

To: The Management Team

In the past few months we have talked a lot about safety and the need for everyone to practice riding their horses and get comfortable riding before they participate in moving bison. So far, opportunities to practice and develop riding skills have been limited due to numerous factors (e.g. weather, trainings, meetings, lack of adequate horses and tack, duties, etc.). However, given the range of experience and skill levels among personnel, it is important that individuals have adequate time and instruction (if needed) to develop their riding skills. One half hour session of riding around in a pen is not sufficient for acquiring the skills and knowledge riders need to have to herd bison, regardless of their current horsemanship skills. Following the second group horse ride on Tuesday (3/24), which unexpectedly turned into a bison moving event, a number of individuals approached me and expressed concern for their personal safety. The following is a summary of concerns expressed to me and some of my own concerns.

We have formal mandatory trainings for operating ATVs, for using computers, and for just about everything you can think of, regardless the prior skill levels, but we have no formal training, certification, or protocols for riding horses, the most dangerous thing we do on the refuge. Riders should be fully competent and comfortable handling their horses before being asked to participate in bison herding activities. Properly trained riders should not fall off their horses; falling off a horse is analogous to having a car accident - it results from rider error, lack of skill or familiarity with their horse. Riders should know how to avoid situations that would place their horse and themselves in overly hazardous situations. Placing persons lacking in proper training and experience into extremely dangerous and potentially life-threatening positions is inexcusable.

Prior to moving bison, new personnel involved should be given an overview of herding strategies, bison herd behavior, potentially dangerous situations to watch out for and avoid, how to handle themselves and their horse if they find themselves in dangerous situations, and any other relevant information. To the extent possible, bison moving activities need to be planned out with everyone involved knowing at least the basic strategy for moving the bison, e.g. destination, route, etc.. Decisions in the field need to be made rationally, with the safety of all personnel considered as the highest priority.

Moving bison is one of the most exciting and most dangerous aspects of working on the Bison Range, and therefore demands a high degree of planning, training, and team work to ensure the safety of everyone involved.

If an individual staff member finds him or herself in a situation in which they feel unsafe or uncomfortable, they should have the option of removing themselves from that situation. Individuals should not be intimidated or coerced into doing something that they feel threatens their safety. Intimidation includes referring to personnel who opted out of an activity for safety concerns as “quitters” or threatening the safety of others by using intimidating language, e.g. “you can join the other quitter(s) if you want”. It is also not constructive to make comments like “We should’ve hired people with more riding experience.” Every person hired is a valuable member of our team and everyone who needs it has a reasonable level of experience riding horses.

Moving bison involves a high degree of inherent risk. Who is responsible if someone gets seriously injured or killed? Did we take all the necessary and reasonable precautions to keep our staff as safe as possible? There are a lot of factors that come into play when making decisions about moving bison. One factor of concern is that people will accuse us of not doing our jobs, or lacking the experience to do the job (e.g. herd bison). These comments may come from outside observers, or even from NBRC personnel. This may happen, regardless of our actions. However, the safety of our staff should take priority over any real or perceived public perceptions. We also need to consider how it sounds when our staff go home and tell their families and friends that they almost died today, or how a situation degraded into complete chaos placing themselves and others at risk of serious injury or worse. We also need to consider how our staff and the public will perceive us if someone is seriously injured.