



# The Bison Rancher

Official Newsletter of the Rocky Mountain Bison Association

## Join us as we co-host the 2021 NBA Summer Conference

We are so excited to be able to co-host the 2021 NBA Summer Conference in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Mark your calendars for this great event featuring both learning & ranch tours.

The dates are tentatively planned for June 27 - 30, 2021.

We hope to see you there!



## ROCK RIVER RANCHES

### 2020 business pivot & survival

*By Rex Moore, Rock River Ranches*

The year 2020 will be a year to remember and hopefully it will be about business survival.

I wish I would have had 20/20 vision and a crystal ball for what was going to happen to me, my family and my business. Here is a short story about what happened and what my recommendations would be going forward in the new world we live in.

It was mid-March 2020. Business was slow. My part-time employees were gone. It was just me at Rock River Ranches in Commerce City, CO. The pet food side of my business had slowed way down and I was supplying bison to local Front Range restaurants.

#### **Then someone pulled the emergency brake.**

In one week's time I lost 80 percent of my restaurant business as they were all forced to close. I had just processed eight head of bison the week before. What to do?

I told my landlord that I was probably not going to be able to pay rent in the coming month. I was worried I could go out of business with the restaurants.

In desperation, I posted a classified ad on Denver's Craigslist and then I posted a message and

picture on my personal Facebook page. I only had 120 friends. I rarely posted anything on social media. I posted that my cold storage facility was full of fresh and frozen bison and I had no one to sell it to.

#### **I asked for America's help. I was real. I was vulnerable.**

To my astonishment, people started sharing my post with their friends. Their friends shared with even more. In a time when there was a shortage of meat in the grocery stores, my Facebook posting went viral. Within 5 hours it had been shared over 12,000 times. By the next morning it had been shared over 24,000 times. I have been told now that it was shared somewhere between 80,000 to 100,000 times. In early April, it went viral a second time all by itself. Americans wanted to help. They wanted to help the little guy. They wanted to buy direct from small business and to support small agriculture.

Mainstream media got wind of the story and I was interviewed by four television stations, one radio station and a newspaper. They wanted to report on a positive story of America coming together in a time of crisis and how

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Elections are held annually at the Spring General Membership Meeting. Meeting minutes & financials are available from the Board Secretary.

**PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**  
**Keep on keeping on**

*By John Graves, RMBA President*

Here we are again: Another fall season, another round of annual roundups & herd health checks, and the time for making decisions related to your herd for the next year.

We are still facing a little uncertainty in the marketplace and economy due to COVID-19, but we are seeing positive things happen.

- There has been a small uptick in prices.
- Bison meat producers are now included for potential assistance through the second round of Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP-2).
- A petition has been filed under the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service Section 32 Commodity Purchase Program to support bison meat prices through government purchase.
- The Custer State Park Roundup got lots of attention this year and helped increase the public interest in bison.

All positive things!

**Keep bison in demand**

Here in Sheridan, Wyoming, you can buy bison meat at Albertson's or Walmart. While it is just the one-pound packages, the stores are consistently out of stock. Some of you might say that is the meat manager not getting his orders in, but I do not think so.

Even if my wife and I are not there to buy bison meat, I always make a point to ask the meat counter if they have any more bison in the back. They usually do not, and explain that even though they order & receive more with every delivery, they cannot keep it in stock because it is so popular.

I want them to see people ask for it when they run out, so they know it is missed and keep it stocked up, or



even expand their bison product offering. It's one small, local effort everyone can do to hopefully get bison on the shelves and into the hands of more people, more often.

**NWSS & GTSS**

Like many of you, I was saddened that the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) was canceled, and with that the traditional Gold Trophy Show & Sale (GTSS) and National Bison Association Winter Conference held each year in Denver.

As of early October, the NBA's committees for these events are discussing alternative options, but nothing official has been announced.

RMBA has stepped up its support of the GTSS the past few years and will continue to do so even if it changes location.

One positive aspect of the stock show being canceled, is that this will allow them to continue construction of the new facilities through January instead of delaying for an event. When finished, the fully redesigned stock yards will have dedicated bison pens to allow for a wonderful live animal sale.

The whole National Western Complex redesign will also contribute to the overall promotion of agriculture both locally and nationally.

