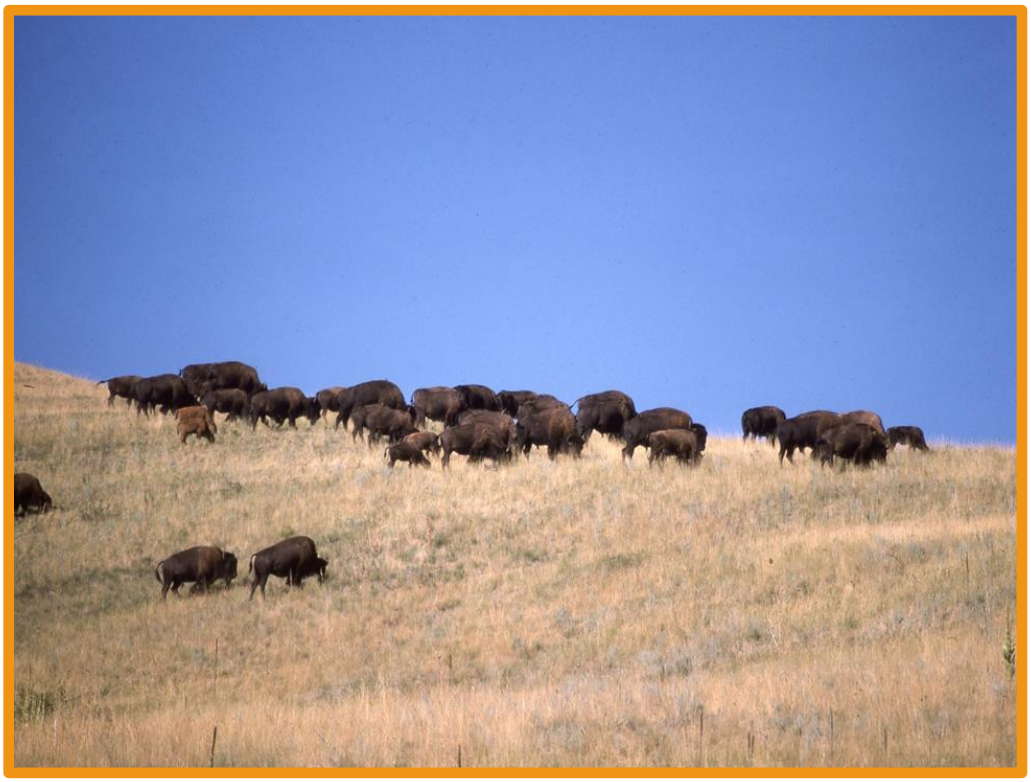
May 13 and 14, 2026
Saskatoon, SK, Canada

Wild Buffalo Summit 2026

Report and Action Plan



Supporters

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Message from the Co-Chairs

Honouring Our Commitments: From Conversations to Collective Action

Last year, as we closed the first Wild Buffalo Summit, participants shared a clear vision for what was needed next. People called for stronger relationships, broader participation, continued dialogue, practical action, greater attention to land and policy, support for buffalo caretakers, and a shared vision that could carry this work forward.

This year, we are encouraged by how many of those aspirations are beginning to take shape. More than sixty participants came together from First Nations, Métis communities, conservation organizations, governments, researchers, ranching communities, youth, Elders, and buffalo caretakers. Together, we expanded the circle while remaining grounded in Indigenous leadership, ceremony, and relationship.

Participants asked for opportunities to build trust and engage in meaningful conversations. In response, this year's gathering created space for listening, learning, mapping, visioning, and collaborative planning. Across diverse perspectives and experiences, relationships were strengthened and a shared sense of purpose continued to emerge.

We also heard a desire to move from discussion to action. Throughout the gathering, participants identified practical pathways for future work related to land, policy, genetics, youth engagement, education, natural law, and relationship-building. Many individuals expressed interest in continuing this work through working groups and ongoing collaboration.

Last year, participants encouraged us to better understand where buffalo rematriation efforts are taking place and how they can connect. This year, we developed a shared picture of active, emerging, long-term, and at-risk initiatives across the Prairies. The result was a stronger understanding of both the progress already underway and the opportunities that lie ahead.

Participants also emphasized the importance of Indigenous knowledge, language, ceremony, and cultural teachings. Throughout this gathering, these were not treated as additions to the conversation. They formed the foundation of the work, helping guide discussions toward reciprocity, responsibility, and right relationship with buffalo, the land, and one another.

Youth involvement was another aspiration that emerged strongly last year. While much work remains, youth leadership, mentorship, education, and intergenerational knowledge

transfer became important priorities in this year's discussions. Participants consistently recognized that future generations must be active partners in carrying this work forward.

Perhaps most importantly, participants expressed a desire for momentum. The strong commitment to continued collaboration, future gatherings, shared learning, and coordinated action demonstrates that momentum is growing. The relationships created and strengthened over the past two years are becoming the foundation for a broader movement focused on restoring buffalo, grasslands, cultural connection, and community well-being.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who has contributed their knowledge, leadership, vision, and commitment. Together, we are transforming shared aspirations into meaningful action. While much work remains ahead, we leave this gathering confident that we are moving forward together, guided by buffalo, grounded in relationship, and inspired by a vision that reaches well beyond ourselves and toward future generations.

Dr. Tasha Hubbard, Peepeekesis Cree Nation; University of Alberta Faculty of Native Studies

Candice Pete-Cardoso, Little Pine First Nation; University of Saskatchewan kihci-okāwīmāw askiy Knowledge Centre

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1. Summit Context

Meeting basics

- Wild Buffalo Summit, May 13–14, 2026
- College of Law, University of Saskatchewan — including the Indigenous Law Centre ceremonial space — Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Treaty 6 Territory
- Approximately 66 participants over two days
- Organized with funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada, Grassland Knowledge and Learning Hub, and the Alberta Wilderness Association; some participant travel was funded through the Buffalo Treaty Research Network (part of the Critical Approaches to Indigenous Relationality SSHRC Partnership Grant), as well as the Nature Conservancy of Canada Alberta and WWF-US Great Plains Program. Support for Elder honoraria was provided by the kihci-okāwīmāw askiy Knowledge Centre and the Office of the Vice-President Research, USask
- Co-Chairs: Dr. Tasha Hubbard and Candice Pete-Cardoso; Lead Facilitator and report writer: Rhett Sangster
- Additional facilitation and coordination support: Joely BigEagle-Kequahtooway, Naomi Carriere, Donna van de Velde
- Note-takers: Ruiping Luo, Madeline Burns, Christian Artuso, Naomi Carriere, Yanabah Whitehorse
- Organizing Committee members: Dr. Tasha Hubbard, Candice Pete-Cardoso, Cliff Wallis, Ruiping Luo, Donna van de Velde, Lisa Ladouceur, Naomi Carriere, Cheyenne Ironman, Jeremy Hogan, Diandra Bruised Head, Benjamin Ralston, Dan Fox, Joely BigEagle-Kequahtooway, Christian Artuso, Ross MacDonald, Rhett Sangster
- All acronyms used in this report are spelled out fully in Appendix A

Who was in the room

The Summit brought together a deliberately broad range of participants:

- First Nations and Métis bison Keepers, Guardians, and Caretakers from across the prairies
- Elders from multiple Nations
- Conservation organizations and land trusts (Alberta Wilderness Association, Nature Conservancy of Canada)
- Federal and provincial government representatives (ECCC, Parks Canada, Saskatchewan Agriculture)
- Academics and researchers
- Artists
- Youth
- Non-Indigenous ranchers and producers with bison operations

- U.S. representatives via Zoom recordings: InterTribal Buffalo Council and Wind River Tribal Buffalo Program
- The full list of summit participants can be found in this report's Appendix

Language for "plains buffalo"

- This report mirrors the discussions of the summit, in which "buffalo" and "bison" were used interchangeably to refer to plains bison.
- While some discussions at the summit referred to efforts with *wood* bison, this report and the efforts of the summit focus on the unique circumstances and efforts of rematriating *plains* bison.
- The first Wild Buffalo Summit in 2025 was gifted a name by Elder Charlie Fox of the Kainai Nation: *iinnii kom moi taan* (Buffalo to overcome, to persevere).
- To honour that gift and Charlie's direction to respect the Indigenous Peoples where we all work, it is important to recognize all the languages that describe this cultural and ecological keystone species. Table 1. provides a sampling of many of the words used on the Canadian portion of the Great Plains.

Table 1. Indigenous words for plains buffalo (compiled by Christian Artuso)

Niitsitapi (Blackfoot)	iiníí (plains buffalo)	https://dictionary.blackfoot.atlas-ling.ca
A'aninin (Atsina, Gros Ventre)	byiih (female), eneečee (male)	https://native-languages.org
Nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree)	paskwâwimostos	https://creedictionary.com
Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe)	mashkode-bizhiki	https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu
Michif (southern Métis)	lii bufloo	https://metismuseum.ca/michif_dictionary.php
Michif (Cree Michif)	paskwâw moshtosh	https://metismuseum.ca/northern_michif_dictionary.php
Dakȟótiyapi (Dakota)	pte (female), tataŋka (male), tataŋka ikceka	https://dictionary.swodli.com
Lakȟótiyapi (Lakota)	pte (female), tȟatȟaŋka (male)	https://glosbe.com/en/lkt

Ĩyãħé Nakón mąkóce (Nakoda)	pte (female), mnoga (male), tatâga	https://dictionary.stoneynakoda.org
Tsúùtʼínà Gūnáhà (Sarcee)	xāní-tīī	http://tsuutinagunahainstitute.com
Ktunaxa (Kutenai)	kamquq̓uku‡ ʔiyamu	https://firstvoices.com/ktunaxa

Summit goals

The organizing team developed five goals for the Summit:

- Promote knowledge sharing and coordination among key actors and rights holders working toward plains buffalo rematriation
- Continue building understanding and relationships among diverse communities, with the aim of forming a coalition around plains buffalo rematriation
- Share information on existing work across the prairies — preventing duplication of effort, and creating space to understand the aspirations of Keepers, Guardians, and Caretakers
- Provide participants with space to “unfence” their visions for wild buffalo rematriation, seeking a shared aspirational view of success in 25 years
- Identify actions in three areas:
  - Policy — what is still needed regarding species designation at federal and provincial levels
  - Places — where are the most contiguous natural habitats, and which collectives of Indigenous Peoples and interested landholders are engaged in rematriation
  - Governance — what structures, organizations, and processes could address the concerns and aspirations of participants

Background: previous summit and context

- This was the second Wild Buffalo Summit; the first took place in Calgary, Alberta on February 4-5, 2025.
- Cliff Wallis (AWA) described the first summit as "reconciliation in action" — bringing together Elders, ranchers, and other players to connect people with their territories and with buffalo
- Three areas of focus carried from the first summit: policy and legislation; large landscapes; and technical assistance for caretakers
- Key framing from the first summit: plains buffalo are not classified as a wild species in the three prairie provinces. They are listed as "Extirpated" in Manitoba; as "big game" if free roaming or otherwise as “agricultural livestock” in Saskatchewan, and either "Extirpated" or "agricultural livestock" in Alberta

- There is no federal listing for Plains Buffalo. The Committee on Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) has recommended “Threatened” status but Ministers have never accepted the recommendation
- A call to formally designate plains buffalo as a wild species provincially, particularly on public lands, was a recurring thread across both summits
- The Buffalo Treaty — a contemporary inter-Nation agreement — serves as a guiding vision for this work; IBRI (International Buffalo Relations Institute) supports signatory Nations and has grown from 12 to approximately 80 people in its network
- The Trilateral Committee of wildlife agencies (Canada, United States, Mexico) provides cross-border context; Paulette Fox represented this work and its connections to Indigenous governance frameworks across Turtle Island

Cultural Grounding: Feedback from Elders and Knowledge Keepers

- The summit was opened in a good way – with ceremony
- Day 1 opened with a Pipe Ceremony led by Elder Joseph Naytowhow. Participation was offered as open and welcome, not mandatory
- Elders set the cultural and relational tone throughout the summit:
  - Elder Joseph Naytowhow — welcomed participants to Treaty 6 Territory; offered greetings across Plains languages; closed Day 1 with a story about connecting mind and heart
  - Elder Julie Pitzel — reflected on hospitality, and on the roles of women and children in buffalo hunts
  - Elder Roland Duquette — welcomed participants; reminded the gathering that wâhkôhtowin (right relationship) is not yet fully present — ‘Reconciliation’ may not yet be the right word for where we are
  - Elder Charlie Fox — spoke of restoring traditional diets and health; named the Wild Buffalo Summit *‘Iinnii kom moi taan’* (a name given the previous year). He opened Day 2 with a naming ceremony, honouring Cliff Wallis with a Blackfoot name.
  - Joseph Naytowhow, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, and Brent Coté shared music throughout the summit, including a welcome song (Miywâsin), and a round dance.
  - Joely BigEagle-Kequahtooway reflected on Indigenous conceptions of time as a spiral rather than linear — relevant to the summit's pace and its willingness to let things unfold on Creator's time
  - Day 2 closed with co-chair reflections and a closing prayer/ceremony

How the agenda was designed and carried out

The agenda was designed as a deliberate journey, with each phase building on the last:

- Connection (Day 1 morning and afternoon) — ceremony, introductions, framing presentations situating the summit in the longer history of the movement
- Current system (Day 1 afternoon) — knowledge-sharing presentations from active programs across the prairies and into the U.S.A.; participant mapping exercise placing current and emerging buffalo work on a large-format prairie map and Approaches Board
- A different future (Day 2 morning and afternoon) — sense-making from the map; Co-Chair Tasha Hubbard and Marie-Eve Marchand's IBRI video offering a large-scale vision of connected buffalo corridors; participants broke into two parallel small-group tracks (Unfenced/Transformative visions and Near-Term/Within-the-System next steps)
- Pathways (Day 2 afternoon) — groups reported back; from those discussions, seven emerging themes were identified, placed on post-it notes in different parts of the room, and participants self-selected into pathway groups for focused discussions
- Momentum and next steps (Day 2 late afternoon) — large-group closing harvest; reflection on how to stay connected and keep the energy moving
- Day 2 included dedicated time for Indigenous participants to gather separately over lunch

2. Where We Are Now

This section draws on three data sources from the summit: the participant mapping exercise, Day 1 and Day 2 knowledge-sharing presentations, and the Patterns Wall. The first part below combines the map and presentations into a picture of what's currently on the ground. The second part presents the Patterns Wall - as it is the only source that is entirely participants' own real-time voice, and it reads differently from the other two. A short synthesis follows.

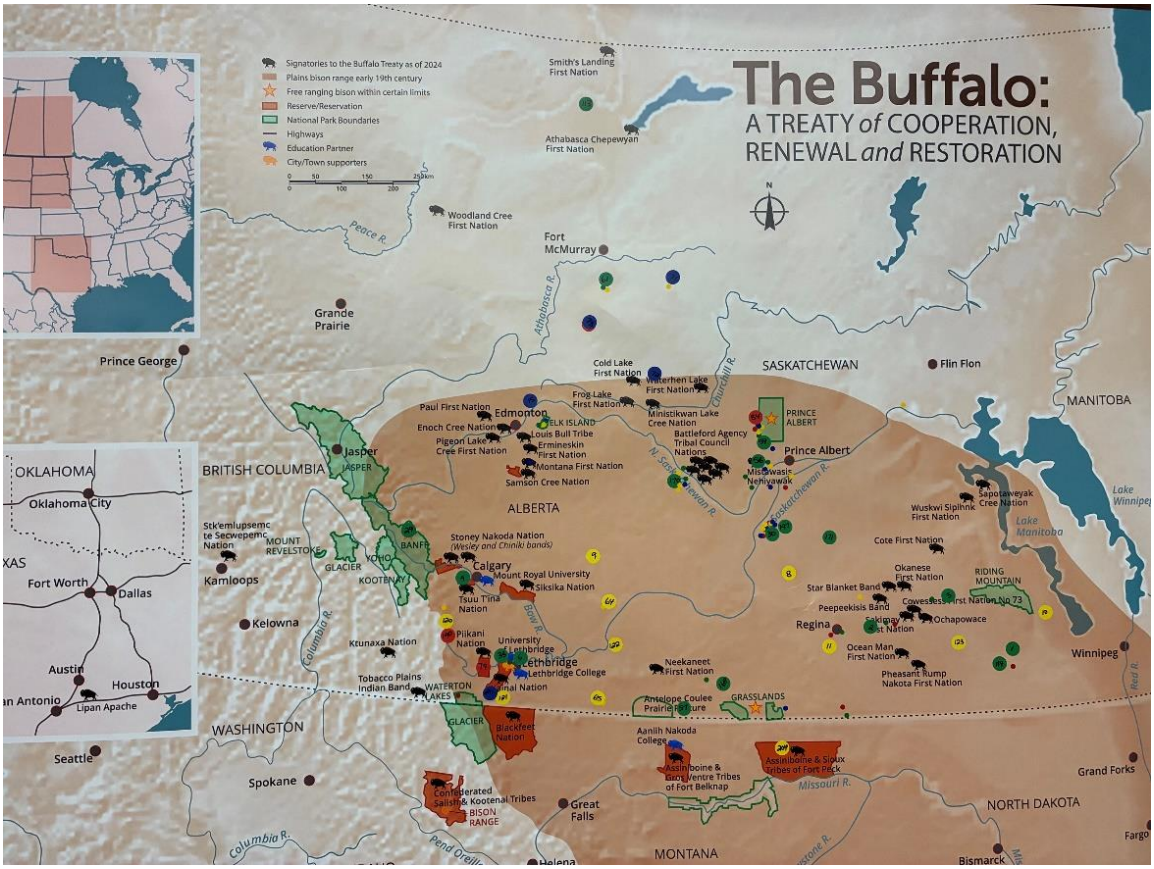
Part 1: What's on the Ground — Map and Presentations

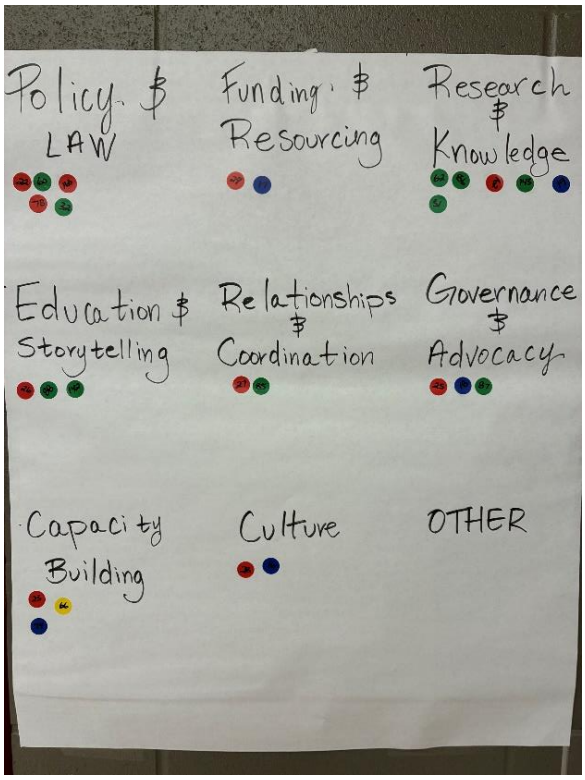
- Participants mapped their work by placing colour-coded and numbered stickers on a large prairie map and an Approaches Board (for non-geographic, cross-cutting work). Green stickers represent work currently taking place, yellow stickers signify opportunities emerging in the next five years, blue stickers represent long-term opportunities (10+ years) and red stickers signify areas of risk or concern.



- Participants completed "mapping cards" for each sticker, describing the work in one sentence and circling relevant categories from a list of ten: stewardship/land management; education/youth; funding; research; governance; culture/ceremony; policy/advocacy; conservation/ecology; capacity building; economic development; other).

- 62 mapping cards were completed across approximately 32 organizations and Nations.
- Ten knowledge-sharing presentations from Day 1 and Day 2 gave voice to many of the same programs — adding texture, story, and specificity to the mapping cards:
  - Kat Hecker (Nature Conservancy of Canada / Old Man on His Back)
  - Clint Johnstone (Mistawasis Nêhiyawak)
  - Merek Wigness (bison genetics / IUCN criteria, Sask Bison Association)
  - Dillon Watt via Zoom video recording (Banff National Park bison program)
  - Monique Desjarlais (National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture & Food (NCIAF) / Indigenous Prairie Bison Initiative)
  - Todd Shury (Sturgeon River Plains Bison Herd / Prince Albert National Park)
  - Jason Baldes via Zoom video recording (Wind River Tribal Buffalo Program / InterTribal Buffalo Council)
  - Chief Tanya Stone (Mosquito Grizzly Bear's Head Lean Man First Nation)
  - Chief Ron Bear (Muskoday First Nation)
  - Bill Snow (Stoney Nakoda Nations/ Banff Bison Monitoring Project)





Clusters of work on the map:

- **Southwest Alberta:** the densest and most colour-diverse cluster on the map: active herds in Blood Tribe (#33, 211), and Piikani Nations (#79), alongside emerging rematriation planning by Blackfoot Confederacy (#190), and the Foothills Bison Restoration Society (#120), efforts by the International Buffalo Relations Institute (IBRI) to build connections and capacity (#4, 5) and Blackfoot cultural protection efforts (#121).
- **National Parks as federal anchors** (Banff, Elk Island, Prince Albert, Grasslands and Riding Mountain): active rematriation transfers to Indigenous communities; Banff program described as an explicitly ecocultural model — cultural restoration and ecological rematriation as one objective, with ceremonial harvesting led by Treaty 7 Nations and ecosystem changes already visible. Prince Albert NP is a partner in managing Sturgeon River herd. While not an attendee at the Summit, Grasslands NP as another important federal anchor on the map.
- **Northern Alberta and Saskatchewan**: this cluster represents a mix of active and emerging work - herds at Métis Crossing near Smoky Lake, AB (#15) and Willow Lake Métis Nation, SK (#61); Buffalo River Dene Nation (#71), at an early land use planning stage to bring wood bison back to ancestral territory; and two wild free-ranging herds near Waterhen/Flotten Lake (#72) and the Primrose/McCusker River area (#73), related by lineage to the Sturgeon River herd (#84,).
- **Central Saskatchewan:** most active Saskatchewan cluster; anchored by herds in Mosquito Grizzly Bear's Head Lean Man First Nation (#170), Mistawasis Nêhiyawak

(#58), Muskowekwan First Nation (#171) and the Sturgeon River Plains Bison Herd (#59, 84), within and around Prince Albert National Park.

