



Wenk, Dan &lt;dan\_wenk@nps.gov&gt;

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**Re: YELL bison meeting**

1 message

**Stephens, Beverly (Grace)** <grace\_stephens@nps.gov>

Mon, Jun 5, 2017 at 12:31 PM

To: Dan Wenk &lt;dan\_wenk@nps.gov&gt;, Sue Masica &lt;sue\_masica@nps.gov&gt;, Herbert Frost &lt;bert\_frost@nps.gov&gt;

sorry, meant to include the paper. She also wanted you to re-do the APHIS paper, but I pushed back on that and explained that it was written at the Secretary's request for a specific purpose. Thanks

Grace Stephens  
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On Mon, Jun 5, 2017 at 2:30 PM, Stephens, Beverly (Grace) <[grace\\_stephens@nps.gov](mailto:grace_stephens@nps.gov)> wrote:

Maureen wants an updated paper for the meeting with Doug and Jim - which is tentatively scheduled for tomorrow at 1pm. Who should call in from the park?

Thanks,  
Grace

Grace Stephens  
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**Bison combined BP updated 02-03-17 (1) (1).docx**

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## **Briefing Statement      FY 2017**

**Bureau:** National Park Service  
**Issue:** Bison Issues (Population, Quarantine, Removal/Winter Operations)  
**Program/Park:** Yellowstone National Park (YELL)

### **Key Points:**

- Bison management and the migration of bison outside of Yellowstone National Park remains a contentious issue involving the National Park Service (NPS); the State of Montana (MT); the Animal Plant Health and Inspection Service (APHIS); Native American tribes; the U.S. Forest Service (USFS); and assorted stakeholder interests (livestock, conservation, animal rights).
- Bison are on the move at present as snow accumulates in the park and bison migrate north and west out of the park in search of forage. Winter operations pursuant to the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) are underway to manage the population size of the herd.
- 40 bison have been held in the park since March, 2016, in anticipation of an agreement to allow for transfer of these animals to the Fort Peck Reservation to complete quarantine at their newly constructed, state-of-the art quarantine facility. A decision about the fate of these 40 animals has recently been reached with the State of Montana – 25 of these animals will be moved to a temporary holding north of the park; 15 of them will be sent to slaughter. The Fort Peck Tribes are anticipating receipt of the bison upon approval of the preferred alternative detailed in the 2016 quarantine program environmental assessment.
- As of February 2, there are an estimated 400 bison captured by YELL and being held at the park's Stephens Creek capture facility. Pursuant to the current Interagency Bison Management Plan and agreements reached with the State of Montana regarding transport and the tribes regarding processing, these bison will be transported to slaughter.
- Yellowstone's actions to deal with the herd also require cooperation from other parties. Complicating any movement of bison outside the park are Montana and APHIS requirements about brucellosis-free certifications and a Montana executive order regarding state approval to transport bison on state roads. If those parties are in disagreement with NPS actions, they may reach out to DOI leadership for engagement.

### **Background:**

- Yellowstone bison are important due to their large population size, high genetic diversity, lack of interbreeding with cattle, and wild behaviors and adaptive capabilities like their ancestors.
- Many bison are infected with the disease brucellosis, which was introduced by cattle and induces abortions, reduces pregnancy rates, and poses a risk of transmission back to cattle.
- Brucellosis and concerns about property damage, human safety, and competition with cattle limit tolerance for bison outside Yellowstone and prevent relocations elsewhere to restore the species.
- Yellowstone bison have high reproductive and survival rates, with few animals perishing due to old age, predators, and severe winter conditions. Thus, some bison need to be culled from the population.
- Options to deal with bison management are impacted by the intersection of multiple legal and administrative factors, including DOI trust responsibilities to tribes; Montana statutes and executive orders having to do with brucellosis-free certification and state approval for any transport of bison within the state; and APHIS' "uniform methods and rules" with regard to protocols for quarantine.

### Current Population Size and Management Actions

- The federal government and state of Montana are signatories to the IBMP, which they have implemented since 2001 to sustain a viable population of Yellowstone bison and reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle.