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE CONTINUED

### Membership survey responses

Thank you to everyone who has completed the survey we sent members last month. If you have not yet completed the survey, we ask that you please complete it. We will compile all the responses and the RMBA Board will analyze

the feedback to see what changes we need to make to better serve all of our members.

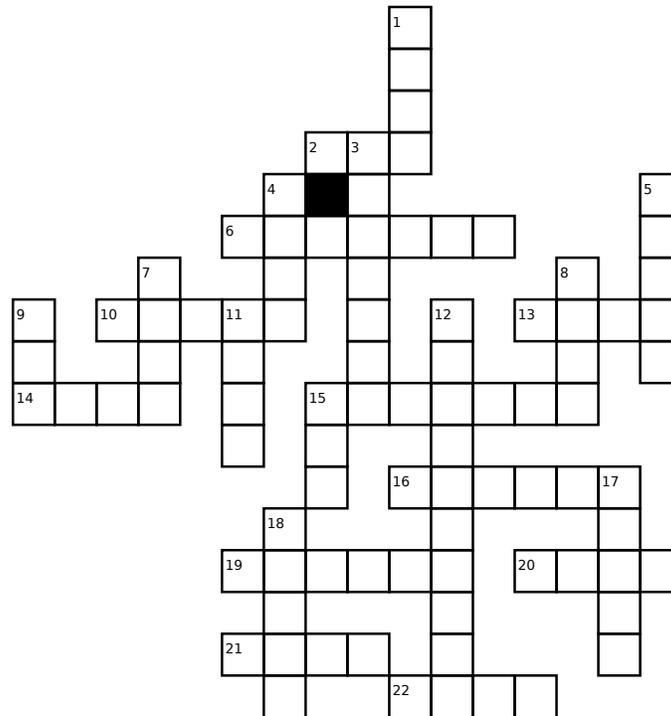
I hope that our membership fee rollover for 2021 is helpful to you all. Though we will not be charging all of our current members to renew for 2021, I do assure you

we are still here working hard to serve you.

Be sure to participate in our photo contest (more information on page 9). Stay safe during your roundups and stay healthy in your lives.

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# Rocky Mountain Bison Association Crossword



*Answers on page 7.*

#### Down:

1. your favorite bison association
3. what we call our favorite animal
4. the warmest blanket you'll ever need
5. white head of our favorite animal
7. one characteristic of the meat we produce
8. high point of the week or on a bison
9. mama bison
11. baby bison
12. annual RMBA spring ritual
15. annual animal ritual
17. our home (or our favorite salad dressing)
18. our favorite animal (specifically)

#### Across:

2. that other bison association (or a basketball organization)
6. (two words) we provide by-product or offal for this
10. that perimeter thing we are always working on
13. daddy bison
14. separation of baby & mama
15. stressful and fun annual work gathering
16. one characteristic of the meat we produce
19. the "extended" portion of a bull when happy
20. home to our bison
21. physical feature our animals are known for
22. what we produce



# Rock River Ranches adapts to pandemic impacts

Continued from page 1

businesses were evolving at the speed of light to adapt, pivot and change their ways to stay in business. Be real. Be truthful. Be honest. Be humble and ask for help when necessary.

Rock River didn't have a website posted on the internet. It had been built but never posted. So my wife, Julie, created a JotForm order form to take orders.

For a while I thought I had broken Craigslist and Facebook. They couldn't keep up with the inquiries. I was getting one to three orders per minute. I had 300 text messages on my phone coming in and my voicemail and phone just about quit working. The response was overwhelming and humbling. I called back several part-time employees to help out that day. My wife came in to help with the avalanche of inquiries, people placing orders, and customers coming by with cash to buy bison meat. This is called an extreme business pivot in today's terminology.

## **Overnight I went from selling bison meat to restaurants to direct-to-consumer sales all over the United States.**

I was afraid of turning down orders. We took thousands of orders from people wanting to help me stay in business. We immediately started curbside pickups and local deliveries. We had so many orders that I needed to order in a semi-load of shipping coolers and that would take several weeks to get delivered.

After 12 weeks, we got caught up on our out-of-state shipments. My business grew instead of losing sales. I had eight people working in various capacities to help with order assembly and shipping. We got to the point



where we could ship 200 orders a week out of state and complete 100 deliveries and curbside pickups.

### **Recommendations**

Where are we at today? First, the overnight business pivot was necessary to stay in business.