- **Saskatoon** as a research hub: Livestock and Forage Centre of Excellence (LFCE) /USask (#30) and USask- Soil and Agroecosystem (SAGE) (#197) together anchor a university-based support cluster in Saskatoon — active work in genetics, vaccines, bison-land interaction, cultural integration, and event support for the wider network across the prairies.
- **Manitoba** (Sioux Valley/Fort Ellice area): Sioux Valley Dakota Nation has an established herd in the region (#114, 1), nearly 20 years old, still needing capacity and sustainability support; Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC)/Fort Ellice an emerging rematriation site (#123).
- **Cross-prairie / non-geographic:** NCIAF/ Indigenous Prairie Bison Initiative (IPBI), IBRI, Canadian Bison Association, Saskatchewan Agriculture, and AWA operate across the whole map.
- **The beginnings of a potential east-west corridor** in the southern prairies: Efforts in southwest Alberta could connect with AWA's work at Suffield (#64) and Milk River/Kennedy Coulee (#65) in southeastern Alberta, to Old Man on His Back (#57), Grasslands National Park, NCC's Fort Ellice site in SW Manitoba (#123), and First Nations' lands, to create a connectivity corridor across the southern grasslands. Sticker #169 (no card filled out) was also placed in this zone on the map. If these sites were connected — through land trusts, policy change, and inter-Nation and agency coordination — they could form the backbone of the east-west prairie corridor that participants described in their visioning.
- **Notable absences:** Few stickers appear on the map in Manitoba and southern Saskatchewan, relative to that region's Buffalo Treaty signatory footprint. In any future mapping efforts, more work should be done to explore these Nations' buffalo activities. The commercial ranching sector is also underrepresented on the map.

What's active (green stickers — 25 entries)

- The majority of current rematriation efforts on the map are being led by First Nation and Métis communities. There are also federal and provincial efforts to build capacity (NCIAF Indigenous Prairie Bison Initiative, Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture), national parks with rematriation efforts and capacity support (Elk Island, Banff, Prince Albert), conservation organizations (NCC/Old Man on His Back, Alberta Wilderness Association), a growing research infrastructure (genetics, vaccines, cultural integration), and coordination and education roles (International Bison Relations Institute, SAGE, Canadian Bison Association, Elk Island).
- **Indigenous-led rematriation:**
  - Mosquito Grizzly Bear's Head Lean Man First Nation (two active herds, own fencing and caretaking crew, is the only First Nation with a quarantine site, and Yellowstone has offered to gift 100 bison and MGHLM is prepared to receive them);

  - Muskoday First Nation (program has been running since 1995 — ~40 head; four at a time harvested with ceremony; buffalo meat to Elders, school, daycare, assisted living; still struggling with funding sustainability after three decades)
  - Mistawasis Nêhiyawak (animals arriving in summer of 2026, fire renewed the land two years ago, working on Creator's time);
  - Muskowekwan First Nation (stewardship focus);
  - Blood Tribe/Kainai (cultural herd, keeping bison wild);
  - Willow Lake Métis Nation (wood bison rematriated January 2026)
  - Sioux Valley Dakota Nation (nearly 20 years, needs capacity and sustainability support);
- **National Parks and conservation organizations:**
  - Elk Island NP (transfers and education, entries were added to the Approaches Board highlighting research and education);
  - Prince Albert NP co-managing the Sturgeon River herd;
  - Banff NP/Stoney Tribal Administration (ecocultural reintroduction, ceremonial harvesting, ecological monitoring);
  - Old Man on His Back/NCC (~100 animals, 13,000 acres, herd handled once a year, transfers made to Kahkewistahaw and Standing Buffalo First Nations)
- **Cross-cutting support:**
  - NCIAF and IBRI networks (coordination, knowledge, caretaker gatherings);
  - USask research cluster — LFCE/USask (genetics, vaccines, bison-land interaction, cultural integration) and SAGE (#197, event support across the prairies);
  - Saskatchewan Agriculture (research, land and forage programs, economic development);
  - AWA policy advocacy, grassland protection efforts;
  - Canadian Bison Association (education including three major conventions per year, DNA research)
- Active work is multidimensional: average 5.3 categories per green mapping card entry; Nation-led entries in particular show that communities doing this work do not separate stewardship, culture, governance, education, food sovereignty, and economic development into silos — echoing what was heard in pre-summit interviews

What's emerging (yellow stickers — 13 entries)

- Yellow stickers point to what could be emerging in the next five years. The yellow layer could substantially expand the active picture — new rematriation sites in Alberta and Manitoba, cultural infrastructure in Regina and SW Alberta, and ongoing policy discussions at Suffield and Milk River. It is also worth noting that the emerging layer is currently being led largely by organizations with broad mandates (NCIAF, IBRI, AWA) and non-Indigenous entities (AWA, Foothills Bison Restoration Society, NCC) rather than community-based actors with specific herd management roles — a different character from the active layer.

- **Site-specific rematriation and policy efforts:**
  - Suffield National Wildlife Area (AWA in discussions with ECCC, National Defence)
  - Milk River Natural Area and Kennedy Coulee (now in management plan),
  - Foothills Bison Restoration Society (public lands, First Nations and conservation partnerships)
  - NCC/Fort Ellice rematriation in planning
- **Cultural infrastructure at emerging stage:**
  - Tatanga Oyate Cultural Centre in Regina (Buffalo People Arts Institute) — museum, ceremonial site, and Buffalo Nation gathering place to raise Tatanga consciousness
  - Blackfoot Elder language and ceremony videography (Blood Tribe) — videotaping Elders' storytelling, ceremony, ways of knowing, and history; education and culture/ceremony categories only
- **NCIAF/IPBI** placed three yellow stickers representing support operations in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba — likely a partial view of a broader network; if a living digital map develops, NCIAF's full reach will want to be included.

What's long-term (blue stickers — 10 entries)

- Blue stickers represent work whose timeline extends beyond a decade. The Métis National Council (MNC) cluster describes the most ambitious systemic agenda on the map: four interlocking entries using buffalo as a lever for Métis sovereignty and governance recognition, including pushing for greater inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge into the Committee on Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assessment system. Institutional programs (Elk Island NP, Saskatchewan Agriculture) reflect patient, durable support. Aspiring herds and communities (Buffalo River Dene Nation, Métis Crossing) represent the next generation of the movement. And two wild free-ranging herds in northern Saskatchewan were also highlighted.
- **Systemic change through existing frameworks (MNC):**
  - Embedding buffalo and its teachings in Métis law, culture, and gatherings — recognizing that some Métis laws are built on the buffalo hunt
  - Securing land and infrastructure funding for Métis governments to establish or expand buffalo operations
  - International and national advocacy for buffalo and grasslands — building relationships with Indigenous peoples worldwide
  - Pushing for Indigenous Knowledge to be better incorporated into the COSEWIC species assessment system via the ATK Sub-committee — using buffalo as a key test case for changing how Western scientific frameworks recognize Indigenous ways of knowing
- **Sustained institutional support**:
  - Elk Island NP (long-range rematriation pipeline beyond current active transfers, and Education and Storytelling were indicated on the Approaches Board);

  - Saskatchewan Agriculture (research, land and forage, animal health, economic development programs at long horizon). Sask Ag placed stickers across all four colours, signalling engagement at every time horizon
- **Growing herds:**
  - Buffalo River Dene Nation — placed on behalf of a Nation not at the summit; strong community desire for wood bison rematriation grounded in Elder memory; at land use planning stage;
  - Métis Crossing, Smoky Lake, AB — existing herd with both plains and wood buffalo;
  - Dan Fox/Blood Tribe — a ranching operation described as 'reworking/working learning with Elder'; tagged Culture/ceremony only; cultural relearning at a long horizon
- **Two wild free-ranging herds in northern Saskatchewan**
  - A wood bison herd near Sīkīp Sākahikan (Waterhen Lake FN / Flotten Lake) and plains bison in the Primrose/McCusker River area — exist beyond fences without a clear stewardship structure

What's at risk (red stickers — 13 entries)

- Red stickers mark three distinct types of concern that call for different responses: acute active risk to an existing wild herd (Sturgeon River Plains Bison Herd); institutional and regulatory concern from the commercial sector (Canadian Bison Association — disease concerns and opposition to threatened species designation); and constraints for Nations that want to move faster (Piikani, Blackfoot Guardians) but face barriers around funding, land, and policy.
- **An urgent situation with the Sturgeon River Plains Bison Herd:**
  - Hunting pressure reducing population and genetics to an imperiled state; critical calving grounds on Crown land threatened by planned forest harvest; multi-partner coalition (Big River Métis, Ahtahkakoop First Nation, Lac La Ronge Indian Band, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak, Sturgeon River Plains Bison Stewards) working to sustain what is one of the few genuinely wild free-ranging plains bison herds in Canada
- **Nations facing structural barriers:**
  - Piikani Nation — wanting to develop their herd further but facing funding and capacity constraints;
  - Blackfoot Guardians of the Eastern Slopes — exploring Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA) reintroduction on the Eastern Slopes, at early exploration stage;
- **Canadian Bison Association — two red Approaches Board entries:**
  - Disease concerns (mycoplasmosis, brucellosis, TB in the commercial sector).
  - Concern that a Threatened species designation for plains bison could harm export capacity and reduce consumption;

    - CBA also placed green entries (education, DNA research) — pointing to a sector that is both contributing to the knowledge base and holding a fundamentally different position on the species designation question
- Seven unattributed red Approaches Board stickers across all eight categories — Policy & Law, Capacity Building, Funding & Resourcing, Governance & Advocacy, Education & Storytelling, Relationships & Coordination, and Culture — unknown contributors, no mapping cards created to correspond with sticker numbers.

The U.S. context — scale and urgency

- Jason Baldes (InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) / Wind River, via Zoom recording): ITBC has grown to 89 member tribes, ~30,000 bison restored to tribal lands; proposed Indian Buffalo Management Act would codify federal trust responsibility for buffalo restoration — raised as a potential Canadian model
- Current U.S. federal administration threatening tribal buffalo leases; some U.S. partners now looking to Canada as a more stable environment; Canada is at an earlier stage but seen as having more institutional stability — creating both opportunity and responsibility to move faster

Part 2: How Participants Made Sense of It — Patterns Wall

Throughout Day 1, participants posted observations and reactions to the presentations being made on a Patterns Wall. On the morning of Day 2, Rhett grouped these into 11 themes and shared them back with the full group. Unlike the map and presentations — which document existing programs and organized knowledge — the Patterns Wall is real-time sense-making: what participants noticed, questioned, and felt moved to write down as the day unfolded. It reads differently from the other two sources, and deliberately so.

- **Eco-cultural connections:** bison and fire restoration as interconnected; connection to other species (birds, ungulates); water is life — Mni Wiconi; A working definition of eco-cultural offered by a presenter at the summit: 'the balance between ensuring a successful, bountiful herd that is economically feasible and ensuring cultural access and Indigenous involvement'
- **Defining wild:** 'Buffalo not a livestock system'; 'Buffalo are NOT Wild they ARE Gentle Giants'; 'What is wild? Who should bear the cost of wildness?'; 'What tools are okay to use to define wild?'; 'Is there a different word from wild in our own language?'; 'How do we define wild without falling into traps of purity logics?'; 'What do people want to think of as wild and what do buffalo want as wild — are they the same?'
- **Territory boundaries:** harvest in national parks named as loosening prohibitive barriers — could this be replicated elsewhere?; 'The permeable and dynamic boundaries of buffalo territory are central to the ability of buffalo to live freely on

their own terms'; could NCC and similar organizations offer grassland space for Nations to steward collectively?

- **Collaboration and coordination:** land trust for buffalo rematriation, possibly connected to Treaty Land Sharing Network; can Canadian First Nations become ITBC affiliates?; Indian Buffalo Management Act as a Canadian model; 'Reduce red tape!'; Prairie Bison Initiative as a nascent guardian structure; Sturgeon River / Prince Albert herd as a coordination model; 'Collaboration between land, buffalo, and people'; 'Sharing! Reciprocity'
- **Traditional and spiritual connection:** 'The spiritual connection of eye contact with buffalo'; 'The entanglement of Indigenous resurgence and the restoration of ecological health for buffalo'; Paskwaw-sakaw mostos; 'Buffalo/bison will lead us as long as we listen and gain trust'; 'Bison work occurs on Creator's timeline!'
- **Key projects:** 'Is there a key project or location as a starting point? A catalyst?'; 'Personal commitment and excitement → success'
- **Food sovereignty:** Muskowekwan First Nation — 'How do we add buffalo into our diets? Can we use an abattoir? Affordable to process our meat?'; 'Buffalo as sustenance — how can we get buffalo into food pyramids, into schools?'; food systems
- **Policy and legislation:** 'Not much help on policy/legislation (lobbying)'; 'Bison in Alberta can't yet be wild on public land outside national parks'
- **Genetics:** 'What is the chance for exchanging bulls/cows with Canadian herds to help the gene pool?'; importance of genetic diversity named repeatedly; 'How to maintain if National Park bison are being auctioned to commercial operations?'
- **Capacity building:** 'Support for caretakers. Build capacity and education'; NCIAF accessing resources for Nations to become successful buffalo keepers; 'Planning for your project ahead of time is essential!'
- **Herd management:** connections to prescribed fire; risks to buffalo now; Kainai herd as a wild herd model (60/40 female/male, consistent calving ratio); climate change and pasture management; 'Can the existing herds be used as a core to expand from?'

Preliminary analysis — map and presentations

- There is a significant amount of work underway: 25 active map entries across four provinces; herds running since 1969, 1970, and 1995 with sophisticated management, ceremony, food programs, and ecological monitoring; this is a movement with deep roots and real practice that has been chronically underrecognized and under-resourced
- Active herd stewardship is primarily Nation-led and holistic — linked to culture, healing, governance, and community wellbeing. It is supported by national parks (rematriation transfers, capacity building, modeling), conservation organizations, provincial programs, research institutions, and coordination bodies; these are

complementary roles, but the dependency runs in one direction — community-led work relies on institutional support subject to funding cycles and government priorities
- The emerging (yellow) layer has a different character from the active layer — currently led largely by non-Indigenous organizations and broad-mandate bodies rather than community-based actors; this is an important distinction as the movement thinks about how to grow
- The classification problem — plains buffalo as livestock, not wildlife — shows up across the map, presentations, and Patterns Wall from multiple angles; it is perhaps the most important policy change needed to unlock downstream progress
- Many Buffalo Treaty signatory Nations appear on the base map without stickers. It will be important to learn more within the network about where active or emerging work is possible.

Preliminary analysis — Patterns Wall

- Participants arrived with sophisticated questions and ideas - many post-it notes are related to implementation: who bears the cost of wildness, how to access an abattoir, how to join ITBC as affiliates?
- 'Defining wild' drew the most post-it notes and most diverse thinking — scientific, linguistic, cultural, philosophical; the question of what word to use in Indigenous languages, questioning the conceptual frame not just the policy category
- The Collaboration section is the most action-oriented part of the wall: land trust, ITBC affiliate membership, federal legislative model — all systemic ideas that would change structural conditions for many communities at once
- Food sovereignty appears on the Patterns Wall as a need for practical infrastructure — processing, abattoir access, affordability. By contrast, none of these topics related to food sovereignty appear as current or future activities on the map.

3. Imagining a Different Future

How this part of the Summit worked

After lunch on Day 2, co-chair Tasha Hubbard introduced the visioning session by sharing short film excerpts showing large herds of buffalo on the prairies — offering a visceral sense of the scale of what once existed and what could be again. This was followed by a 10-minute video by Marie-Eve Marchand of IBRI, which laid out a broad and ambitious vision of buffalo living wildly on large east-west and north-south corridors, connecting the current constellations of buffalo work into something much larger.

Participants then self-selected into two parallel tracks of discussion: multiple Unfenced/Transformative small groups (long-horizon, systems change thinking) and one larger Near-Term/Within-the-System group (12–15 people focused on what's achievable in 1–3 years).

Major themes in how people described a wilder buffalo future

Scale — from isolated herds to a connected presence

- The single most repeated image was large, connected herds rather than isolated populations: 'a constellation of buffalo — private, public, and Nation lands — not isolated locations but connected, normalized by 2050'; thinking in longer time horizons — 100 years rather than 5–10
- Marie-Eve Marchand's IBRI video crystallized this for many participants: an east-west corridor connecting existing constellations of buffalo-related work, and a north-south axis from Yellowstone to Yukon, with river systems as natural connectors
- How big is a big herd? Near-term group named this directly: right now our biggest wild herds are in the hundreds; aim for a couple thousand head on existing pasture grasslands; work to get existing herds extremely healthy before opening the gateway for expansion
- Find land where people can experience a herd migrating at pre-settlement scale — 'except it's not the past, it is also the future'; 'if we don't dream it, it doesn't have a chance'

Buffalo as sovereign beings, not managed resources

- Buffalo described repeatedly as sovereign beings with their own needs and wisdom: 'buffalo as healthy sovereign beings, meeting our needs and buffalo's needs'; 'bison will tell us what to do'; 'observe bison and they will tell us what to do'

- ‘when you pen an animal, you’re taking away their eating habits, their medicines; they become dependent on humans’ — the future must involve buffalo having breathing room; ‘always compare residential school to bison’
- Buffalo as teachers: animals know when rain is coming, how to move through storms, how to use fire smoke to clean themselves of parasites, where new growth appears after fire; ‘learning from them and giving them space’
- Harvest in protocol: ‘done in a good right way — buffalo lives its best life, dies with grass still in its mouth, surrounded by its family’; sustenance hunting as a long-term frame, not commercial harvest
- Take down fences — in minds, in policy, in how we live: ‘what would it look like to take our fences down for the bison? Is it possible?’; fences named as protection in the near-term but not the long-term aspiration

Ecological restoration as inseparable from cultural restoration

- Consistent across all groups: the restoration of buffalo and the restoration of cultural health are one goal, not two — ‘reclamation of culture’, ‘bring back health of land’, ‘heal the people’ named together as outcomes
- Biodiversity restoration named alongside buffalo: when bison come back, so do the birds; soil health, grassland diversity, beetle populations; buffalo as a keystone that restores the whole system
- Fire and buffalo as co-restoration tools: ‘eco-cultural approach to bison restoration AND fire restoration’; prescribed burns followed by bison return; bison graze after fire to take in nitrogen from ash; ‘positive disruption to the land — getting away from pristine that is critical to notions of conservation’
- Near-term group: soil and plant testing studies before and after rematriation; seed banks for native grasses; restoration program — cultural burns, then bison, then getting rid of invasive species; without chemicals the ecosystem thrives
- Climate change named as both a reason to act urgently and a factor to plan for in long-term pasture and herd management
- Carbon sequestration, grassland health, and water retention — the ecological case as part of climate adaptation, not only cultural priority

Nation-to-Nation relationships as the governance foundation

- The future is nation-to-nation: between Nations sharing buffalo and land, between Nations and federal/provincial governments, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous landholders
- Honour the original intent of the Buffalo Treaty — ‘may have been signed 12 years ago but the spirit, intent, and tradition is much older — over 200 years’; leveraging Treaty rights and Section 35 as pathways Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and conservation organizations alone cannot access

- An Indigenous Buffalo Coalition to support Nations and caretakers named as a vision; intertribal council and identifying lands raised in multiple discussions as a long-term governance structure
- Trade and co-management strategies between Nations: share buffalo, send them to each other's lands, give some lands the opportunity to rest while building up herds; 'surplus leads to trade, not profit'; good example cited — Mistawasis Nêhiyawak and Louis Bull Tribe
- NGOs here to support rather than lead: 'without Indigenous leadership this wouldn't have happened — all we can do is become allies'
- Indigenous people have their own governing laws: 'going back to traditional knowledge and values'; 'selfless vs. selfish'; reciprocity and relationality as the economic model replacing commodity thinking

