

**Bison Quarantine Feasibility Meeting
May 1, 2008**

Introductions

- Meeting was attended by 20 individuals representing 11 organizations and agencies. Attendance list and contact information is attached.

Meeting Objective

- Advise the agencies (MFWP and APHIS VS) in the development of an RFP (including evaluation criteria) for distribution of brucellosis-free bison from the quarantine feasibility study, solicitation of proposals, and evaluation of proposals (Page 31 of EA).
- The Bison Quarantine Feasibility Environmental Assessment (Dec. 2005) called for establishment of an interagency/Tribal panel to define the socio-economic and biological criteria for identifying suitable release sites of brucellosis-free bison resulting from the quarantine feasibility study. The agencies would work with this panel to develop a process for selecting the most suitable restoration sites for the release of the feasibility study animals (EA - Page 22).

Interagency Bison Conservation Committee

- The EA completed for the feasibility study recommended establishment of an interagency advisory committee to advise the agencies in the solicitation and evaluation of suitable restoration projects according to some well-defined criteria. The Committee would include representatives from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Livestock, USDA/Animal Plant Health Inspection Service/Veterinary Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and InterTribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC). In addition, the Interagency Bison Restoration Committee would consider guidance and counsel of the IUCN bison specialist group.

Background on Feasibility Study

- Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) outlines three options for bison out of YNP – hazing, slaughter, or quarantine, so quarantine idea dates back to development of the IBMP. The EIS for IBMP actually contains protocol for quarantine (Appendix).
- Following the release of the IBMP, quarantine feasibility approach was conceived vs. committing agencies to a large, expensive program. That's why there is a phased in process → to gain increasing levels of knowledge about process and protocol. The quarantine feasibility project is something that has been closely scrutinized, examined, and reviewed all along from the inception. Advisory role by the agencies is part of that review process.

- State of MT owns those animals and has clear jurisdiction over them. Purpose of this group is to help ensure conservation of bison is addressed.
- There is strong interest in restoration of bison on the North American continent. Window for restoration is narrow – probably the next 10-20 years. Conservation bison (bison on public lands) grew in numbers through about 1930 to about 20,000 animals – that number has remained fairly steady since then. Commercial bison have continued to grow in number.
- Quarantine bison are part of next phase. They present the opportunity to tap into an important set of genetics, as well as the ability to have bison operating on the landscape as part of a functional free-ranging bison herd(s).

Status of Quarantine Facility Bison

- March 29, 2005 – 17 calves brought in to facilities → 3 sero-converted = 14
- Additional animals were added the following year to total of 100
- 100 – 4 sero-converted = 96
- June 2006 – slaughtered half, intensively cultured – sample size enables detection of prevalence with high confidence. All tested negative. By August, one of the remaining 48 sero-converted, was slaughtered, and tested positive through culture
- December 2006 – 2 animals were suspect, killed, and were culture negative. Rest remained sero-negative, so in January 2007, those 45 bison (37 F/8 M) were moved into Phase II. They were bred that spring (spring 2007). Should calve in May, 2008.
- All animals have been tested twice a year, so all have been tested between 6-13 times. Most have been tested at least 9 times.
- Primary concern is latency – so need continual testing through calving to ensure there is no latent carrier.
- Currently have 45 bison (2005 and 2006 year classes) – 8 bulls (4 are 4-year-olds & 4 are 3-year-olds); 37 cows. Of those, 23 are pregnant (all of the 4- and portion of the 3 year olds.)
- These have been split into 4 groups of 7-9 per group (3 groups of pregnant females + 1 group of bulls and open cows). All are completely separated so each group is independent of the others. If a cow aborts, fetus is tested, if positive, group is considered positive and must stay in facility for another year and round of testing.
- 23 cows plus their calves, plus bulls = Maximum of 50 bison would go to a location where they would be in a closed herd that can be tested over the next 5 years. The 23 cows will be bred again before being turned out, meaning they will

go out pregnant. There is potential for genetic homogeneity among the animals due to unknown matrilineal lines and limited number of bulls.

