

# Bringing Back the Bison: The Wolakota Buffalo Range Project

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In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, tens of millions of bison roamed the Great Plains of North America; however western expansion eventually pushed the species to the brink of extinction. Today, Toyota has teamed up with leaders of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to bring the bison back to their native habitat.

“The Wolakota Buffalo Range is a project that seeks justice for the Lakota people, buffalo and our planet,” says Clay Colombe, CEO of Rosebud Economic Development Corporation (REDCO). “At its core, Wolakota is a Native-led bison restoration project, but it is much more than that to the Sicangu Lakota Oyate [Rosebud Sioux Tribe].”

The Wolakota Buffalo Range project is located on the land of the Sicangu Lakota Oyate, commonly known as the Rosebud Indian Reservation, in South Dakota. Over the next few years, the project will establish a herd of over 1,200 plains bison on 27,680 acres of native grassland. When at capacity, the herd will be North America’s largest bison herd owned and managed by Native Americans. The project is being led by REDCO, the economic arm of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, with the support of WWF, Toyota, and numerous partners. Toyota has donated \$300,000 toward the effort.



Photo: WWF-US/Clay Bolt

“The project is responding to a community’s desire to revitalize their relationship with their relative, the bison, after a period of forced separation,” says Dennis Jorgensen, bison program manager for World Wildlife Fund’s Northern Great Plains Program. “Restoring the bison to tribal lands provides a foundation for many things to unfold at Wolakota and for the Sicangu Lakota nation.”

**Bringing the Project to Life**

According to Colombe, the dream of the Wolakota Buffalo Range has been in development for generations. Through conversations with Lakota leaders, former REDCO CEO Wizipan Little Elk refined the plan to bring back the bison for several years. But finding the right site had always been a challenge.

“Our Lakota ancestors have been fighting for generations to overcome this disruption to our food system and mass extraction of wealth from our community,” Colombe says. “But ultimately, they were forced to accept agreements that forced them onto limited areas of land as part of the reservation system.”

It was also this reservation system that created a particular challenge during the development of the Wolakota Buffalo Range. Due to the federal policy of allotment of Native land, most land bases for Native nations – including Rosebud – are extremely fractionated, and thus not large enough to sustain a substantial bison herd. When Wizipan learned that a ranch known locally as Mustang Meadows — which was purchased by the Rosebud Sioux Tribe from the brother of former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor — was being offered for lease by Rosebud Tribal Land Enterprise, he contacted WWF.



Photo: WWF-US/Clay Bolt

“Once we analyzed the feasibility of the project, we jumped at the chance,” says Jorgensen. “We estimated that it would likely take about five years to stock the property with 1,200 bison, so the lease would need to be longer than five years to see some return on investment for REDCO. Ultimately, REDCO and the Tribal Land Enterprise were able to negotiate a 15-year lease.”

Included in the donation, Toyota provided \$150,000 to the project to support the development of the range, specifically for the construction of 23 miles of perimeter fence in 2021. In 2020, 18.5 miles of fence was constructed. The remaining 12 miles of fencing will be completed in 2022 and will make the entire 27,680 acres accessible to bison. The first 100 bison were returned to the Wolakota Buffalo Range in October 2020, with a three-year plan to grow the herd to approximately 1,200 animals.

“It is very important to REDCO and WWF to have outside collaborators like Toyota who can provide substantial support and bring this story to a broader audience,” says Colombe. “Toyota is the largest corporate sponsor of this project and provided critical matching funds for a WWF online fundraising campaign.”

According to Kevin Butt, senior director of Environmental Sustainability for Toyota Motor North America, the automaker has worked with WWF in the past, and these kinds of projects only see success when they engage local communities.

“You’ve got to listen to the people who are on the ground and what their needs are,” says Butt. “We can’t come in as outsiders and say, ‘This is the Toyota way.’ That’s just not going to work. You have to have complete buy-in by the people that are going to own it.”

### **Economic and Cultural Renewal**

In addition to the cultural significance of revitalizing the sacred relationship between the buffalo and the Lakota, the Wolakota Buffalo Project will have positive environmental and economic impacts for the Rosebud Reservation and surrounding areas. Colombe says that the range opens the door for economic opportunities in the region in sectors like ecotourism and meat processing.

“Wolakota is an important step toward food sovereignty, economic prosperity and cultural revitalization for the Sicangu Lakota Oyate,” Colombe says. “Wolakota will provide a healthy, culturally relevant, regeneratively raised food source for the people of Rosebud.”

When the herd was first established Wizipan Little Elk, former CEO of REDCO said “We are going to ensure the buffalo are taken care of in a way that is culturally appropriate. Part of our instructions are to treat buffalo as buffalo. Don’t treat them like cattle. That means we have to raise them differently from how a lot of people do buffalo ranching. We have to make sure they have big open spaces to use the land how they need to. It also means our buffalo will never see a feed lot. That’s a law we put down. When we harvest them, it will be done in a culturally appropriate manner where we pray with them, honor who they are in their spirit and make sure that we are not wasting anything.”