Land as the central constraint and central aspiration

- Every vision came back to land: more of it, less fragmented, accessed differently, held differently; land as the material foundation without which no other vision is achievable
- Near-term group identified specific land opportunities: Suffield, Sturgeon Lake, Cowessess, Banff, IPCAs; 'with wildlife designations buffalo could move between these spaces with lands and herds shared between multiple communities'
- With climate change and drought — choose a location or two to invest in to create corridors, while building Nation capacities; building corridors along abandoned mines and resource extraction areas
- Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE) lands in Saskatchewan that have grasslands — need to inventory; focus on not confining to reserve boundaries; 'create a coalition to buy land and protect it'; converting parcels of cropland back into pastureland
- Crown land sell-offs named as an immediate threat: TLE Nations not able to purchase lands in competition with commercial buyers
- Cattle and bison prices through the roof — land costs rising; a conservation-focused herd that still sells harvested meat to keep scaling up named as one way to build economic sustainability for the long-term land vision

Food sovereignty and community health

- Buffalo as staple food and medicine: restoring buffalo to community diets as a health and sovereignty goal; food sovereignty named as a running theme across both tracks
- Near-term group: food sharing and distribution, native seed projects alongside food systems; 'buffalo as sustenance — how can we get buffalo into the food pyramids, into schools'
- Balancing culture, conservation, and profit: the consensus was that it must be cultural-based first, with economic dimensions subordinate — 'revenue vs. cultural'

named as a tension but not left unresolved; ‘it must be cultural based — relationships with external partners to support’

Youth, education, and knowledge transfer

- Investment in youth involvement named in the near-term themes: youth at the table, youth planning groups, youth in monitoring on horseback, youth connected to teachings
- Succession — how is knowledge shared; ‘make sure a young person is leading or involved’; succession as a form of long-term planning
- Role of education and curriculum building: changing the values of farming communities, ranchers, and the public; finding allies within ranching; ‘need to change mentality/values — education and who is the appropriate presenter to reach groups’
- New ways of sharing knowledge: podcasts, oral sharing, Buffalo Chasers podcast as an example; ‘knowledge sharing — freely — in and beyond’

Points of strong consensus

- Scale matters: virtually everyone described wanting large, connected herds rather than small managed exceptions; the difference between a conservation herd and a living presence came up across all groups
- Cultural foundation is non-negotiable: no group imagined a future that separated cultural restoration from ecological restoration; Indigenous knowledge, natural law, and relationships with buffalo were placed at the centre of every vision
- The land question underlies everything: every future vision came back to land — more of it, less fragmented, accessed differently; without a different relationship to land there is no different future for buffalo
- Fences are the problem — literally and metaphorically: both physical fences and mental/policy fences need to come down; stated in nearly identical terms across multiple groups
- Nation-to-Nation is the right governance model: between Nations first, then with other partners in a supporting role; this was not contested
- Thinking in longer time horizons: participants explicitly embraced 25–50–100-year thinking; ‘if we don’t dream it, it doesn’t have a chance’

Points of recurring tension

- How big is a ‘big’ herd? No shared answer: some described 2,000+ as the aspiration, others focused on making existing small herds sustainable first; consolidate or multiply was not resolved

- Revenue vs. cultural use: every group named this as a central tension; the direction was cultural-based first, but what this means practically for Nations that also need economic sustainability was left open
- What counts as ‘wild’: tension between aspirational wildness (free-roaming, no fences, sovereign) and practical definitions (fenced for protection while building toward something larger)
- Role of non-Indigenous partners: acknowledged as necessary (land, funding, policy, research) but the terms of partnership were unresolved; ‘without Indigenous leadership this wouldn’t have happened — all we can do is become allies’ named a clear direction without spelling out what genuine alliance looks like in practice
- Balancing buffalo work with other community priorities - communities face housing crises, food systems challenges, land restoration, and herd management simultaneously; visions of the future need to account for this rather than treating buffalo work as if it exists in isolation from other community needs
- Pressures on leadership: economic growth expectations from governments and community members create real pressure on Chief and Council; ‘Council needs to get instructions from Elders on protocol’ was one answer — grounding decisions in cultural authority rather than political pressure

4. The Seven Pathways — What the Summit Produced

After the small groups reported back from their Unfenced/Transformative and Near-Term discussions, the facilitator (Rhett Sangster) identified seven themes emerging from the energy in the room, wrote each on a post-it note, placed them in different parts of the room, and invited participants to gather at the pathway they felt most called to. Participants self-selected into groups and spent approximately 75 minutes developing each pathway using a structured worksheet and reporting back to the large group. What follows is a synthesis of those discussions, supplemented by related content from across the summit.

Pathway 1: Space and Land

Where we are now

- Land availability is the foundational constraint on buffalo rematriation — every other pathway eventually hits this wall; 63 mapping cards placed across the prairies show active and emerging work, but overwhelmingly on existing reserve and park lands rather than the larger, connected landscapes the movement envisions
- Momentum is building, but slowly; public pushback against bison and prescribed fire remains a barrier due to fear and unfamiliarity
- Land prices are rising, putting grasslands further out of reach for Nations competing with commercial buyers; grasslands are still being lost to cropland conversion
- Some promising policy conversations are underway: Suffield National Wildlife Area, Milk River/Kennedy Coulee, Foothills Bison Restoration Society working with First Nations on Alberta public lands
- A potential east-west corridor is visible on the map: SW Alberta through Suffield and Milk River, connecting to Old Man on His Back, Grasslands NP, and NCC's Fort Ellice in SW Manitoba — but no connective tissue yet exists between these sites

What participants envisioned

- Buffalo corridors — east-west and north-south; Yellowstone to Yukon; 'add up our reserve lands, public lands, crop lands — and the scale is automatically much bigger'
- Prescribed fire and bison working together to reduce fire risk and create habitat; the codependence of fire and bison as a restoration system
- Large tracts of fence-free grassland; forests managed for wood bison in the north; expanding grasslands northward as climate and habitat shift
- Creating an intertribal council to identify and pursue lands collectively; land trusts fed by individuals with no succession plan; Treaty Land Sharing Network as a potential

partner and source of buffalo ambassadors and land contributors; building relationships with commercial ranches as potential partnerships
- By 2050: a constellation of buffalo across private, public, and Nation lands — connected, not isolated; normalized rather than exceptional

Concrete actions and next steps

a) Policy and designation changes (see also Pathway 4 for further discussion on this topic):

- Formally designate plains buffalo as a wild species under federal and provincial legislation, not livestock (foundational policy change named across presentations and pathway discussions)
- Explore legislative model analogous to the U.S. Indian Buffalo Management Act for Canada (Patterns Wall and in small group notes)
- Leverage United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Section 35 Treaty rights as tools for policy and land access change (Law, Rights and Policy pathway, small group notes)

b) Land access and land trust:

- Establish a land trust specifically designated for buffalo rematriation, fed by individuals with no succession plan for their land (Patterns Wall, Collaboration section)
- Build relationships with the Treaty Land Sharing Network — invite members to become buffalo ambassadors and potential contributors to land trusts (Patterns Wall)
- Inventory TLE (Treaty Land Entitlement) lands in Saskatchewan with grassland potential for buffalo (Unfenced Group 3 notes)
- Explore whether organizations like NCC with existing grassland holdings could offer space for buffalo that Nations steward or access collectively (Patterns Wall, Territory section)
- Create an intertribal council to identify and pursue lands for rematriation (Space and Land Group 2 next step; also raised in small group notes)
- Focus on not confining work to reserve boundaries — explore access to Crown land and public lands beyond existing Nation territories (Space and Land pathway)
- Convert parcels of cropland back into pastureland where opportunities arise (small group notes)

c) Corridors and landscape-scale vision

- Work toward a buffalo corridor spanning the prairies — north-south and east-west, potentially using river systems as connectors; longer-term Yellowstone-to-Yukon framing (multiple sources)
- Map and identify existing lands suitable for corridors and connections; pursue land purchases to create connections between existing parcels (Space and Land pathway, small group notes)
- Advance site-specific rematriation efforts (mapping exercise):

    - Suffield National Wildlife Area (AWA in discussions with Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), National Defence)
    - Milk River Natural Area and Kennedy Coulee (now in management plan),
    - Foothills Bison Restoration Society (public lands, First Nations and conservation partnerships)
    - NCC/Fort Ellice rematriation in planning
- Pursue alignment between buffalo rematriation and wildfire management — overgrown landscapes create fire risk and need for more grassland; bison and prescribed fire as complementary tools (Space and Land pathway Group 1, Unfenced Group 3)
- Build a seed bank and greenhouse capacity for native grass restoration to accompany buffalo rematriation (Unfenced Group 3)
- Explore carrying capacity and land health assessments to support expansion from existing herds as a core (Patterns Wall, Herd Management section)

Open tensions and unresolved questions

- In assessing long-term wild buffalo movement, it may be more important to try to establish north-south corridors despite the extra political challenges there.
- Crown land selloffs are an immediate threat; how do Nations compete with commercial buyers?
- Alignment with wildfire issues is a real opportunity but also politically complex; not all communities or governments see fire and bison as connected solutions
- Public pushback and negative stereotypes remain barriers; the question of who the appropriate messengers are for different audiences is unresolved

Pathway 2: Genetics

Where we are now

- Genetic diversity is a critical and recognized concern: most Canadian plains bison herds originated from very small founder populations; the Sturgeon River / Prince Albert herd, currently at risk, is among the lowest genetic diversity herds in Canada, originating from 50 animals in 1969.
- The Bison Relatedness Tool — developed with Canadian Bison Association (CBA) support — provides a tool for measuring herd health including genetic indicators; the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Bison Specialist Group has criteria including cattle introgression, subpopulation size, and sex ratio
- Trade and movement of animals between Nations and herds is happening but inconsistently; export/import rules create barriers to cross-border movement
- The Canadian Bison Association raised disease concerns (mycoplasmosis, brucellosis, TB) as red sticker issues that affect both commercial and conservation herds

- Risk flagged on the Patterns Wall: if National Park bison are auctioned to commercial operations, genetic diversity in the broader commons could be reduced (further clarification on this point is needed)

What participants envisioned

- Genetic corridors: as buffalo move freely across larger landscapes, genetic variability will naturally increase — corridors solve multiple problems simultaneously
- Cross-border exchange: connection with Yellowstone, Fort Peck, and ITBC herds as sources of genetic diversity; 'what is the chance for exchanging bulls/cows with Canadian herds to help the gene pool?'
- A network of producers and Nations actively trading and moving animals; the Bison Relatedness Tool made more widely available
- Community and bison growth together — as communities build capacity, genetic health follows; the long-term vision is self-sustaining wild herds with natural dynamics

