

On the cover



WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Dawn Ianson speaks with Marc Vance, owner of Island Bison, about the safety standards on his ranch.

Taking the risk out of the range

By Ryan Parton

From “accidental” bison farmer to agricultural health and safety leader, Island Bison’s Marc Vance has learned a lot along the way.

Back in 2010, during one of his least proud moments, Marc Vance found himself cowering under a tractor from two raging male bison, each more than 1,000 kilograms and surly as heck. The carpenter, turned closet organizer, turned impromptu bison farmer, spent a full half-hour held captive by the magnificent beasts, of which he was admittedly “scared to death,” before they finally lost interest.

Vance, owner of Island Bison on Vancouver Island, has learned a lot since those early days as a bison rancher. Nonetheless, he still seems uncomfortable with the notion of being lauded as a role model for occupational health and safety in the ranching industry. Like it or not, however, that’s exactly what he’s become.

In an industry that sees an average of 38 time-loss claims each year in B.C., 40 percent of which are for serious injuries, Island Bison doesn’t have a single claim on its record. In fact, Vance can only recall two minor incidents in that eight-year period — an impressive track record considering he and his five employees deal every day with wild animals that can weigh more than a tonne, jump nearly two metres high from a standing position, and go from zero to fifty-five kilometres per hour in just three strides.

“I compare it to painting a house,” says Vance. “It’s all in the prep work. You know how smoothly a paint job goes once you get your taping and prep work taken care of; it’s the same with safety.”

Working with the ‘predictably unpredictable’

From ensuring farm equipment is well-maintained, to placing an emergency air horn in every building and vehicle, to creating clear reference points by naming every field, gate, outbuilding, and alleyway on the 130-hectare ranch, Vance has certainly done his prep work.

“You can tell that the health and safety of his family and his workers is paramount in the decisions they make each day,” notes Dawn Ianson, a Victoria-based occupational safety officer and part of WorkSafeBC’s 11-member Agriculture Team. “Marc absolutely respects the power of those animals. He spends the time to ensure his workers and his family are mentored

properly, and he’s invested in equipment that keeps his employees as safe as possible.”

One such example is Island Bison’s purpose-built hydraulic handling system, which Ianson says is the most “substantial and well thought out” network of chutes, squeezes, alleyways, and holding pens that she’s ever seen. The system allows workers to operate virtually every gate from a raised mezzanine above the sightline of the bison, which keeps the powerful animals calmer and more predictable, thus improving safety for both workers and the animals themselves.

While the handling system was designed based on extensive animal-behaviour research, other Island Bison initiatives are much more straightforward. High-visibility vests are required at all times, farm vehicles are enclosed to prevent injuries from ramming, and behavioural traits are considered when choosing breed stock in order to breed aggression out of the herd. Notably, every employee carries a two-way radio at all times on the farm, a simple yet effective safety measure that Ianson says goes “above and beyond” what’s required by B.C.’s Occupational Health and Safety Regulation.

But that’s not the only area in which Island Bison exceeds minimum standards. Because bison are, in Vance’s words, “predictably unpredictable,” he and his team conduct an informal safety huddle every single time they move animals, as well as a debriefing afterward to discuss how things went.