- Next year could have another 30 (14 cows + 14 calves + bulls) from this year's cohort (these are the cows that did not become pregnant in 2007 – they will be bred again in 2008).
- Captured 111 calves this year from north and west sides of YNP. 11-12 are suspect, leaving 99-100 for a repeat of the feasibility process. Will be testing every month. This summer half will be sent to slaughter, remaining half would be bred in 2009, calving 2010, with final calving stringing out until 2011 or 2012.
- Need to place this first group of 50 this winter (January) and potentially 30 more next winter. Another group will possibly be available in 2010 and another in 2011. All animals will be individually marked and will need to be in a closed herd to enable monitoring for next 5 years. Can combined 50 + 30 be mixed if they all go to the same place?? (Yes - but then the required 5 year monitoring starts again)
- IUCN guidelines suggest minimum of 100 animals on the landscape quickly is a desired goal. 50 + 30 is a good start.
- Clarification: This was set up as a test vs. a permanent management action. It has a definite end date. No guarantee there will be any animals beyond. Are we looking beyond 2011? → Beyond 2011, decision-makers will need to decide future actions.
- Before these animals could be moved out, APHIS first needs to categorize them as brucellosis-free. If they decide they meet APHIS criteria, then DOL would evaluate status.
- APHIS – if met protocol requirements, would be considered brucella-free – this protocol goes over and above that, so regulatory-wise they would be considered negative, but would require that additional 5 years of testing/surveillance. Easier if they stay in Montana and not cross state lines.
- DOL – will feel better after second calving. However, the bison will be outside of quarantine facility and outside of GYA. Need to emphasize that the experiment will be continuing over the next 5 years.
- ?? If bison were moved outside of GYA and brucella showed up, is there a way APHIS wouldn't count that against the state's brucellosis-free status??? → Emphasize these are part of an experimental, research herd, designated as wildlife, included in a 5-year study. Maintain research designation = research herd. What things need to be in place to maintain that research herd designation?

Surveillance protocol is key. Are there rules/statutes that come with labeling as a research herd? Probably dependent on state of designation and their state rules.

- From State perspective, how other state veterinarians view this is probably what is most important since they regulate imports of livestock into their state. Success will be dependent on ability to communicate with other state veterinarians. This has been going on regularly throughout the process. Frequent contact and updates through the U.S. Animal Health Association is also occurring.
- ?? The question needs to be resolved as to when we could conclude quarantine protocol is effective and potentially move into an operational phase – after end of facility testing? After end of soft release (1 year after last bison is released from facility)? Or at the end of the 5-year surveillance period?
- Question was asked about placing bison on an existing FWS refuge. USFWS responded that they would not introduce these experimental bison to any Refuge with an existing FWS bison herd, nor will FWS establish a new fenced enclosure on a Refuge not currently having bison to place these bison. In short, completion of the research experiment needs to happen elsewhere.
- Regarding an interim facility – DoL is concerned about an “interim” facility – would need to be at least as stout as a game farm.

Criteria for Suitable Recipients/Release Sites

- Discussion is based on criteria listed on Page 32 of Quarantine Feasibility EA

All proposals should address at least the following:

- Question was asked whether these criteria are for the 5-year period or the long-term conservation goal?? Group recommendation was that any applicants should be specific about what they will do for the first 5 years, then beyond that.
- Preference will be given to those areas within the State of Montana boundaries.
- Need to provide description of what year’s animals they are submitting the proposal for.
- Description of project objectives, including how the project serves the long-term greater conservation needs of plains bison (*including maintaining genetic diversity*). Should be consistent with IUCN restoration planning (RFP should reference page 23 of the EA, and include contact information for IUCN). If bison already exist on the project area, include description of how those bison would interact (or not) with the quarantine bison. Should include what they foresee at end of 5-year study – relocation, transplantation, dropping the fence, supplementing with other bison, etc. (i.e., longer-range vision).

- Description of the location and habitats in the project area. Must be within suitable habitat within the historic range of plains bison.
- Identification of secured and potential funding sources – to maintain animals within a closed herd and meet the surveillance plan requirements within the required area (e.g., fencing, management, water development) and testing/surveillance – proposal should note if one or more of the agencies will commit to assistance if agencies are involved in the proposal.
- Agreement to a surveillance and monitoring response protocol (to be developed by APHIS/US AHA) if brucellosis is detected.
- Comprehensive management plan – for first 5 years, then thereafter.
- Population objectives = capacity – at least the capacity to hold original animals and any offspring
- Habitat Management – how will they appropriately manage habitat to avoid overgrazing in first 5 years, and thereafter depending on long-range vision. Include potential impacts to other animals as well (prairie dogs, ferrets, swift fox, etc.)
- Brucellosis monitoring plan – compliance with minimum standards to be developed by interagency committee, and then any other health or brucellosis monitoring they propose. Includes contingency if brucellosis breaks.
- Conflict management strategies – during and post 5-year period. E.g., what if one breaks out, if there are issues with neighbors, predators (e.g., griz bear), issues with other wildlife.
- Include agency authorities and how they would be addressed if the applicant
- Clarification of any legal or policy constraints: MEPA/NEPA/Tribal constraints, any legislative or statutory constraints, any restrictions associated with designation as a “research herd”.
- Clear description of environmental review process to be conducted, if required.
- To the degree appropriate, include a description of socio-economic cost vs. benefits associated with the project (optional)
- Letters of support (including up to an MOU) from all partners....

