

BISON

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Building a bison herd

David Henry bought the five bulls, which are about 2 1/2 years old, from a ranch near Powell Butte, between Redmond and Prineville.

Virtue said the heifers, which are 1 1/2, came from the Brown Bison Ranch near Vale.

He said Stellar Provisions operation started with relatively young animals “to let them get used to this as home.”

If the bison have the desired effect on the soil, the Henry property should be able to support a larger herd, Virtue said.

But he’s not focusing solely on how to pack on more pounds of bison flesh — pounds equaling dollars, in the ranching business.

“How do you make this whole ecosystem healthier, not just more grass for bison,” Virtue said. “Insects and birds will come back without chemicals.”

The process requires patience.

Virtue has fed the bison hay through the winter — as cattle ranchers do — but he said he’ll also probably have to supplement their diet this summer and prevent overgrazing of the recovering grasses.

“We want to get that grass stimulated,” Loren said.

Virtue said he plans to butcher one bull this summer because they have more bulls than they need for breeding.

Breeding will happen this fall — naturally, he said, not by artificial insemination.

Ideally, the herd’s first batch of calves will arrive in the spring of 2021.

Bison, he said, neither need nor will tolerate human aid with calving.

“They do it themselves,” he said.

His plan is to keep the calves on the property, finishing them with grass, before taking them to the butcher.

A conspicuous herd

Loren said the arrival of the bison in his pasture beside West Campbell Loop, a relatively well-traveled road that leads to the Western Heights



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald

Loren Henry, who lives in a home above the bison pasture, said he has a “ringside seat” to watch the interesting animals.

subdivision, has lured curious sightseers.

“There’s been lots of interest with people driving by and stopping to watch,” he said. “It’s amazing how much buzz it’s created in the community.”

The bison have also provided entertainment for Loren, whose home stands on a knoll to the southwest of the pasture.

“I’ve got a ringside seat looking down at them,” he said. “They’re just a fascinating creature.”

Loren said the bison, despite their imposing size, remind him more of goats than of cattle, as they gambol across the pasture in a way he describes as “almost playful.”

Although he concedes he was initially nervous about having bison on his property — mainly due to their bulk and their reputation, from places such as Yellowstone, for occasional aggression — Loren said his firsthand experience with the animals, both at the Brown Ranch



near Vale and now on his own land, has allayed his fears.

There’s no comparison between Yellowstone bison — which are wild — and the Stellar Provisions herd, which come from ranching stock, Virtue said.

Even so, Loren said the plan is to boost the height of the pasture fencing to about 6 feet to increase security.

Although he’s mainly a spectator and facilitator — and, of course, a landlord — Loren said he’s excited

about the prospects of his son’s new business.

“To me it’s all coming together,” Loren said. “My role is just to be supporting and encouraging. We’re learning as we go. That’s part of the fun.”