- Bison numbers have almost doubled since 2008, and there are concerns that high grazing intensities on some summer ranges may not be sustainable over time. The current herd size was about 5,500 bison during summer 2016. To date, no cases of brucellosis transmission from Yellowstone bison to cattle have been detected. However, there have been at least 20 documented cases of transmission from infected wild elk to cattle in the Greater Yellowstone Area in the past 15 years.
- High bison densities can result in the migration of thousands of bison into Montana, which can overwhelm managers' abilities to maintain separation with cattle and protect people and property.
- Consistent with the IBMP, managers developed an operations plan to decrease bison numbers by 750 to 1,300 during the winter of 2017 through public and treaty harvests in Montana and culling in Yellowstone (Stephens Creek).
- The National Park Service has signed agreements with several tribes to provide them with culled bison for direct transfer to meat processing facilities and subsequent distribution to their members.
- The effectiveness of hunting in Montana has been limited by concentrations of hunters near the park boundary that prevent bison from distributing, wound bison, and cause safety issues.
- The shipment of bison to processing facilities is extremely controversial and generates negative publicity. The State of Montana and APHIS object because of the risk of brucellosis transmission; animal rights groups object on humane treatment grounds.

#### Consideration of a Quarantine Program

- In 2012, the Secretary of the Interior directed YELL to explore developing and operating quarantine facilities for Yellowstone bison. Park managers have drafted a FONSI to implement a quarantine program with initial screening of bison at a capture facility in the park and completion of APHIS' testing protocol at a quarantine facility on the Fort Peck Reservation.
- Montana maintains the shipment of bison to the Fort Peck Reservation is prohibited by state law until bison complete quarantine and are certified as brucellosis-free. Also, APHIS maintains quarantine facilities must be located in or near YELL and approved by animal health officials according to their 2003 Uniform Methods and Rules, which are directed at managing livestock.
- YELL is at an impasse because Montana and APHIS have refused to allow bison quarantine on the Fort Peck Reservation. Also, DOI solicitors advise that the Secretary must conclude this impasse is preventing the carrying out of our statutory duties before bison can be transferred without state agreement; a determination which has not been forthcoming. Thus, even if the FONSI were to be signed by the IMR Director, the quarantine plan could not be implemented without the determination from the Secretary.
- The Fort Peck tribes are frustrated the NPS has not released a decision document and by the State of Montana's and APHIS' refusal to ever allow the quarantine of bison at Fort Peck. Also, some environmental groups have asking their members to contact the park and appeal for a decision to send bison to the Fort Peck Reservation for quarantine. Lawsuits may be forthcoming.
- YELL National Park recommends issuing a FONSI to conduct quarantine at the Fort Peck Reservation, while continuing negotiations with the State, APHIS, Tribes, and the Secretary. No decision has yet been made on this recommendation.

#### Development of a New Interagency Bison Management Plan

- The National Park Service and the State of Montana (Montana) have entered into an agreement to co-lead the development of a new Yellowstone Bison Management Plan. There are also six cooperating agencies involved, including the U.S. Forest Service, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, the Nez Perce Tribe, and the InterTribal Buffalo Council. The states of Wyoming and Idaho, and the USDA Animal Health Inspection Service (APHIS) declined to participate.
- The EIS is managed by the NPS, who is providing sole funding for the EIS effort at this time.

- Public scoping was initiated in 2015 that including a newsletter identifying alternative concepts. About 8,300 individual comments were received. Since that time, the NPS and Montana have met on several occasions to develop a range of alternatives for a Draft EIS.
- In order to assist with alternative development, the co-leads contracted the Udall Foundation, U.S. Institute on Environmental Conflict Resolution, to provide third-party, neutral facilitation and engagement services for the EIS process. The Udall Foundation completed a situational assessment of co-lead and cooperating agencies perspectives on bison management, and provided facilitation at one meeting between the NPS and Montana.
- There has been little agreement on many facets of bison management, both under the existing IBMP and in this new EIS process. Montana has two agencies involved, the Department of Livestock and Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Both of these state agencies differ in their perspectives on bison management and thus, there is no “unified” state approach towards bison management from Montana. This has made it very difficult to come to agreement on a range of alternatives, tools for management, and overall objectives and goals.
- In addition, relationships are strained due to the conflict over the NPS bison quarantine proposal and current management under the existing IBMP. There may need to be a reevaluation of goals and objectives, as well as renewed State of Montana commitment, to a new bison management plan in order to move forward.

**Current Status:**

- YELL worked with Montana and APHIS to identify alternatives for the 40 bison still being held. The current agreement will retain 25 bison for potential transfer to Fort Peck; the remaining 15 of these 40 will be transported to slaughter. Additional shipment to slaughter is anticipated as a result of the culling of an additional 750-1300 bison over the course of the next 8-10 weeks. There are currently 400 bison already captured to be prepared for transport to slaughter.
- The Intermountain Region is prepared to complete its work on the quarantine Environmental Assessment and sign the Finding of No Significant Impact.
- The tribal hunt outside the park is ongoing. Safety remains a high concern.

**Contact Person:** Dan Wenk, Yellowstone NP Superintendent, 307-344-2002

**Last Updated:** February 3, 2017