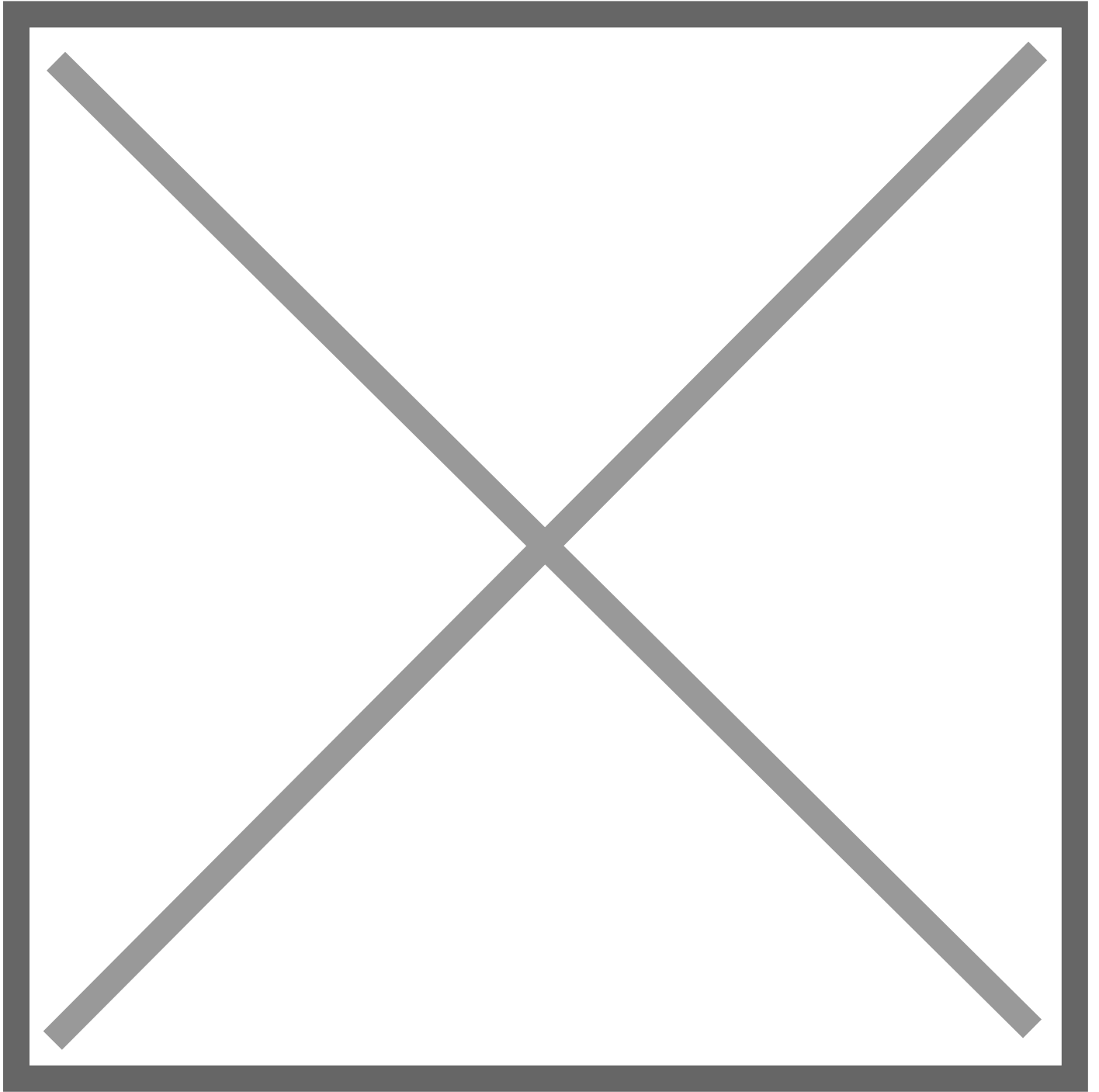


Photo: WWF-US/Clay Bolt

Additionally, returning the bison to their native habitat has environmental benefits. Before REDCO leased the land it had primarily been subject to a series of short-term cattle leases that have degraded the health of the land. The combination of Wolakota's commitment to data-driven management and the reintroduction of bison as a keystone species, supports sustainable management and encourages recovery of the land and the biodiversity it can sustain. These environmental impacts are part of the reason Butt and other sustainability leaders at Toyota

are so excited about the project. In addition to the \$150,000 for fencing, Toyota is providing \$150,000 in funding to conduct annual ecological monitoring to understand how bison restoration and management impacts land, soil, water, vegetation and biodiversity health.

So why is an automotive company so involved in biodiversity? “We have to be thinking about the holistic viewpoint,” says Butt. “It’s another part of what we’re trying to do to preserve and improve the ecosystems around us, not just around our manufacturing plants. With the platform that we have, I believe we have the obligation and responsibility to lead by example, and that’s why we get involved in these projects.”

