

Bringing back the bison

Operators of bison ranch near Baker City seek to improve the soil

By LISA BRITTON
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Garrett Virtue grins when asked about the number of bison grazing in the Baker Valley field behind him.

The herd started with 30 in December 2019.

Today there are 200 of the shaggy beasts. This increase was not part of the original plan.

“No,” Virtue says with a shake of his head.

But his smile proves it is a good thing.

Virtue and his wife, Kerbie, manage Aurora Meadows Ranch for Stellar Provisions. The company’s second ranch, named Solana Mountain, is at Bozeman, Montana, and operated by Alyssa Henry and John Vose.

Stellar Provisions was founded by David Henry, a Baker City native. The company has four focuses: raising bison and chickens in Baker City, and producing beef and lambs in Bozeman.

David originally suggested the company research raising bison.

For the past 15 months, the bison, which roam a field along West Campbell Loop just outside Baker City, have attracted attention from passers-by.

In March 2021 the animals were moved to a new home to the north, along Pocatong Road.

“We’ve been cleaning all winter and getting the fences ready,” Garrett said of the new property.

Bison require fencing at least six feet tall to keep them from jumping over it. The powerful animals can also run up to 40 miles per hour.

Garrett says the Aurora Meadows Ranch will provide more space for the bison, along with 300 chickens.

The bison herd increased faster than expected because several California bison operations went out of business in 2020. Stellar Provisions bought the animals, which



Bison graze in a pasture just west of Baker City in March.

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

included bred cows.

Garrett says they needed to move the herd — in several cattle truck loads — prior to calving.

As he looks over the herd on an unusually warm March day, Garrett smiles as he watches the bison nose through hay, or run down the hill in a thunder of hooves after quenching their thirst at a natural spring.

He points out yearlings, older cows, and the bulls roaming through the herd.

Bison have, over the past 500 years, gone from abundant to nearly extinct.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, bison numbered 30 to 60 million in North America in the 1500s.

As Europeans moved across North America, changes in native habitat and diseases brought by cattle impacted the number

of bison during the 1700s and 1800s. Starting in the mid-1800s, bison were harvested for their hides to satisfy fashion trends.

By 1900, there were fewer than 1,000 in North America.

Through conservation efforts, the number has slowly increased.

Today, there are about 500,000 bison in North America.

“Not enough,” Garrett says. “Hopefully we can fix it. They deserve a place here.”

IMPROVING THE SOIL

Although the bison are the most obvious product — it’s hard to miss the massive animals — Stellar Provisions also focuses on smaller tasks, including addressing the condition of the soil at a microscopic level.

“Soil health is our number one driver,”

Garrett says. “The more you increase soil health, the more you increase production.”

“And create a more nutrient-dense product,” Kerbie says.

This approach, called “regenerative agriculture,” considers all parts of the system, from the soil that grows the grass to the animals that graze the vegetation.

In their new space, the bison will be moved through 10-acre pastures every day using a system of temporary electric fencing.

But first, the animals will need to learn about those hot wires.

“There might be some growing pains,” Garrett says. “This is all learning, all new.”

He says this rotating grazing schedule will simulate, in a way, how these animals

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