- Yes - I would have liked to have been able to plan ahead and have enough dry ice and shipping coolers in advance of the Facebook post.
- Yes - I would have liked to have had a website and an online store in advance.

The world has changed forever. It will not go back to the way it was before COVID-19. So how do we in the bison industry and small agriculture take advantage of this brave new world?

1. All farms and ranches should use social media and marketing forms online.
2. We should all have a website

as that provides validity and way to communicate with our followers.

3. We should all have an online store or at the very least an online order form. The American consumer is - now more than ever - used to buying almost anything online and having it shipped to their front door.
4. Start or use an online farmer's market with curbside pickup. Join with other farmers and ranchers in this online farmer's market to provide greater variety of food or proteins available.
5. Use CRM (customer relations management) software to communicate with your customer base.

### **Challenges**

To be able to sell direct to consumers, here are some things to think about:

1. What is your delivery mechanism? Local delivery,

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- curbside pickup, or shipping?
2. If you are shipping, where can you buy dry ice, shipping coolers and what shipping service you are going to use?
3. Are you using ground or 2nd day shipping? You can negotiate better rates in advance with UPS and FedEx as well as 3rd party shippers.
4. Where are you located in relation to your customer base? If you are in California, you are not going to be able to ship frozen meat to the East Coast by ground (which is more cost effective). 2nd day can be too pricey for the consumer in the days of free Amazon Prime shipping.
5. Are your profit margins good enough to cover the cost of shipping or will you charge for shipping? (I do.)
6. How do you balance selling the various cuts of meat in the right volumes? Do you have back-up suppliers to buy from? I only harvest enough

animals to fill about 80% of the highest moving items and then buy extra items from other bison producers.

7. Find the right software and marketing companies to use.
8. What is your marketing area? The entire U.S. or just a region of the U.S.? Or is it just local to your state? How close is your ranch to a major metropolitan area for a start of a customer base?

### Future

At Rock River Ranches we are forever changed. I have three full-time employees now and some part-time help. We will continue to sell to restaurants, direct to consumer and the pet food industry. We will continue to sell bison meat and a huge variety of items, including non-meat items.

We were pleasantly surprised by the inquiries for skulls, horn caps and bison robes. I had 20 bison robes in stock and had not sold one of them. Now we have sold six or more. I just got in 25 skulls and 10 are already sold. I

will be able to sell hundreds of horn caps in the future (they make great dog chews) and more. So, think about selling every part of the animal.

### Final thoughts

2020 will be the year to remember in our business. How did we adapt and move forward? After a slow start of the year in the first quarter, sales are now increasing with our direct to consumer segment.

**Be flexible. Be willing to learn and change and be willing to USE SOCIAL MEDIA.**

If I had not been willing to try posting on social media, none of this would have happened. Now we have thousands of followers on various social media platforms and have collected an outrageous amount of email addresses to direct market to. We have been fortunate and blessed to have survived so far in this new world. Soon maybe I will get a day off.

## RMBA Board: We love our members

*By Jen Graves, RMBA Secretary on behalf of the Board of Directors*

During their mid-August meeting, the RMBA Board of Directors discussed how the association could help its members during the uncertainty of the pandemic. From that conversation, it was decided to postpone a planned increase in membership dues, and to give all current members a free year of membership.

**"We wanted to make sure our members felt supported by the association."**

**- President John Graves**

Providing current members with one free year of membership will result in an approximate \$5,000

hit to our annual budget; however, the association is in a strong financial position thanks to the support we receive from our members every year.

**"Each year we see our member's generosity through their participation in our raffle, Bison Bingo game and fun auction,"**  
**said Graves.**

This regular support enabled the association to waive dues for one year.

### Dues increase

During the March Board of Directors meeting (pre-pandemic), the board approved a \$15 membership fee increase for individual and dual membership

types, making individual membership \$65 per year and dual membership \$100 per year.

This dues increase was supposed to be implemented during the renewal period this fall; however, it will now take place during membership renewals for 2022 dues (beginning in October 2020). It has already been implemented for people applying for a new membership.

This is the first membership increase any of the board members could remember. It is necessary for the organization to grow and continue with raising costs. It also brings our membership dues in line with other state and regional bison associations.



# A look back to the beginning of Big E Game Ranch

By *Big E Game Ranch*

Located in the foothills just west of Denver, Evergreen Memorial Park offers panoramic views of the surrounding mountains and the peaks of the Continental Divide. Buffalo, elk, yak and fallow deer roam the property.

