and inventory fish and wildlife resources and then to develop the capacity to effectively manage those resources. Upon proper identification of resources, Tribes will be empowered to address the protection, conservation and enhancement of fish and wildlife. Presently, many Tribes have not developed regulatory schemes for their fish and wildlife resources, such as buffalo, and do not have the trained personnel to best protect these resources. S. 2301 will allow Tribes to develop effective management plans that will maximize the production of fish and wildlife, including buffalo, to better meet Tribal subsistence, ceremonial, recreational and commercial needs. Additionally, S. 2301 will create employment opportunities for Tribal members in wildlife management positions.

S. 2301 also establishes a framework for the long-range goal of some ITBC member Tribes to commercially market buffalo meat through the authority to develop certification standards and marketing initiatives. ITBC member Tribes have been frustrated with the inability to coordinate with the Secretary of Agriculture to furnish Tribally produced range-fed buffalo to the Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations. S. 2301 would allow ITBC member Tribes to develop an alternative Tribally controlled program to distribute natural range fed buffalo to Native American populations. Additionally, S. 2301 requires the Secretary of Agriculture to consult with Tribes to allow Tribes meaningful participation in USDA programs and improve the diet related health conditions of Indian people.

Finally, S. 2301 would allow ITBC and its member Tribes the resources to offer meaningful alternatives to the needless killing of Yellowstone Area buffalo.

## **CONCLUSION**

Passage of S. 2301 will insure that the critical efforts of ITBC to restore buffalo to Indian lands will continue. Currently, ITBC has been funded only by yearly grants with no assurance of continuous funding. Although ITBC has made significant and admirable progress to restore buffalo to Indian lands, the herds remain in stages of infancy and consistent and adequate funding is critical to continue with restoration efforts. S. 2301 will allow Tribes to achieve the goal of providing healthy range-fed buffalo to American Indian populations to combat diet related diseases. Most importantly, S. 2301 will allow Tribes to restore and manage buffalo herds on their Tribal lands, in a manner that is compatible with the economic goals and the spiritual and cultural beliefs of the Tribes.

ITBC believes this legislative effort is long overdue and strongly urges passage.