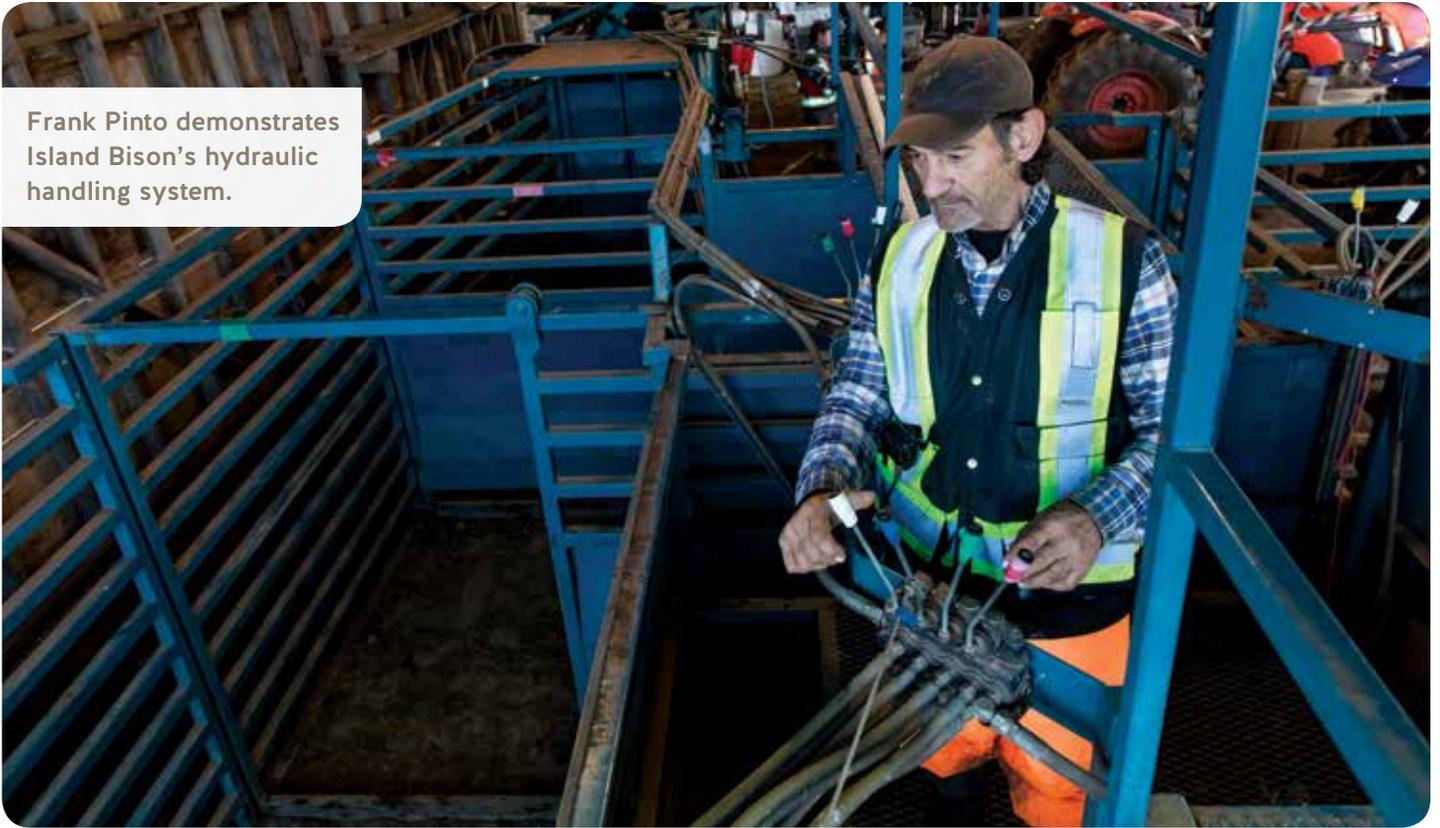
“At a minimum you should discuss health and safety about once a month or when a new process is introduced,” says Ianson. “These guys are doing it every day, and they’re doing it every time they move those bison. We rarely see that.

“Safety is a shared responsibility,” she adds, “and Marc is certainly doing his part to create a safe and productive workplace.”

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Frank Pinto demonstrates Island Bison's hydraulic handling system.



'I was like a big sponge ready to learn'

Marc Vance's exemplary safety record didn't come about by accident, although his role as a bison farmer sort of did.

Vance first discovered Vancouver Island's Comox Valley when he went there to do a closet-organizing job in 2009. He quickly fell in love with the area and was intrigued by a small bison farm he saw near Black Creek, a rural community about 20 kilometres north of Courtenay.

Though Vance's farming experience was limited to a vivid, Grizzly Adams-inspired childhood dream of being a cattle rancher — he used to ask his parents to call him Tex because "that was a cowboy name" — within a year he and his wife had purchased the farm and moved to Black Creek to embark upon what he jokingly refers to as his "mid-life crisis." Ironically, Vance largely credits that lack of experience with his health and safety performance today.

"We didn't come here with a preconceived notion of how to raise bison," he explains. "I was like a big sponge ready to learn. I think people who come to bison ranching from the cattle industry sometimes try

to apply their knowledge and life experience with cattle to bison, and in so many ways it doesn't work well."

Though it was an "incredibly steep learning curve," Vance has grown his herd of bison from 32 to 150, and he's even added 120 water buffalo, which he started introducing five years ago. More importantly, however, he's cultivated a workplace culture that puts safety above all else.

"A phrase you'll hear on a weekly basis around here is 'Safety first at Island Bison,'" says Vance. "That work culture of safety, in my opinion, is the most important thing. If you don't have that culture, it doesn't matter what rules you implement, you won't have the buy-in of the employees.

"When my staff see something that's not right, they just deal with it," he adds. "They fix it, they move it, they put a cone on it; they've just got this attitude of looking out for things. It's not just me, the owner, who has to worry about safety. It's everybody."

Working together to keep ranchers safe

WorkSafeBC's Agriculture Team has been working closely with the ranching sector since 2013, as part of a broader agriculture initiative.

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After identifying a gap in ranchers’ familiarity with WorkSafeBC’s mandate, processes, and regulations, the Agriculture Team embarked upon an awareness campaign designed to facilitate understanding and encourage injury prevention and regulatory compliance. The initiative also included the development of several safety resources, in collaboration with AgSafe (a health and safety organization that provides education, training, and consultation to B.C. farms and ranches) and the B.C. Cattlemen’s Association. Like all efforts to improve safety, it’s an ongoing process.

“We want to hear from ranchers about the perceived barriers to compliance, and to work with them to develop compliant solutions that are practical for their industry,” says Doug Pasco, a WorkSafeBC manager and industry specialist in agriculture. “The overall goal is to keep ranchers safe.”

For more information about health and safety in agriculture, visit www.agsafebc.ca or visit the animal handling page on worksafebc.com. ☺



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