Owners Ron and Carol Lewis began their bison experiment in spring of 1979. Ron owned a construction company named Buffalo Park Development Company. Until the spring of '79, his only connection to bison was a mounted head that hung on his office wall.

Fortune changed when a semi-tractor trailer hauling bison lost control and veered off of Highway 93 near Longmont, Colorado. When only three of the herd survived the crash, the herd owner decided he wanted out of the bison business and Ron decided he wanted in.

The names of these three animals should have been indicative of the Lewis' launch into the bison world, but hindsight is 20/20.



- **Badnews**, a mature pregnant female, received her name appropriately due to her temperament.
- **Trouble**, another mature pregnant female, broke her horns off flipping a jeep over.
- **Buddy**, a two-year-old male bull, was full of vigor.

Their arrival to Turkey Creek Road was ever so eventful. Immediately upon turnout into their new home, the bison trio upset their pasture mates - three

long horn cattle - who in turn spooked the bison back. This prompted three weeks of fracas everywhere except in their home pasture. A local newspaper said it appropriately: "Buddy do we have Badnews and Trouble." Containing these troublesome three took considerable time and over their years they had numerous excursions into adjoining properties - five strand, reinforced bob-wired fences be damned!

Eventually Trouble gave birth to Sorrow, Badnews gave birth to Woe and Buddy frolicked. In year two, Trouble gave birth to Joy and Badnews gave birth to Jubilation, and a herd was born.

Fast-forward to year seven, a mature female died while giving birth to a female calf. The orphaned calf, Jessica, was raised by hand by the Lewis's for her first two years. She most likely thought she was a German Shepard, as that is who her playmates were.

When returned to the herd, Jessica was always the lowest female in the pecking order - but always received special attention once the herd had left. Jessica

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was trained to be led by a halter and was special guest in her corral at numerous events including the National Western Stock Show (NWSS).

Big E Ranch has been home to **Rain Maker**, a NWSS National Grand Champion and many reserve National Grand Champions in several categories over the years.

The herd has grown up to 70 head at times, but it is best managed on this property at near 30 head.

Calving season is exciting and is always announced by the coyotes who come from miles to find afterbirth.

The reins of the ranch are being pried out of the hands of long-time Rocky Mountain Bison Association member Ron, and slowly turned over to his granddaughter and active RMBA



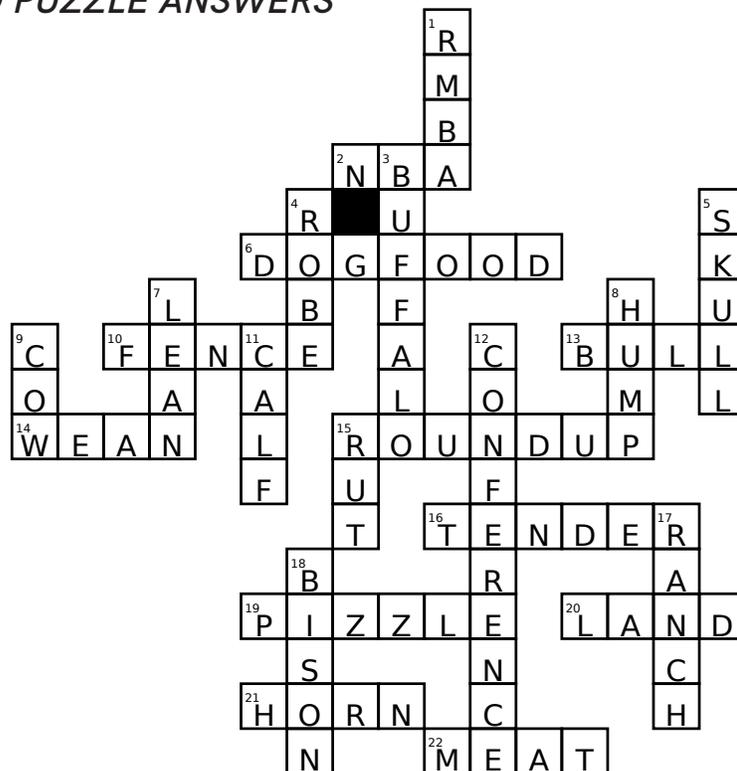
member Jaymee Lewis.