Concrete actions and next steps

- Build and maintain a network/list of bison producers, Nations, associations, research groups, government agencies, and other contacts for ongoing exchange — including attendees from this summit (Genetics pathway, both groups)
- Explore trading and movement of bison between Nations to improve genetic diversity — develop tracking and history systems to support this (Genetics pathway Group 2)
- Explore export/import rules and work to navigate or change them to enable cross-border animal movement (Genetics pathway; small group notes)
- Explore whether Canadian First Nations can become ITBC affiliate members to access bison from Yellowstone or Fort Peck (Patterns Wall; small group notes)
- Develop incentives for genetic diversity work outside of national parks (Genetics pathway Group 2)
- Make the Bison Relatedness Tool more widely available across the network (small group notes)
- Investigate and address the risk raised on the Patterns Wall that National Park bison being auctioned to commercial operations could reduce genetic diversity in the commons (Patterns Wall, Genetics section)
- Develop a system for testing, tracking, and sharing genetic history across herds (Genetics pathway group 2)
- Explore a mobile processing plant with a certified inspector able to travel between Nations — would support both genetics/trade and food processing (Genetics pathway group 1)
- Share bulls periodically between herds to introduce new genetics; build this into a network practice (Chief Bear presentation)

Open tensions and unresolved questions

- Selective breeding for productive herds vs. perpetuating natural genetic variation in wild herds — a tension between commercial and conservation/cultural priorities

- Export rules are a barrier; navigating them requires both legal expertise and political will that may not yet be in place

Pathway 3: Youth

Where we are now

- Youth are largely absent from current buffalo work at a formal level; the group named a lack of inclusion and an intergenerational gap as the starting point
- Urban Indigenous youth in particular have limited access to land-based learning and herd programs
- Knowledge holders — Elders who carry buffalo teachings, language, and protocol — are aging; the urgency of succession and knowledge transfer is real and time-limited
- Some promising existing models: Stoney Nakoda's youth riders participating in bison monitoring on horseback; the Buffalo Youth Camp concept raised as an aspiration; MGHLM's 10-year strategic plan includes youth dimensions

What participants envisioned

- Self-sufficient and sustainable communities where buffalo is a staple in the diet — youth growing up with buffalo as a normal part of life, not an exceptional cultural event
- Building connection between Buffalo Nations and non-Buffalo Nations through youth exchange and shared learning
- Curriculum integration across disciplines: science, ecology, economics, food systems, cultural knowledge, protocols — bringing different departments together to learn about buffalo holistically
- Youth advocating on behalf of their communities and leadership; youth leading future summits and planning processes
- A youth network that spans the prairie network and beyond; social media as the primary connectivity tool
- Make sure a young person is leading or involved in every initiative — named explicitly as a principle

Concrete actions and next steps

- Establish a youth network — social media as the likely primary channel; connect youth across buffalo programs and Nations (Youth pathway)
- Create a youth planning team or youth representative role for future summits and organizing (Youth pathway)
- Connect these efforts to those of the Global Indigenous Youth caucus
- Develop a Youth Buffalo Camp or gathering as a dedicated space for intergenerational knowledge transfer (Youth pathway)
- Integrate buffalo teachings into school curriculum across disciplines (Youth pathway)

- Design programming specifically for urban Indigenous youth with less access to land and herd-based learning (Youth pathway)
- Develop succession and transition plans for knowledge transfer from current caretakers and knowledge holders (small group reporting back)

Open tensions and unresolved questions

- Balancing profit and cultural relationships — named in the context of youth because the next generation will inherit both the aspiration and the economic pressure

Pathway 4: Law, Rights and Policy

Where we are now

- Plains buffalo are classified as livestock by some provinces, not wildlife — the most cited policy barrier across the summit; this affects movement, protection, harvesting rights, and land management
- Alberta Chiefs called for wild species listing in 2014; not yet acted on
- Jurisdictional fragmentation is a significant barrier: different rules apply province by province, and there is no federal policy framework equivalent to the U.S. Indian Buffalo Management Act
- UNDRIP and Section 35 Treaty rights exist as legal pathways for First Nations - their application to buffalo has not been fully developed
- The Patterns Wall noted bluntly: ‘not much help on policy/legislation (lobbying)’ — participants felt the policy environment was not yet supportive

What participants envisioned

- Formal provincial designation of plains buffalo as a wild species
- A Canadian legislative framework analogous to the Indian Buffalo Management Act — codifying trust responsibility and Indigenous rights in relation to buffalo
- Nation-to-nation agreements between Indigenous Nations and with federal/provincial governments on buffalo governance

Concrete actions and next steps

- Advocate for formal wild species designation for plains buffalo federally and provincially (multiple sources)
- Create a cultural plan ground in natural law to sit alongside (or ahead of) Western science management plans - center Indigenous Nations’ understanding of buffalo on landscapes (Law, Rights and Policy Pathway)
- Require cultural components in management plans for all federal lands with buffalo herds (Law, Rights and Policy Pathway)
- Work with legislators and policy makers on removing barriers to buffalo on public lands (small group reporting back)

- Leverage UNDRIP and Section 35 as tools for policy change; honor original intent of the Buffalo Treaty as a legal and relational framework (Law, Rights and Policy Pathway, small group notes)
- Explore a Canadian federal legislative framework analogous to the U.S. Indian Buffalo Management Act (Patterns Wall, Jason Baldes presentation, small group notes)
- Engage with U.S. counterparts on cross-border policy alignment; Trilateral Committee as a vehicle
- Pursue nation-to-nation agreements between Nations and with federal/provincial governments on buffalo governance and co-management (multiple sources)

Open tensions and unresolved questions

- Jurisdictional fragmentation means any policy change will need to be pursued simultaneously at federal, provincial, and Nation levels — which requires significant coordination
- The CBA's opposition to threatened species designation is a real political tension; how to build trust and cooperation that manages this tension?

Pathway 5: Natural Law / Creator's Law / Spiritual Law (Ethics)

Where we are now

- This pathway was identified because participants felt that the ethical and spiritual dimensions of buffalo work were not fully captured by the other pathways — that there is a deeper foundation of natural law and right relationship that needs to be named and held
- Elder Roland Duquette's observations throughout Day 2 were the clearest articulation: when you pen an animal, you take away their eating habits, their medicines; they become dependent on humans; 'always compare residential school to bison' — the ethical stakes of containment and management are not small
- Ceremony and protocol are already embedded in several active programs (Muskoday's harvest ceremony; Banff's Indigenous-led harvesting on horseback) but are not universally present or formalized
- The Patterns Wall's Traditional and Spiritual Connection section captured what participants felt: 'The spiritual connection of eye contact with buffalo'; 'bison work occurs on Creator's timeline!'; 'the entanglement of Indigenous resurgence and the restoration of ecological health for buffalo'

What participants envisioned

- Right action, right speech, right thinking as the operating principles of the movement — applied to how decisions are made, how animals are handled, how people speak to one another

- Your actions are counted: watching where you take the movement, being accountable to the buffalo and to future generations
- Horseback monitoring rather than quads where possible — relational, less disruptive, models the approach
- Shift away from protocols that involve penning or confining animals in ways that remove their ability to find medicines, water, and movement
- Elders and knowledge holders not as advisors but as the source of instruction for Chief and Council and for program design

Concrete actions and next steps

- Embed ceremony and protocol into buffalo programs explicitly — not as optional or ceremonial add-on but as foundational to how herds are managed and animals are harvested (Elder Duquette, Banff model, Chief Bear presentation)
- Explore what natural law concepts mean as practical guides for how the movement operates (Natural Law Pathway)
- Build nation-to-nation relationships between Indigenous Nations as the primary governance structure for buffalo work – not solely through settler government frameworks; Council gets instructions from Elders on protocol (multiple sources)
- Shift away from protocols that involve penning or confining animals in ways that remove their ability to find their own medicines, water, and movement (unfenced group 4)
- Invite Elders and knowledge holders into governance decisions as the source of direction, not just consultation (Unfenced group 3)
- Use horseback rather than motorized vehicles in monitoring where possible (Elder Duquette, Unfenced Group 4)

Open tensions and unresolved questions

- How does natural law framework interface with Western legal and management systems?
- How do communities honor natural law obligations when facing real economic pressures to manage herds in ways that maximize production or minimize cost?

Pathway 6: Education

Overview

Education was identified during the large-group clustering as a pathway, but no breakout group formed to discuss it. The content below is drawn from the Patterns Wall, the visioning discussions, the action items, and references throughout the summit notes. It represents what participants identified as important in this area, not a developed pathway discussion.

Where we are now and what participants envisioned

- Education named repeatedly as a cross-cutting need: changing public perception of buffalo; finding allies within ranching communities; reaching urban Indigenous youth; integrating buffalo into school curricula
- Blood Tribe is actively documenting Elders' language, ceremony, and stories on video — urgent given the timeline of knowledge holders
- Tatanga Oyate Cultural Centre in Regina — a museum, ceremonial site, and Buffalo Nation gathering place to raise Tatanga consciousness — represents the kind of public-facing cultural education infrastructure the movement needs
- Stoney Nakoda Nations' Bison Cultural Study is a model for combined cultural and ecological documentation
- Need to change mentality/values — 'who is the appropriate presenter to reach groups' named as an open question; different messengers needed for ranching communities, government, urban publics
- Role of education in reducing stereotypes about bison and Indigenous Peoples that create public pushback

Concrete actions and next steps

- Increase public education and outreach with ranchers, farmers and non-Indigenous communities about buffalo - address fears and unfamiliarity (Space and Land Group 1)
- Identify and work with advocates and allies within the ranching community (Unfenced Group 3)
- Reduce stereotypes about bison and Indigenous peoples that create public pushback against rematriation (Unfenced Group 1; small group notes)
- Share the Stoney Nakoda Nations' Bison Cultural Study more widely; a model for combined cultural and ecological documentation (Bill Snow presentation)
- Support Blood Tribe in documenting Elders' language, ceremony, storytelling, and history on video before knowledge holders are no longer available (Charlie Fox mapping card)
- Complete the Tatanga Oyate Cultural Centre in Regina as a museum, ceremonial site, and Buffalo Nation gathering place (Joely BigEagle-Kequahtooway, yellow sticker)
- Develop buffalo-focused podcasts, media, and new channels for knowledge sharing beyond paper and formal gatherings (Unfenced Group 3)
- Build buffalo into school curricula across disciplines: science, ecology, food systems, cultural knowledge (Youth Pathway)
- Design educational programming for urban Indigenous youth with limited land access (Youth Pathway)

Open tensions and unresolved questions

- No group developed this pathway; identifying champions for education work is a priority

Pathway 7: Relationships and Coordination

Overview

Relationships was identified during the large-group clustering as a pathway, but no breakout group formed to discuss it. This section draws on the Patterns Wall Collaboration section, the visioning discussions about nation-to-nation governance, and the action items related to coordination and network-building. The original pathway name has been expanded to 'Relationships and Coordination' to reflect summit discussions.

