

## Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - MN Bison Herd 01GAKXKZYJFWTTK8S09PA2DQWN

CATHY WURZER: I want you to think about this for just a minute. Only a couple of hundred years ago, 20 million to 30 million bison lived in vast herds across North America. There's a sustained effort by some Native tribes to reestablish bison herds in Minnesota.

The Red Lake Nation in far northern Minnesota started a herd back in 2021, and we thought we'd check in to see how they're doing. Cherilyn Spears joins us right now. She's the director of the Red Lake Nation's new Department of Agriculture. Cherilyn, welcome.

**CHERILYN** Welcome.

**SPEARS:**

**CATHY WURZER:** Nice to have you. Nice to have you. Say, for folks who are not familiar, why is the bison so important to native culture?

**CHERILYN SPEARS:** Well, the buffalo are more than just a tourist attraction for us. We hold the seven teachings of the anishinaabe very sacred to us-- love, respect, truth, humility, honesty, bravery, and wisdom. And the buffalo represents respect. We respect them as they provided shelter, clothing, food, tools for our ancestors. And we're going to be teaching our youth on how to utilize every part of the buffalo when we process our first one, just as our ancestors did.

**CATHY WURZER:** OK. So let me ask you about the herd that you got started. How big is it?

**WURZER:**

**CHERILYN SPEARS:** We started out with seven buffalo. The following year, we had four little ones that joined us. Then the following year, we got 15 from Wind Cave National Park. And that brought us to 27, and then four more were born this year so we're up to 31 buffalo.

**CATHY WURZER:** So you're growing. You're getting there.

**WURZER:**

**CHERILYN SPEARS:** Yes, we are.

**SPEARS:**

**CATHY WURZER:** I'm kind of curious as to what got the band to start this herd to begin with.

**WURZER:**

**CHERILYN SPEARS:** Well, our current chairman, Mr. Darrell Siki, when he first came on in 2014, he held a series of meetings and asked the citizens of Red Lake what their concerns were and what projects they'd like to see happen on Red Lake. They expressed the concern that our food was transported in and why we couldn't grow our own food here, because we have so much land, and why we couldn't have buffalo available as a meat source.

So as a project coordinator for economic development at that time, I was tasked with starting a Buffalo ranch. I reached out to some friends of mine who owned the North American Native American foods. They also have tonka bars, one of their products. She said that the tribe wanted to start a tribal business, to start a bison ranch and they'd buy up all the bison we could produce.

So one of the things that the tribe looks at when you're starting a tribal business, they want to make sure you have a buyer. So right from the get-go, I had a buyer. And from then on there, I contacted the Intertribal Buffalo Council. They were very, very helpful in giving us technical assistance. And they also provide grants.

And so then, we just started building our fence and putting our water infrastructure in. And then we had our Buffalo transported here from Wind Cave National Park.

**CATHY** Wow. So you really had to learn a lot about buffalo pretty quick.

**WURZER:**

**CHERILYN** We did. We did. I hired a tribal member to come and help look after the bison after we got it, because we didn't  
**SPEARS:** have the training prior to it. And I knew he was a hunter, gatherer, and a farmer. And so I knew he was the one to bring on.

And my part only is to order the mineral tubs, and supplemental feed, and write the grants. And so as our herd grew, we brought on another tribal member. We all attended training in herd management from the Intertribal Buffalo Council. And Fred, who I originally hired, is now a farm manager. And Jim Kingbird is now our Buffalo manager.

**CATHY** Wow. From my interactions with buffalo, they can be a little ornery. What do you think?

**WURZER:**

**CHERILYN** Well, the buffalo are like one big family. Where the bull goes, so does the rest of the herd. Our original herd is  
**SPEARS:** young. Maybe when we got them, they were just young adults or even teenagers when we first brought them here. And we received 15 more last year. They were teenagers.

So the older ones, the first herd, they had to teach them how to behave. They're just like a family. They're just like teenagers and young adults.

And so they all looked after the young ones that were born this year. We had one bison that was going around a fence like he was trying to get out this year. He must have made one of them upset at him. But anyway, we prayed for him to stay because if he tried to get out, we would have had to put him down. And we didn't want to do that.

Two days later, he was back with the herd like nothing happened. And Fred watches them day in and day out. And when we first got them, I was told, do not name the Buffalo, because you get attached to them. So one day, my friend asked him if they had names.

And he looked at me and he said, well, there's Jumbo, Buffy, Lady Gaga. So he must have seen some personalities and named our first herd.

**CATHY** I love that story. OK, have you had the chance to slaughter any bison at this point? Are you going to wait on that  
**WURZER:** for a little bit?

**CHERILYN** Well, they're too young to slaughter. Our oldest one is the bull. Of course, you know what happens if you  
**SPEARS:** slaughter the bull, we don't have any more buffalo. So next year he'll be the oldest one. And then the following year is when we'll be able to process more. So in 2024 is when we're looking we'll be able to process more than one.

**CATHY** And then will the band share in the meat?

**WURZER:**

**CHERILYN SPEARS:** Yes. Yes. We'll be distributing it to community elders, and programs, and the schools. We really want to try to get it into our schools. We have an immersion school right now, and that's who we'll definitely get started, because we're able to, because we'll have our own food court code, we'll be able to provide meat to them without going through the USDA.

But our public school system will have to go through the USDA. And we're currently going to build a buffalo processing facility with a commercial grade kitchen and butchering facilities in it. So we should be able to pass inspection through the USDA.

**CATHY WURZER:** You know what I'm wondering, Cherilyn-- when that first buffalo is processed, would there be maybe a ritual or something that you might perform?

**CHERILYN SPEARS:** We'll have a ceremony. There are different ceremonies of the different cultures on how they process. We'll be inviting our Lakota sister, Lisa Ironcloud from Pine Ridge, to come and help us process our first one. And what she does is she utilizes every part of the buffalo.

So prior to that, we're going to be training our youth in the different parts of the Buffalo that the Intertribal Buffalo Council provides as a box with all the different parts of the Buffalo and what it can be used for. And so when we process our first buffalo, she'll be our trainer. And the youth will learn how to cut the different pieces up and how we're going to be canning our first hide with all the youth. So we're going to be sharing with our members and our youth in processing the buffalo and utilizing every part.

**CATHY WURZER:** Terrific. So this is part of this larger agriculture effort by Red Lake. How extensive do you think this is going to be?

**CHERILYN SPEARS:** Well, currently, we have set aside almost 600 acres for the buffalo pasture. And we currently have 280 acres fenced in. And we'll be fencing in 300 more this year. Across the road from it, we have eight acres that's fenced in with an eight-foot high deer fence. Because if we don't fence it in, the deer are going to come in and enjoy all our vegetables.

And we want to share it with the members first. So across the road, we have an eight-acre. And in there, we've got two high tunnels. We're going to have a green house. We have close to 60 fruit-bearing orchard trees. Our goal is to produce an acre of potatoes, an acre of onions, acre of carrots, an acre celery, which is what everybody uses. We'll be selling half of it to our casinos, to our schools, to our stores, and any other to our tribal programs. And then we'll reach out to the community members.

**CATHY WURZER:** Wow. This is a really big operation. And I'm wondering, are other tribal nations in Minnesota, are they looking to Red Lake to find out how you're doing it?

**CHERILYN SPEARS:** Well, recently, Shakopee reached out. And this is really a full circle. I really like this part that what happened is Wozupi Tribal Gardens down in Shakopee was our mentor for our gardening-- our large scale production of vegetables. Now, they're reaching out to us on how to start a Buffalo ranch of their own.

**CATHY WURZER:** Gosh. In 10 years from now-- 10, 15, even 20 years-- do you think that the Red Lake nation will be almost completely self-sustainable when it comes to food?

**CHERILYN  
SPEARS:**

Yes. That is our goal. Food sovereignty is about growing your own food and being able to feed your people. I've said it before and I'll say it again-- you are not sovereign unless you can feed your own people. It's all about having locally grown food available to your members.

Without any pesticides, our farm is going to be 100% organic. And we do plan on expanding our Buffalo. We're currently looking for a larger area, because our herd is growing so fast.

**CATHY  
WURZER:**

Wow. Well, thank you for the update. It was really interesting. And, Cherilyn, we wish you all the best.

**CHERILYN  
SPEARS:**

Thank you.

**CATHY  
WURZER:**

I love Cherilyn's enthusiasm. Cherilyn Spears is the head of the Red Lake Nation's Department of Agriculture.