Jaymee feeds and maintains not only the bison herd but also herds of elk, yaks, fallow deer, goats, and a gaggle of geese, ducks and chickens.

These animals are visited, admired and fed by a steady flow of visitors who visit not only Big E

but also Evergreen Memorial Park and the Barn at Evergreen Memorial Park. These venues host hundreds of weddings and celebrations of life annually. These celebrations rarely end without people reflecting on the majestic bison herd that came to this lovely valley long ago in the spring of 1979.

## RMBA CROSSWORD PUZZLE ANSWERS



# Selling bison meat during a pandemic

Greg Nott, Big Heart Bison

This year has presented a unique set of challenges. Acquiring some of the necessities has become difficult at times. Who would have imagined shortages on toilet paper, freezers, and stall mats? And then there's meat. Never would I have imagined seeing a retail meat display filled with Gatorade.

Earlier this year, it was questionable whether farmers' markets would be open. The possibility of no markets was a real concern since that is our primary outlet. But as ranchers, we learn how to adapt.

Here is the silver lining; more people are looking for better sources for their meat. As a retailer, this has been beneficial. Offering local, no-contact delivery has opened up a new market. We provided this service for free on orders of \$100 or more. Facebook advertising worked well, and the orders came in.

## Meeting hurdles online

The next step was to advertise on Google. But, we met roadblocks with their policies. Since our ad campaign used 'the word Bison, and all product related to Bison meat,' Google suspended our account. The email from Google stated the following:

### *The following is not allowed:*

- **Content that promotes cruelty or gratuitous violence towards animals.** *Examples: Promoting animal cruelty for entertainment purposes, such as cock or dog fighting.*
- **Content that may be interpreted as trading in, or selling products derived from, threatened or extinct species.**



**Examples: Sale of tigers, shark fins, elephant ivory, tiger skins, rhino horn, dolphin oil.**

***I deeply apologize as bison is an extinct species and content related to such species is not allowed to be advertised for as it falls under the inappropriate content policy. Please accept my sincere apologies.***

We submitted repeated appeals to enable our account. And then, we went through the same process again to allow an ad to run. We have since suspended all advertising and are evaluating how to proceed.

## Precautions at farmers' markets

All the farmers' markets have opened but are operating under stringent rules, and the policies vary with each location. All are requiring face coverings. Most are allowing plexiglass between our customers and us as an alternative for face masks. Most markets are controlling the

access and flow of people. One market has the police controlling entry and hired security guards to enforce the traffic pattern to keep people moving. This heavy oversight has had an adverse effect causing the number of visitors to decline.

Selling an expensive niche product has its challenges. We depend on strong communication. A muffled, expressionless face restricts our ability to communicate and it reduces sales. We see this on our bottom line.

But, as stated before, we are ranchers, and once again, we are learning to adapt. We may not like it, but we will survive and become stronger because of it.



# \*RMBA Photo Contest\*



RMBA wants your bison, agricultural, landscape & nature photos!

## Prizes

- **1st Place:** Ted's Montana Grill Gift Card, RMBA Merchandise
- **2nd Place:** One Free RMBA Conference Registration, RMBA Merchandise
- **3rd Place:** RMBA Merchandise

## How to enter

- Download the *2020 RMBA Photo Contest Entry & Release Form* from [www.bisonranchers.com](http://www.bisonranchers.com).
- Email the completed form with your high resolution JPEG photo to [info@bisonranchers.com](mailto:info@bisonranchers.com) with the email subject line: **2020 RMBA Photo Contest**.
- There are two categories for photo entries:
  1. bison
  2. agriculture/landscape/nature
- Each person can submit up to two photos per category. You can submit any photo taken by yourself that fits the categories.
- If submitting more than one photo, use one form per entry.
- Anyone may enter and there is no entry fee.
  - Minors must have parent/guardian permission.
  - You do not need to be an RMBA member to enter.
- All entries are due by **Saturday, October 31, 2020**.
- Submissions will be posted on RMBA's Facebook page for public voting. Within each category, the photo with the most "likes" wins.
- Voting will run from November 5-15. Winners will be announced on Sunday, November 15, 2020.





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[www.bisonranchers.com](http://www.bisonranchers.com)

**First Class**



**YOUR ROCKY MOUNTAIN BISON  
ASSOCIATION NEWS IS HERE**

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