Where we are now and what participants envisioned

- Relationships are understood by participants as both the means and the end: 'connections and relationships are how things keep moving forward'; 'collaboration between land, buffalo, and people'; 'sharing! Reciprocity'
- The Sturgeon River / Prince Albert herd coordination model named as a reference point: multi-partner, multi-mandate, complexity-embracing — 'if we want to move forward we need to learn from the Sturgeon River Plains Bison herd and support them'
- NCIAF and IBRI are emerging backbone organizations; the Prairie Bison Initiative was put forward as a 'nascent guardian structure' worth building on
- The Buffalo Treaty as the relational foundation: not a new agreement but a renewal of a relationship over 200 years old; nation-to-nation between Indigenous Nations first, then with settler governments and organizations in a supporting role
- The Indigenous leadership and buffalo caretaker representatives who were in attendance at the Summit met during Day 2 lunch to discuss the idea of forming an Indigenous Buffalo Caretakers association in order to coordinate efforts for buffalo rematriation in Canada. Leadership also indicated their wish to be involved. Further discussion took place at the Kinship Connections gathering in July 2026, and fundraising is underway to hold a gathering to discuss this more fully with wide representation.
- ITBC affiliate membership for Canadian First Nations — would enable access to U.S. resources, bison, and potentially project funding; raised on the Patterns Wall as a concrete near-term action

Concrete actions and next steps

- Explore whether Canadian First Nations can become ITBC affiliate members; pursue as a near-term action (Patterns Wall, small group notes)
- Explore creating a Canadian Indigenous-led bison council – analogous to the U.S. Intertribal Buffalo Council, to identify and pursue lands, share animals, and coordinate governance across Nations (numerous sources)
- Explore a federal legislative framework (Canadian equivalent to the Indian Buffalo Management Act) as the policy foundation for coordination
- Establish and maintain contact lists from this summit as an immediate action; build toward a broader network directory

- Hold more gatherings like this summit — knowledge sharing and relationship building named as essential infrastructure (multiple sources)
- Build investment into trade and co-management strategies between Nations and with external partners (small group notes)
- Create structures to support buffalo keepers (Prairie Bison Initiative raised as worth building on) (Patterns Wall)
- Use the Sturgeon River / Prince Albert herd's coordination model as a template for multi-partner governance in other regions (Patterns wall)
- IBRI to continue its role as a coordination and knowledge-sharing hub; consider hosting a living digital map as part of that mandate

Open tensions and unresolved questions

- No group developed this pathway; identifying champions is a priority
- the diversity of the summit (Nations, ranchers, conservation, government) is also a coordination challenge
- NCIAF, IBRI, and AWA are already active in coordination roles.

5. Cross-Cutting Themes

The following themes emerged throughout the summit but were not identified as standalone pathways. They cut across multiple pathways and represent enabling conditions for the movement as a whole.

Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty surfaced as a distinct theme across the Patterns Wall, the near-term visioning discussions, and multiple presentations — primarily the Day 2 morning presentations from Chief Bear (Muskoday) and Muskowekwan First Nation's Patterns Wall contribution. It is largely absent from the map data, making these notes its primary home in the report.

- Where we are now: buffalo meat is reaching Elders, schools, daycares, and assisted living in some communities (Muskoday) but not at scale; processing infrastructure — inspected abattoirs, affordable processing, distribution networks — does not yet exist to make buffalo food sovereignty a reality for most Nations
- What participants envisioned: buffalo as staple food and medicine; herds large enough to feed Nations without external dependence; school lunch programs, Elder food programs, community food systems built around buffalo
- Concrete actions: explore shared or mobile abattoir/processing infrastructure; build the case for buffalo meat in school programs; develop food distribution networks; integrate buffalo into educational resources as a food that is considered sustenance; frame food sovereignty as economic development as well as cultural restoration
- Open tensions: processing infrastructure requires significant capital investment; food inspection requirements create regulatory barriers; balancing cultural protocols around harvest with food safety regulations

Research and Knowledge

Research and knowledge work is already active and well-organized in several domains — genetics, vaccines, ecological monitoring, cultural documentation. This theme covers what is beyond pure genetics research (which is addressed in Pathway 2).

- Where we are now: USask cluster (LFCE, SAGE) active in genetics, vaccines, bison-land interaction, and cultural integration; Bison Monitoring Project (Stoney Nakoda Nations) combining ecological and cultural documentation; CBA contributing DNA testing and education; BIG Project developing vaccines and genome biobank
- What participants envisioned: research freely shared across the network; soil and plant testing before and after rematriation to document ecological restoration; seed banks for native grasses; collaborative knowledge systems that blend Indigenous and Western science

- Concrete actions: continue and expand the Bison Monitoring Project; conduct soil testing and plant species monitoring at rematriation sites; build a native grass seed bank; share research and knowledge freely across the network; develop a guide to supporting wild buffalo (named on the Patterns Wall as a question worth answering)
- Open tensions: how to ensure research supports communities rather than extracting from them; balancing Western scientific frameworks with Indigenous knowledge systems; ensuring research findings reach caretakers in accessible, usable form

Capacity Building

Capacity building runs underneath every pathway — the question of who supports buffalo keepers, how programs become sustainable, and what institutions need to provide. It appeared on the Patterns Wall, in presentations, and across the mapping data.

- Where we are now: NCIAF/Indigenous Prairie Bison Initiative (IPBI), IBRI, Elk Island and Saskatchewan Agriculture are the primary capacity-building organization in the network; several Nation-led entries on the map explicitly name capacity and sustainability as their current constraints; Muskoday' 30-year-old program still struggling with funding sustainability is the clearest illustration
- What participants envisioned: mentoring networks between established and newer programs; Nations supporting each other rather than depending entirely on institutional programs; ‘lots of help available to do the on-the-ground work’ — but access is the gap
- Concrete actions: continue and expand NCIAF/IPBI and other capacity building programs; develop mentoring networks between established and emerging programs; support Nations to access Elk Island National Park (EINP) and other rematriation transfer lists; ensure keeper support includes both technical and cultural dimensions; develop practical planning resources for communities beginning programs
- Open tensions: capacity building depends on sustained funding

6. Keeping the Energy Moving

6a. Post-Summit Survey Snapshot

A post-Summit feedback survey was sent to all participants. Twenty-one responses were received, with 19 of 21 rating their experience 4 or 5 out of 5. Seventeen of 21 indicated willingness to join or lead a working group going forward; 20 of 21 were willing to share contact information with other participants. A sample of what participants said they felt called to do after attending:

- 'Working on wild designation for plains bison in Alberta'
- 'Clarifying legal frameworks and brainstorming rights-based approaches to buffalo protection that go beyond wildlife and species at risk frameworks'
- 'Working on large landscape grassland conservation and building relationships to get more freer-roaming plains buffalo out there'
- 'Figure out a way to create a knowledge hub'

6b. A Proposed Framework for Action

The summit generated a substantial body of shared knowledge, a clearer collective picture of where plains buffalo rematriation stands, and a wide range of ideas for what needs to happen next. Section 5 organized those ideas by the seven pathways that emerged from the summit's discussions, along with three cross-cutting themes. This section proposes a different organizing lens — five priority areas for action, pursued in parallel — as a framework to guide what comes next. As the seven pathways are integrated into the five priorities, detailed actions and next steps for each priority are found in Section 5.

These five priorities support the overarching Mission, Vision and Goals of the Wild Buffalo Summit, as defined by the organizing team in advance of the 2026 Summit:

Wild Buffalo Summit Mission:

The Wild Buffalo summit is seeking common ground on rematriating plains bison to their traditional territories in as natural state as possible as part of a larger effort across Turtle Island, from Canada to Mexico.

Core Vision:

To restore plains bison to their lands through Indigenous-led, ceremonial, relational, and practical pathways - prioritizing the buffalo first, while navigating natural and colonial law, land, and governance without recreating colonial structures.

This coalition is:

- *Relational, Indigenous-led, multi-nation, non-competitive, independent of government*
- *Focused on a wholistic view of the ecological, economic, cultural and spiritual importance of plains bison on the prairies*

***Our primary goal** is to have more plains bison living on their homelands.*

*The **second goal**, is that some plains bison populations can move more freely on their own lands, retaining their autonomy, body sovereignty, and natural behaviours.*

Priority 1: Protect and grow the health of current and future herds

The movement's first obligation is to the buffalo and communities already in relationship — ensuring that existing herds are healthy, well-supported, and stewarded in ways that honour both the animals and the people caring for them. This priority brings together the Genetics pathway, the Natural Law pathway, and the three cross-cutting themes of capacity building, research, and food sovereignty. It includes supporting the work of the multi-partner coalition managing the at-risk Sturgeon River Plains Bison Herd through whatever assistance they identify as useful, as well as attending to the status of the two wild free-ranging herds in northern Saskatchewan. It also means addressing the longer-term question of how buffalo programs remain sustainable amid market pressures, limited government funding, and the imperative to put the interests of the buffalo first.

Priority 2: Create the policy and legal conditions for buffalo to live more freely

One of the most significant barriers named throughout the summit is the legal and policy framework that currently treats plains buffalo as livestock rather than wild animals — limiting their movement, their protection, and the tools communities can use to advocate for them. This priority encompasses the Law, Rights and Policy pathway: pursuing formal species designation, developing a Canadian legislative framework that recognizes Indigenous rights and responsibilities in relation to buffalo, and centering cultural and natural law alongside Western management science. Progress on this priority would create enabling conditions for almost everything else the movement is working toward. Several summit participants with legal expertise specifically indicated interest in working on this priority.

Priority 3: Build the land base

Every future vision articulated at the summit came back to land. The Space and Land pathway addresses this directly: pushing for progress on specific sites already identified as opportunities (see Section 5 for details), exploring what it would take to connect those sites into the east-west and north-south corridors that participants envisioned, and developing land trust mechanisms that could make more land available for rematriation over time. This is the priority area that attracted the most working group interest in the post-summit survey.

Priority 4: Change minds to build public support

The summit's long-horizon vision depends on a broader public and political environment that understands and supports buffalo rematriation. The Education pathway and the Youth pathway together address this: integrating buffalo into school curricula, supporting cultural documentation and public-facing cultural infrastructure, building relationships with farming and ranching communities, and ensuring young people are connected to the teachings and the movement so they can carry it forward.

Priority 5: Build the coordination and relationships needed to hold it all together

The Relationships and Coordination pathway addresses what is perhaps the most foundational need: the movement for buffalo rematriation has energy, actors, and a shared vision, but needs thoughtfully created and sustainable coordination structures to sustain and direct that energy over time. This includes building on those coordination structures already in place (IBRI, NCIAF, AWA), allowing space for Indigenous-led structures to emerge and take leadership, deepening relationships across the Buffalo Treaty network - particularly with member Nations whose work is not yet visible on the map - and building relationships with agricultural and ranching stakeholders who are not yet fully part of the conversation. A living digital map hosted by IBRI and/or AWA could serve as a practical coordination tool for the whole network, making current work visible and updatable over time.

