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VANCOUVER - They're high in nutrients, low in fat - and creating a mini-stampede to the meat counter.

B.C.'s bison industry has grown by more than 40 per cent over the last five years from 9,000 animals in 2001 to over 12,600 animals in 2006, according to a Statistics Canada report. However, ostrich farming has plummeted and nobody raises elk anymore.

"The demand for [bison] meat has been increasing, increasing, increasing over the last 10 or 12 years," Fort St. John bison rancher Bill Bouffioux said in an interview. "But in the last three years, it's really taken off. Before, we had to contact the meat marketers. Now, they're calling us. There's 10 want ads for buffalo in the Western Producer. There used to be maybe two or three."

Bouffioux, who is also president of the B.C. Bison Association [BCBA], said the growing interest in bison meat can be traced largely to one factor: health. "People are looking for a naturally raised animal, without hormones or feed antibiotics. They want to know where the animal comes from.

"There's about \$3 million in annual sales [in B.C.]. Five years ago, it was about \$1.5 million. It's a drop in the bucket [compared to beef], but we feel it will double again in five years."

According to StatsCan, B.C. has developed one of Canada's fastest-growing bison industries, with the number of bison growing by 41.2 per cent to 12,656 between 2001 and 2006.

The number of farms also grew by 23.5 per cent over the same period, making B.C. the four-largest bison producer in Canada, accounting for 6.5 per cent of the nation's bison herd.

Alberta has 49.7 per cent of the national herd, followed by Saskatchewan at 29.3 per cent and Manitoba with 10 per cent.

StatsCan cited the Peace River region in B.C. and Alberta as a key bison-producing region, with 14.4 per cent of the country's herd. That area saw its bison herd grow by 59.9 per cent to 28,232 animals from 2001 to 2006, StatsCan said.

StatsCan also cited the health benefits of bison in its report. "The number of bison continues to increase partly because health-conscious consumers perceive bison as being a more natural food product. Bison largely graze on pastures and tend to yield a meat that is low in fat and calories and high in iron."

StatsCan noted that exports of bison meat in 2006 totalled over 2.1 million kilograms, more than double the amount exported five years ago.



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Bill Bouffioux, president of the B.C. Bison Association, raises 260 head of bison at his ranch outside of Fort St. John in northeastern B.C.

The report also noted that bison are naturally adapted to the Canadian climate, but that they require special care by ranchers because they are not yet considered domesticated.

Bouffieux, who has a herd of 260 bison at his XY Bison Ranch, said most B.C. bison meat is exported to the U.S., with about 30 per cent sold in Canada. BCBA secretary Del Myers, a bison rancher near Prince George, said in an interview that bison are "nature's animals. They don't need the higher degree of husbandry as domesticated animals."

He said B.C. has 61 licensed bison farms, with about half in the Peace River region.

However, he said there are only two plants in B.C. that can process bison - so many of the animals have to be shipped to Alberta for processing and then returned to B.C. at an additional cost.

Bouffieux also said that B.C. is the only province where farmers need a special game farm license to raise bison and that they're not allowed to use Crown land. "The herds could expand more [with Crown land] because they'd have more grazing capacity."

Myers said that while most bison was sold to individual butcher shops a few years ago, more bison meat is now showing up in grocery stores. "In Prince George, it's at two local butcher shops, Save-On-Foods and the Canadian Superstore."

He said bison tenderloin steaks sell for about \$22 a pound, with top sirloin going for \$11 an pound.

The Fort St. John-based Northern B.C. Buffalo Company distributes bison meat to retailers in Metro Vancouver.

Company manager Lars Jorgensen said in an interview that his Vancouver customers include Stong's Market and SPUD, the natural foods home-delivery company.

Jorgensen said sales have grown between 10 and 15 per cent over the past 15 months and that he sees that continuing. "I think [sales] will be excellent in five years. By then, people will see it as a serious health food because it's a healthy meat."

Meanwhile, StatsCan said that despite the bison industry's growth, B.C. farmers were moving away from raising "alternative livestock" in 2006.

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Taking stock of alternative livestock in B.C.

The plume is off the ostrich industry in B.C., but the numbers for geese are flying high, along with bison. Farmed elk, however, are virtually extinct in this province.

Alternative livestock numbers followed by % change 2001-2006

Geese: +42%

Bison: +41%

Ducks: +9%

Llamas and alpacas: +6%

Goats: - 30%

Ostriches: - 47%

Emus and rheas: - 62%

Elk: - 100%

Source: BC Stats/Statistics Canada

Fat facts

Grams of fat per 100 grams of cooked lean meat

Bison: 2.42

Skinless chicken: 7.41

Beef: 9.28

Pork: 9.66

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture