

All about the bison: Local conference draws national attendance

by Debbie Griffin

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Tom Barthel of Becker will host national-conference guests at his Snake River Farm June 21 for tours and bison-related discussion and learning.

Several local people have been busily preparing for a big event in the world of bison producers: The National Bison Association summer conference takes place in Becker, Elk River and Otsego June 20-22, when about 200 conference guests visit the Becker-based Snake River Farm owned by husband-and-wife farmers Tom Barthel and Gail Wilkinson.

“I think it’s a big deal to have it in Minnesota,” Barthel said.

Barthel sits on the association’s Region 5 board and is director of the Minnesota Buffalo Association, which has members from several states.

The National Bison Association holds two conferences a year, with a winter one always held in Denver and a summer one that changes venues. This year the theme is “Bison: America’s Soil Producers.” Recent-year locations include the Fort Worth Stockyards in Texas; entertainment mecca Branson, Missouri; one of Ted Turner’s Montana ranches; and other “major” locations.

“About a year ago the president of the association called me and said the executive committee had decided it’s about time Minnesota hosts the conference,” Barthel said.

Barthel said Wilkinson had a can-do attitude about the conference. She figured the approximate number of 200 conference guests could stay in Otsego and visit the Snake River Farm in Becker, which sits on the western edge of the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge. Not long after that, planning began for the big event co-hosted by Snake River Farm and the Minnesota Buffalo Association.

The Minnesota association has about 120 bison-producing members, while the national association has about 1,200. Snake River Farm will host on June 21 about 250 guests for a bison workshop that will include tours of the farm, including its on-site farm museum and the historic Kragero schoolhouse. Visitors will also see the farm’s small herd of 26 bison as well as the other animals that live there such as cows, horses, pigs, chickens and geese.

The day will feature a blacksmithing demonstration, wagon rides and different tents set up for various kinds of learning. Barthel said a professional butcher will help the group conduct a carcass breakdown and comparison of pasture-fed bison and beef. Barthel said the seminar animals will be processed and used for the conference attendees’ lunch the next day so that people can experience the “incredible flavor” of meat from animals that are pasture-fed and harvested humanely.

Barthel said about his and Wilkinson’s Snake River Farm, “Everything is pastured here, nothing is in cages.”

The Becker farmer said he's been working the land since the late 1960s and does more now that he and Wilkinson are retired. He plants a blend of different grasses together to yield a hardy, highly-nutritious pasture.

Barthel said, "We're learning now that all prairie soils were developed under large grazing animals," evidenced by the grazing program now offered at the Refuge.

While there are fences on the farm, Barthel said the one, lone bull of the herd holds the job of "telling" the farm owner when it's time to move to a new pasture – he'll advance to the gate and stomp his big hoof. Barthel said the herd has a definite age-related hierarchy, and while the bull plays an important role, the female bison dominate the herd.

Keynote speaker shares perspective

John Mesko lives on a grass-fed beef farm between Princeton and Milaca and is the executive director for the Sustainable Farming Association. He will be a keynote speaker at the upcoming national bison conference.

He said about Sustainable Farming Association, "The work we do as an association is helping to develop sustainable farming practices."

Mesko said one of those practices is bison grazing but clarifies that any managed grazing of large livestock can be beneficial to the land. He said when farmers and ranchers do managed grazing, they mimic what used to happen naturally: Animals would eat, stomp and poop in one area and then move on to another area.

He'll share with conference guests the story of bison from the time of its abundance in the early 1800s until its near-demise in the late 1800s. Mesko said at one point in time, there were only about 235 head of bison left in the United States, but many different kinds of people came together to "fix" the problem.

Politicians, the U.S. military, entrepreneurs, American Indians, Canadians, farmers, individuals, organizations and business all took simultaneous steps to "save the bison." Mesko said some of the efforts were as informal as taking in a few head and managing them as a herd to more major efforts like that of President Theodore Roosevelt's for conservation. People pulled together and ceased unsustainable practices such as killing the animal to use only its hide for a \$10 "buffalo robe."

"This was a dire situation that was resolved by people coming together," Mesko said, "and that whole idea is inspiring."

Mesko said having the bison conference here is "tremendous" and brings people from all over the country. The presenters also include local U.S. Fish and Wildlife personnel Steve Karel and Tony Hewitt, who will talk about the positive effects of managed grazing at the Sherburne NWR. Soil expert and North Dakota farmer Gabe Brown will speak, as well as Mary Monte, the district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Elk River who gives technical assistance to producers and administers U.S. Department of Agriculture programs.

The conference targets bison producers, but anyone who is interested to learn more about bison can register at the nonmember rate. Get more information at the National Bison Association website, www.bisoncentral.com.