6c. Moving from Summit to Action

The summit has done what summits do well: generated shared knowledge, surfaced common vision, named the key tensions, and created connections. Turning those into assigned, resourced, time-bound actions requires ongoing engagement. For each of the five

priorities, the movement needs people willing to lead or convene working groups, pursue a small number of concrete near-term actions, and design ways to report back to the broader network.

Proposed next steps include:

- Completing and sharing this report with all summit participants by email, to ensure the report's accuracy and to confirm and seek ongoing participant interest in future working group discussions.
- Planning focused working group sessions for each of the five priority areas - oriented toward concrete planning and action.
- Pursue the creation of a digital online map to support ongoing coordination.

Appendix A: Acronyms used in the Wild Buffalo Summit 2026 Report

ATK	Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge
CBA	Canadian Bison Association
AWA	Alberta Wilderness Association
COSEWIC	Committee on Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada
ECCC	Environment and Climate Change Canada
EINP	Elk Island National Park
IBRI	International Buffalo Relations Institute
IPBI	Indigenous Prairie Bison Initiative
IPCA	Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas
ITBC	Intertribal Buffalo Council (represents 89 nations who have buffalo in the US)
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LFCE	Livestock and Forage Centre of Excellence (USask)
MNC	Métis National Council
MGHLM	Mosquito Grizzly Bear's Head Lean Man First Nation
NCC	Nature Conservancy of Canada
NCIAF	National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Food
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NP	National Park
SAGE	Soil and Agro Ecosystem (USask)
TLE	Treaty Land Entitlement
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Appendix B: Summit Participants

Alvin First Rider	Past-chair of Prairie Conservation Forum, AB
Benjamin Ralston	University of Saskatchewan College of Law, SK
Bill McKay	Councillor, Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, AB
Bill Snow	Stoney Nakoda and Wesley First Nations, AB
Brent Little Mustache	Piikani Lands Department, AB
Candice Pete-Cardoso, Co-chair	Little Pine First Nation;, kihci-okāwīmāw askiy Knowledge Centre, SK
Charles Mistaken Chief	Blood Tribe Lands Department, AB
Chelsey Parker	The Meat Bar, SK
Cheyenne Ironman	Sioux Valley Dakota Nation; Indigenous Kinship Circle, MB
Chief Ron Bear	Muskoday First Nation, SK
Chief Tanya Stone	Mosquito Grizzly Bear's Head Lean Man First Nation, SK
Cliff Wallis	Alberta Wilderness Association, AB
Clint Johnstone	Mistawasis Nêhiyawak, SK
Cody Small Legs	Blackfoot Confederacy, AB
Dale Kirkland	Parks Canada-Elk Island National Park, AB
Dallis Mistaken Chief	Kainai Nation, AB
Dan Fox	Kainai Nation, AB

Digit Guedo	Regeneration Canada, SK
Donna van de Velde	Métis/Lakota; kihci-okāwīmāw askiy Knowledge Centre, SK
Doug Griller	NCIAF Bison Production Advisor, SK
Dr. Dawn Wallin	Office of the Vice-President Research, USask, SK
Dr. Melissa Arcand	Muskeg Lake Cree Nation; University of Saskatchewan, College of Agriculture and Bioresources, SK
Dr. Tasha Hubbard, Co-chair	Peepeekesis Cree Nation, University of Alberta; International Buffalo Relations Institute, AB
Elder Charlie Fox	Kainai First Nation, AB
Elder Joseph Naytowhow	Sturgeon Lake First Nation, SK
Elder Julia Pitzel	Dene/Cree/Metis; SK
Elder Roland Duquette	Mistawasis Nêhiyawak, SK
Jaklyn Mistaken Chief	Kainai Nation, AB
Jason Unger	Environmental law centre, University of Alberta, AB
Jessus Karst	Métis National Council/ Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge sub-committee for COSEWIC, SK
Joaquin Four Horns	Piikani Lands Department, AB
Joe Martel	Big River Métis, SK
Joely BigEagle-Kequahtooway	Buffalo People Arts Institute; International Buffalo Relations Institute; kihci-okāwīmāw askiy Knowledge Centre, SK
Joshua Robert Aisaican	Councillor, Cowessess First Nation, SK

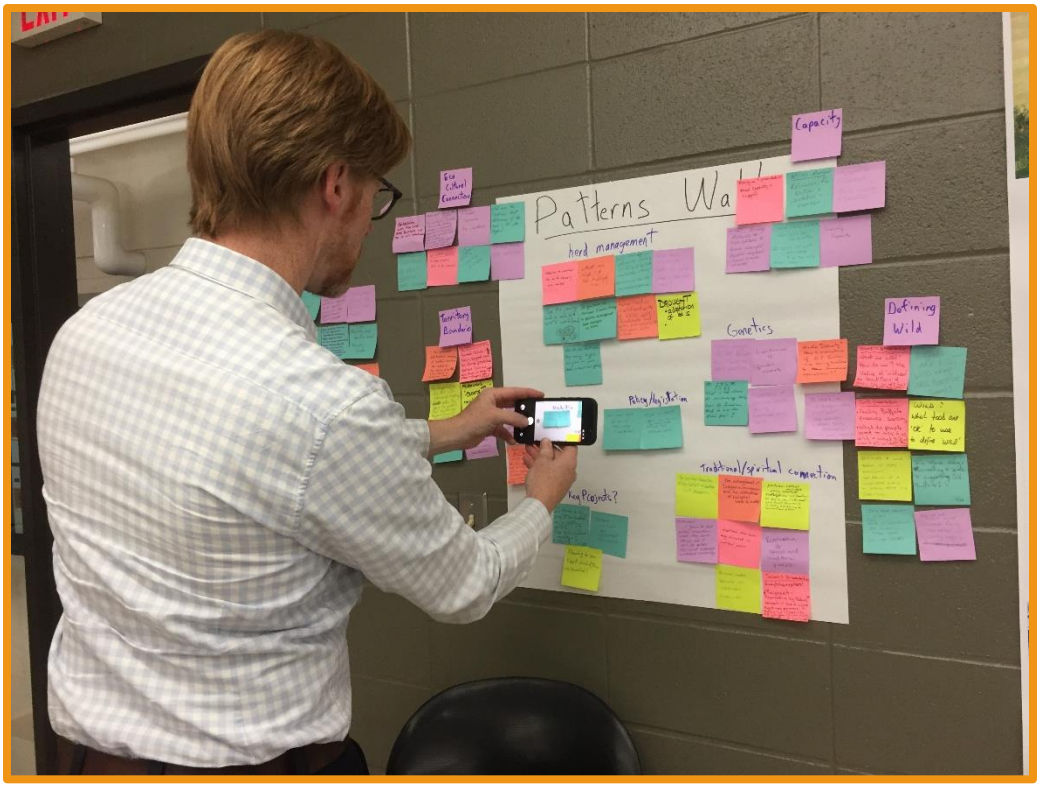
Justin Bruised Head	Blackfoot Confederacy, AB
Kat Hecker	Nature Conservancy of Canada, SK, Old Man on His Back Area Manager
Dr. Kathy Walker	Treaty Commissioner of Saskatchewan, SK
Katira Crow Shoe	International Buffalo Relations Institute, AB
Keara Lightning	Samson Cree Nation; University of Alberta Wildfire Analytics Lab, AB
Ken Williams	Foothills Bison Restoration Society, AB
Kyra Northwest	International Buffalo Relations Institute, AB
Lorne Kequahtooway	Buffalo People Arts Institute, SK
Madeline Burns	Métis, University of Victoria - Indigenous Governance, BC
Merek Wigness	Saskatchewan Bison Association, SK
Michelle Watson	Mistawasis Nêhiyawak, SK
Mike Judd	Foothills Bison Restoration Society, AB
Monique Desjarlais	Indigenous Prairie Bison Initiative, NCIAF, SK
Murray Feist	Ministry of Agriculture, Government of Saskatchewan, SK
Naomi Carriere	kihci-okāwīmāw askiy Knowledge Centre, SK
Ninaakii Low Horn	International Buffalo Relations Institute, AB
Paulette Fox (Holy Walking Woman)	Kainai Nation, AB

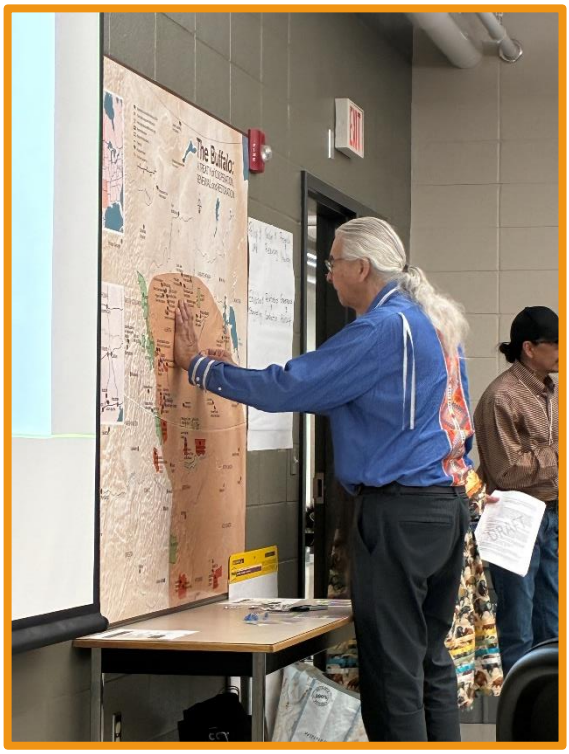
Randy Sangwais	Cowessess Lands Department, SK
Rhett Sangster	Coordinator, Wild Buffalo Summit, SK
Ross MacDonald	Rancher, SK
Ruiping Luo	Alberta Wilderness Association, AB
Scott Wright	Livestock and Forage Centre of Excellence, University of Saskatchewan, SK
Scott Yule	Canadian Bison Association, SK
Dr. Sheldon Krasowski	Office of the Treaty Commissioner, SK
Tim Gompf	Nature Conservancy of Canada, MB
Todd Shury	Prince Albert National Park, SK
Tonya Wirchenko	Office of the Vice-President Research, USask, SK
Travis Spyglass	Mosquito Grizzly Bear's Head Lean Man First Nation, SK

Appendix C: Photos from Wild Buffalo Summit May 2026






Patterns Wa
herd management
Capacity
Genetics
Defining Wild
Traditional/spiritual connection

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