

What is all this Bull About Crossing Bison and Beef?

Clearing up misconceptions about cattle genetics in today's bison.

You may have heard comments on TV, or read stories on the internet, that today's bison herds contain widespread cattle genetics. We want you to know the truth.

What is behind these comments?

To understand the full story, we have to go back more than 120 years. As the 1800's came to a close, the American bison teetered on the brink of extinction. The more than 30 million animals roaming North America at one time had been decimated to the point where fewer than 600 remained alive. Roughly 25 remained in the newly created Yellowstone National Park. The remainder wandered in isolated clusters across the prairies.

Fortunately, five ranchers scattered along the Great Plains began to gather up those remnants and pulled the species back from the brink. Some of those ranchers experimented briefly with crossing bison with cattle in the hope of creating a hearty crossbreed.

They discovered instead that the crossbred animals were highly infertile, had problems calving, and generally performed poorly. The ranchers soon dropped the experiment. In the process, though, *some* cattle genetics were introduced into *some* bison.

How widespread are the resulting levels of cattle genetics in today's bison?

We have to set the record straight. Some media stories refer to "widespread levels" of cattle genetics in the bison herds on private farms and ranches across the United States. Texas A&M University has conducted DNA testing on more than 30,000 bison in both private and public herds across North America. About six percent of those bison tested have shown evidence of cattle DNA. And, the level of cattle genetics in those bison average less than 1.5 percent of the genetic make-up.

Doesn't crossbreeding still occur?

There is an animal called a beefalo, which is the result of some modern crossbreeding. However, those animals—and the meat they produce—are clearly labeled separately from bison or buffalo.

The members of the National Bison Association are dedicated to maintaining the integrity of the all-natural buffalo. That is why our members have adopted a code of ethics that specifically *prohibits crossbreeding bison with any other species of animal.*

Can't you just weed out the animals with cattle genetics?

Remember that all of the bison in the world today descended from the fewer than 600 left alive in 1894. That genetic pool is very important.

Many ranchers today are testing their herds and culling the animals that have remnants of the cattle genetics. But those ranchers are also taking care to protect the vital bison genetics that survived the "bottleneck" of the late 1800s.

Today's ranchers recognize that Mother Nature perfected this animal to thrive on the pastures and rangelands of North America. Even as we build the herds to meet growing consumer demand, we are dedicated to protecting the integrity of this species as an animal that produces nutritious meat, survives in harsh climates, and requires relatively little management.