- Cannot be used for commercial purpose (including any offspring) – i.e., sold as livestock vs. ecotourism, outfitting, etc. Include description of assurances/means to prevent commercialization of these bison and their offspring.
- If dispersal is a management tool, describe processes that would be used to evaluate and designate where those bison will go.
- Must be managed as native wildlife (pre- and post 5-year closed herd). Bison will be public/Tribal wildlife (not private) forever.
- Intent is to enable expansion of founders rather than hold them at the number initially dispersed.
- If desire to incorporate additional bulls to help with genetic integrity, include how that would be done – where they would come from, how the surveillance would be affected, etc. NOTE: No additional bulls from other populations would be allowed until after the 5-year closed herd monitoring is completed.
- Hunting should be part of the population management program....after 5 years.
- Needs to be cooperative effort with state/tribal management authority for bison.
- Ability to maintain bison confined for first year to enable follow-up monitoring post-calving.
- Ability to fund and enable surveillance for 5 years beyond final turn-out of bison, which means through at least 2016.
- Interaction with other bison NOT ALLOWED – these are to be in a closed herd for 5 years – don't interact with other bison or livestock. Should also be elk proof, at least in the GYA. Progressively expand area from soft release area to 5-year perimeter
- Capacity for expansion as a result of breeding

Process for Distribution and Solicitation of RFP

- Recommendation is to put out a request for letters of intent as soon as calving is done and testing has occurred (end of June).
- Jack Ryan will draft surveillance protocol and response protocol that will be included.
- Ken will draft RFP and submit that for review by the group before being finalized
- Pre-proposals/letter of intent due to FWP by August 1. Evaluate those and make recommendations – August 15. **Meet again in mid-August.** Final (full) proposal will need to address environmental compliance, public outreach, etc. (November 15).

- Send out proposals and allow 4 weeks to review, evaluate, and score (December 15).
- FWP MEPA, Decision Notice, and Commission Approval: by February 28.
- Recommendation is a rigorous scoring approach -

Decision Authorities

- FWP – final decision authority on displacement of quarantine bison (per EA – page 32)
- DoL – Marty will check into any requirements, and will visit with the Board of Livestock (July and December??)
- APHIS –
- US AHA (brucellosis committee) – approve surveillance and response protocol
- Landowner – must provide approval
- Other State/Country (if proposal is for another state or has transboundary potential) – as required

Next Steps

- Communication Plan – include key stakeholders (Montana Bison Assn, Stockgrowers, MWF, etc.). Bison Assn will help.

Participants

<u>Ken McDonald</u>	Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks	kmcdonald@mt.gov
Pat Flowers	Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks	pflowers@mt.gov
Arnie Dood	Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks	adood@mt.gov
Neil Anderson	Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks	nanderson@mt.gov
<u>Jack Rhyan</u>	USDA APHIS – Vet Services	jack.c.rhyan@aphis.usda.gov
<u>Marty Zaluski</u>	Montana Dept. of Livestock	mzaluski@mt.gov
Ryan Clarke	USDA APHIS	patrick.r.clarke@usda.gov
Becky Frey	USDA APHIS	rebecca.k.frey@aphis.usda.gov
Justin Gude	Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks	jgude@mt.gov
<u>Jim Claar</u>	U.S. Forest Service	jclaar@fs.fed.us
Keith Aune	WCS-American Bison Society	kaune@wcs.org
Ervin Carlson	ITBC	ecarlson@3rivers.net
<u>Jim Stone</u>	ITBC	jstone@itbcbison.com
<u>Thomas Roffe</u>	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	troffe@montana.edu
<u>PJ White</u>	Yellowstone National Park	pj_white@nps.gov
Rick Wallen	Yellowstone National Park	rick_wallen@nps.gov
Joe Gutkoski	American Buffalo Foundation	joegutkoski@earthlink.net
Jim Bailey	Gallatin Wildlife Assn.	jbailey34@aol.com
Glenn Hockett	Gallatin Wildlife Assn.	glhockett@bresnan.net
<u>Sandra Brooks*</u>	Bureau of Land Management	sandra_s_brooks@blm.gov

*was unable to attend but will represent BLM in future meetings

NOTE: Underlined/Bold names represent agency representatives to the interagency bison conservation committee.