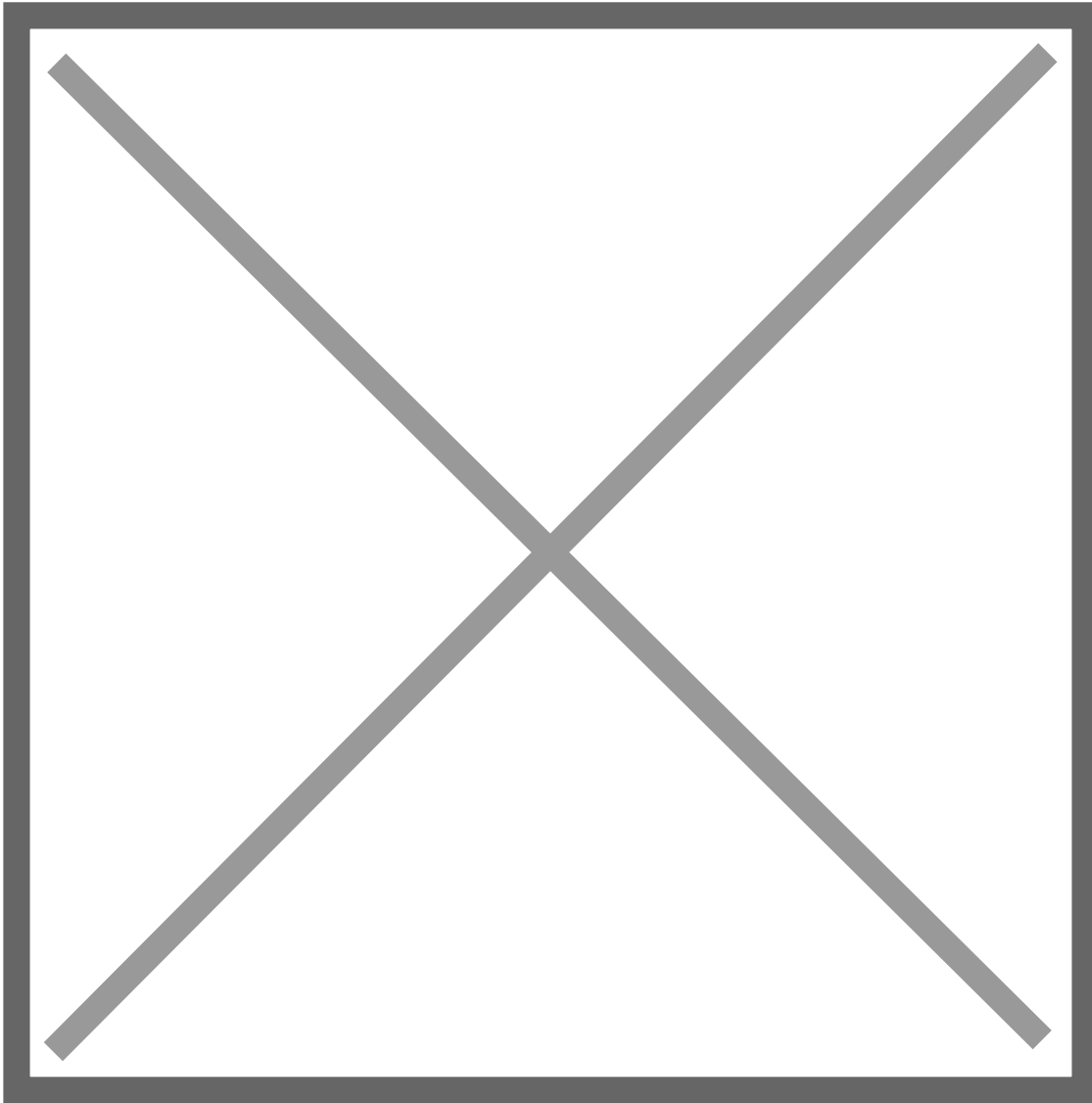
Butt says projects like the Wolakota Buffalo Range are a demonstration of Toyota’s values. Environmental policies and programs go hand in hand with “Respect for People.” The project demonstrates the company’s commitment to environmental justice and ensuring that all people experience the same level of environmental benefits.

“We can’t do it on our own,” Butt says. “We don’t have that expertise. We have subject matter experts of course, but organizations like REDCO and WWF have the ability to work with their sister organizations and governments that are in the area and can get us in the door. It’s really critical that we partner with organizations like that.”

While there is still plenty of work to be done, the Wolakota Buffalo Range is already achieving major milestones and is on target to establish a herd of 1,000 bison by spring 2022.

“We consider Wolakota Buffalo Range a remarkable demonstration of what’s possible,” Jorgensen says. “We’re not sure yet whether the project will be scaled up or replicated, but WWF is exploring the potential to establish additional projects to support the desires of other Native nations in our Northern Great Plains region.”





*If you're interested in helping bring back the bison, you can find more information here: [Wolakota Buffalo Range](#)*

*You can also support World Wildlife Fund by symbolically adopting a bison, here: [Adopt a Bison](#)*

*Want to learn more about Toyota's sustainability efforts and the Wolakota Buffalo Range?*

[Toyota North American Environmental Report: Biodiversity](#)

[Rosebud Buffalo](#)

[World Wildlife Fund](#)