



# European Bison Friends Society

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## POSITION ABOUT EUROPEAN BISON

**Concerns: the statement of European Bison Friends Society in response to Regulation (EU) 2016/429 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on transmissible animal diseases and amending and repealing certain acts in the area of animal health (AHR Animal Health Regulation)**

European Bison Friends Society was created in 2005 in Warsaw. Its main goal is to support the conservation of European bison (the wisent) *Bison bonasus* through advisory, publishing and educational activities as well as initiating *in situ* and *ex situ* restitution projects in Poland and other European countries. The Society gathers together 200 members: scientists, breeders, conservationists and other interested parties. The long-term project of European Bison Friends Society is the European Bison Conservation Center (EBCC). EBCC is the International Network gathering European bison breeders from Poland, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Romania, Netherlands, Czech Republic, Belarus and Lithuania. The main goal of EBCC is to coordinate the flow and exchange of information and create a platform of communication to develop a common policy for wisent conservation in Europe, despite the existence of differences in the rules of E. bison conservation in particular European countries.

### Animal Health Regulation

A new uniform European health law for all captive animals has been created by merging existing European and national regulations on animal health. This law is for animals in captivity, including wild species *ex situ*. The aim of the AHR is to be able to control the health of captive animals, by means of the registration and identification of individual animals and checking their health prior to the transport.

The AHR also applies to captive bovine species. The AHR considers the following species as bovine: "Bovine are all animals belonging to the ungulate species in the genera *Bison*, *Bos* (including the subgenus *Bos*, *Bibos*, *Novibos* and *Poephagus*) and *Bubalus* (including the subgenus *Anoa*) as well as crossbreeds of those species".

There is no separate category for wild animals *ex situ* - animals are considered either as captive or wild. Unfortunately, the European bison (*Bison bonasus*) or wisent belongs to "Bovines" and is therefore also covered by this law.

### **Genera *Bison*:**

**European bison**, the species which was brought back from the brink of extinction. After the World War I<sup>st</sup> there were not natural populations of this species, only animals in zoological gardens and enclosures were left. The first reintroduction of the European bison was performed in 1952. Since then, European bison have been reintroduced in many European countries. The aim of these reintroductions is to enhance and restore the viability of this protected species, as well as bringing back the natural processes initiated by these large herbivores.

The current population of European bison is almost 200 times larger than in 1923 and counts above 9100 individuals. More than 25% of animals are kept in enclosures and many of them live within an area of tens or hundreds of hectares, so animals kept there do not have contact with people. European Bison Pedigree Book 2020 registered over 500 animals in category semi-free. This number is growing every year and in near future it will exceed number of E. bison kept in small enclosures. Management of semi-free herds differs markedly from both wild and captive/kept herds. The reasons are both technical and biological. As such, the semi-free herds require somewhat specific approach. Unfortunately, nowadays the problem of war has returned to Europe. In the event of a threat to the free populations living in mainly in Eastern Europe, the protection of the species should be built on numerous semi-free herds located in various European countries.

The European bison is listed in Appendix III of the Bern Convention. According to the Habitats Directive (Council Directive 97/62 EC), the species is subject to strict protection. It is listed in both Annex II and IV of the Directive. At present, the species as a status of near threatened (NT) on the IUCN Red List. European bison is important specie in European fauna.

This worth to mention that *Bison bison* (American bison) is kept in Europe mainly for meat production purposes. American bison are kept in extensive conditions and managed as farm animals. So there is very great difference between two species belonging to genus *Bison*. Treatment of European bison in the same way as an alien species the American bison, according to the same AHR rules all over the Europe is very inappropriate.

## **AHR implications for European bison**

For identification purposes animals must be handled. In case of European bison its capturing using the squeezing box (crush) is not recommended. Those animals are very strong, wild and nervous, such infrastructure is expensive and especially for calves the method is very dangerous.

The other possibility is sedation, which is used before transport and for any veterinary treatment. Immobilization is dangerous for animals and is very costly. The method is recommended for the species but should be used as rarely as possible.

Ear tags are not recommended - European bison lose them more often than domestic cattle. Also this wild species with easily visible large ear tags will get the appearance of a domestic animal, what is not recommended for education or preservation purposes.

Boluses are poorly applicable in wild animals. Veterinarians experienced in handling of wildlife species advised against the use of boluses, due to the complexity to place it and risk of choking or in consequence pneumonia.

Transponder chips are currently often used to identify European bison. Experiences with them are in general very positive and now those animals are mainly chipped before transport.

Translocation is an component of species conservation and it is necessary for augmentation or for creation of new herds. Additional requirements before the transport (like quarantine inside of a building) could worsen animal welfare and make impossible preparation of the transport and in a consequence restrain measures undertaken towards the species protection. The European bison population in Poland is the largest worldwide (above 25%) and every second wisent in European Union lives in Poland. As a country we have great influence upon European bison protection and animals from Poland are exported to more than 25 countries. However, last planned transport to Sweden had to be canceled because we could not fulfill requirements of Animal Health Regulation.

In general, the implications of the AHR might lead to a lessening of support for the species conservation, due to an increase in rules and regulations that are difficult to implement in practice and can induce higher costs.

## **Proposed changes in the AHR concerning European bison**

We propose to exclude in Animal Health Regulation the species *Bison bonasus* from Bovines under proposed criterion. We would like to propose that the criterion for excluding European bison from the AHR requirements should be based on the size of the enclosure. For example, an exemption from the AHR requirements could apply to reserves where the area per individual is at least 0.5 hectare. In such

conditions animals could express all behavioural and social needs and should be treated in the same way as wild species. Additionally we propose to implement methods of identification and health control adequate to this wild species to assure its welfare and health.

1. Identification with transponder chip in every situation when animal is immobilized, and collection of e tissue (blood or hair) for DNA analysis,
2. Before transport obligatory health check using blood samples,
3. If quarantine is necessary, animals should be placed in an enclosure and not inside a building
4. The health status of a herd could be checked on the base of animals immobilized for other reasons and all available deceased individuals.

## Conclusions

The European bison is an internationally endangered species, just recovering from the brink of extinction. European bison live mostly in natural areas and are not domesticated. European bison have a higher stress level towards humans, which makes it more difficult to handle these animals than cattle. Translocation of animals between countries is necessary for the maintenance of individuals' exchange crucial for preservation of their gene pool. Mandatory regulations such as the AHR must not lead to higher risks for animals, employees or the public.

European regulations should not hinder the recovery of the population of this beautiful endangered animal, but should instead offer support to European bison managers and facilitate efforts towards its restitution.

Warsaw March 14, 2022



*Wanda Olech-Piasecka, EBFS President*