



BUFFALO
FIELD CAMPAIGN

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West Yellowstone, MT - Bison hunting season for state-licensed hunters in the West Yellowstone and Gardiner hunting units of Montana opened on November 15th, with two bulls killed on opening day as they left Yellowstone National Park near the junction of highways MT-287 and MT-191. Four bison have already been taken in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness when limited bison hunting opened on September 15th. These six animals represent the start of the annual decimation of the nation's last wild, unfenced bison herd protected only by the arbitrary boundaries of Yellowstone.

According to the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) and the recommendations of Yellowstone National Park, one-fifth of the current estimated

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population of 5,313 bison (as of 10/12/2025) are projected to be hunted, trapped for slaughter, or quarantined and transferred to Tribal herds under the Bison Conservation Transfer Program. **IBMP population targets of 3,500 to 5,200 bison in the park are a far cry from its potential carrying capacity of approximately 10,000 animals.**

The deliberate suppression of the population of this keystone species threatens both the genetic diversity and long-term viability of the herd, as well as the biodiversity of the landscape in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. According to research published by the National Park Service in *Science* this year (DOI: 10.1126/science.adu0703), migratory bison herds increase plant diversity, stimulate soil microbes, and increase plant nutritional quality by up to 150%. Much like beavers are for wetlands, bison are ecosystem engineers for grassland environments, enhancing rather than depleting them.

The Buffalo Field Campaign believes that managing these herds for abundance through a Tribal co-stewardship program, rather than limiting their populations to barely viable numbers, is in the best interests of the ecosystem, Indigenous and non-tribal hunters, and the Buffalo themselves. Managing for abundance should include opening up available habitat on National Forest and other public lands adjacent to the Park, not just increasing the number of Buffalo the IBMP allows within Park boundaries.

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“The current Bison management plan is broken. It’s been broken for 30 years. A new plan is needed that manages for the best buffalo conservation and a revived flourishing ecosystem,” says Dallas Gudgell, BFC Board Vice President and Tribal Programs Director. “This is our national mammal - our public trust - in a United Nations UNESCO World Heritage site and this the best we can come up with for conservation management.”

According to Mike Mease, Campaign Coordinator for BFC, “Wild Buffalo need to be managed as wildlife just like elk. Elk are managed for abundance. Buffalo need to be managed for abundance. But when we keep the population to a minimum then this is what we’re gonna have: Any Buffalo that dares to be a Buffalo and tries to migrate – kaboom. It’s like Border Patrol.”

The State of Montana with Governor Gianforte and the Livestock Industry’s blessing is currently suing the US Department of the Interior (Case No. CV-24-180-BMM [2024]), claiming that the already unreasonably low bison population mandated by the IBMP is too high, and should be kept to a maximum of 3,000 animals. This legal action runs contrary to both science and the text of the Montana state constitution which requires that “the legislature shall provide adequate remedies to prevent unreasonable depletion of natural resources.” It threatens the health of our grassland and forest ecosystems; it threatens the economy of the gateway communities to Yellowstone National Park that host tourists by the millions coming to see our iconic National Mammal in the wild; and

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it threatens the religious and treaty rights of the sovereign nations that depend on Buffalo for ceremony and subsistence.

"The IBMP is the problem. Buffalo management and conservation continues to fail under this plan. It's time to try something new - tribal co-management. Tribes know this species well. Tribes and Buffalo co-evolved together with Buffalo at the center of historic and traditional life ways. Tribes have a vested cultural interest in wild Buffalo in numbers commensurate with the available habitat in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem," concludes Gudgell.

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