

'Absolutely epic': Blackfeet release wild bison on tribal land



Bison from the Blackfeet Buffalo Program graze on their winter range along the Two Medicine River. THOM BRIDGE/INDEPENDENT RECORD

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As he watched the half-ton buffalo jump in the waist-high grass at Chief Mountain, Blackfeet Councilman Lauren Monroe Jr. said he thought of his ancestors.

"I thought of the demise they went through," he said. "If they were to understand that our language, our culture, our buffalo would come back one day ... it was absolutely momentous as a Blackfeet to be on our land within our sovereignty and do this. We're the leaders. We're choosing our future as we

see it."

On Monday, the Blackfeet Nation transferred 30 wild buffalo (iin-nii in the Blackfoot language) to tribal lands near Chief Mountain, an area steeped in Blackfeet cultural significance in the northwest corner of the reservation bordering Glacier National Park. The buffalo were brought to the Blackfeet from Alberta in 2016 after testing negative for diseases. In the seven years since, the tribe has been growing the captive herd in preparation for the release.

On Monday, the exploratory herd was loaded

into trailers and hauled to a temporary paddock within sight of Chief Mountain. There, they grazed quietly until wranglers opened the gate.

Then every buffalo rushed through, formed a single-file line and rumbled toward a distant tree line. Monroe called the moment "absolutely epic."

Rosalyn LaPier, Blackfeet and Métis, and her family own 120 acres in the foothills of Chief Mountain. She said the tribe has created a conservation district in the area to allow for grazing.

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