

## **How to Select a Veterinarian for Your Bison Herd's Care!**

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Producers sometimes find it difficult to locate a veterinarian willing and able or capable of helping them with their bison herd's health issues and disease prevention strategies. Most large animal cattle veterinarians would be very capable of dealing with your bison herd's problems. The challenge is to find the veterinarians with a special interest in bison and go from there.

Since many of the health issues and preventative medicine strategies in bison are similar to those in cattle, the mixed animal veterinarians in our rural towns can extrapolate their knowledge of cattle and apply it to bison in most circumstances. There are more similarities than differences.

The Bison Producers of Alberta (BPA) has a list in their office of the veterinarians in Alberta interested in working on bison. Other provinces may have similar lists. In speaking with your local vet clinic, if they are not able to assist you, they will likely be able to refer you to a veterinarian who has an interest in bison. If you know a veterinarian who has a keen interest in bison, encourage them to attend the National Bison Convention in Regina or the regional field days in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba at these allow events allow them to network with producers, marketers, other veterinarians and bison enthusiasts who have a keen interest in maintaining healthy bison herds.

Make your veterinarian aware of the Bison Producers Handbook as that is a valuable reference on all aspects of bison production including health and animal welfare. It was prepared by people active in the industry. Do not hesitate to share any relevant articles you find on bison with the local veterinarian. Information on malignant catarrhal fever (MCF) or *Mycoplasma pneumonia* or parasites is valuable for veterinarians in dealing with present and future bison herd health issues. These diseases would be different from what they experience in their cattle clients' herds.

Veterinarians in general are highly skilled in post mortems. Often they are the first contact you have. If you as producers call for an autopsy before there is much post mortem change (rotting of the carcass) there is a good chance that a cause of death can be made. With this information recommendations for treatment of the rest of the herd can be made. Lab tests including blood work or fecal tests commonly are done for their cattle clients so similar tests for bison are also possible.

If handling bison for the first time young veterinarians must become accustomed to the speed of bison movement and the amount of restraint necessary to keep them and their handler safe. If you happen to be working the herd, do not hesitate to get your veterinarian involved as it assists in teaching them some of the finer aspects of bison handling. Let veterinarians help at the yearly processing and weaning of the calves. By allowing such involvement, veterinarians become accustomed to handling bison as well as using the handling system. It also gives them an opportunity to make a good assessment of the overall health from close up.

Producers in the bison industry need good facilities to handle their bison. This allows cattle veterinarians to adjust quickly to your facilities. In fact they will find most bison facilities safer for the bison and their handlers than many of the cattle facilities with which they must work. Through experience, bison handlers quickly learn how bison kick and can identify the safe access points on the chute to safely deal with the bison.

There is often one veterinarian at most clinics that has an interest in exotics or alternative livestock. The local clinic is where most of your supplies, vaccines, dewormers and possibly antibiotics if necessary can be purchased. Virtually no products are approved for bison so one must have a close working relationship (veterinary/client/patient relationship) in order to get prescriptions filled. The clinic will keep a record of prescriptions. This information is needed to determine slaughter withdrawal times. It also is a good practice to maintain quality control.

New graduate veterinarians are getting a few hours of lectures in the alternative livestock at the two western Canadian veterinary schools. For export and regulatory work the local veterinarian must be accredited for bison. Encourage your veterinarian to obtain this accreditation if you plan on exporting live animals to the United States. Most of the routine work on bison such as pregnancy testing, semen evaluations, tagging and installing Bison (White 300 series) RFID tags, and blood testing is pretty much the same as it is on cattle. If your veterinarian's clinic has the capability to do things like fecal testing, blood work and other lab tests in house you will get answers to your problems quicker.

A few final points: The veterinary profession in general attends to the health and welfare of our food producing and companion animals. In working with your veterinarian be transparent as to your needs. Use them as an integrated part of your management team. By being involved they can serve you better. Prevention is much less costly than dealing with "a wreck" within your bison herd. Communicate with your local clinic knowing you will need supplies advice and professional services over the years. You need to find the veterinarian that is the best fit for your operation. It is beneficial to ask other producers which veterinarian a neighbor uses and the level of their satisfaction. It is often only necessary to have the vet attend at processing times say once or twice a year. The relationship will last decades and you both will enjoy learning together. Undoubtedly many will even enjoy the occasional bison steak or burger with the producer.