

Briefing Statement

Bureau: National Park Service
Issue: Bison Management FAQ
Park Site: Yellowstone National Park
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What is the Interagency Bison Management Plan?

- Montana filed a lawsuit against the Department of Interior/National Park Service in 1995. The lawsuit focused on the state's concerns that Yellowstone bison entering Montana could potentially transmit brucellosis to Montana livestock and jeopardize the state's brucellosis-free status for cattle and trade.
- The lawsuit resulted in a mediated settlement and corresponding federal and state Environmental Impact Statements/Records of Decision that created the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) in 2000.
- The primary IBMP objectives include: 1) maintain a wild, free-ranging bison population; and 2) reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle. Both objectives have been achieved since 2000.

Who are the IBMP Partners?

- The original IBMP partners included the Department of the Interior/National Park Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (U.S. Forest Service and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and Montana Departments of Livestock and Fish, Wildlife and Parks.
- In 2009, the IBMP expanded to include three Tribal partners. They include the Nez Perce Tribe, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation, and InterTribal Buffalo Council.
- IBMP partners meet two times per year to discuss bison management. Lead partner duties rotate each year.

What Should the Yellowstone Bison Population Be?

- The original IBMP identified a target bison population of 3,000 animals. This number was agreed upon as a minimum number that would minimize large migrations out of the park, reducing brucellosis risks of transmission to cattle.
- Both federal and state environmental documents authorized the use of adaptive management decisions as conditions changed and/or new science became available. IBMP partners have made a wide range of adaptive management decisions over two decades, including allowing higher bison population numbers.
- The habitat carrying capacity for bison inside of the park is 8,000-10,000 based on studies by Yellowstone wildlife biologists. Due to the constraining factors remaining outside the park, however, the population must be kept at a lower level. The bison population has not been below 4,000 bison since 2012 and rose to 6,000 in 2022.
- Alternatives in the park's draft Bison Management Plan outline population ranges from 3,500 to 7,000 bison.

What is Brucellosis?

- Brucellosis is an infectious bacterial disease that can induce abortions in livestock under the right conditions.
- Brucellosis was first detected in the Yellowstone bison population in 1917. Yellowstone bison and elk first contracted the disease from cattle.
- Approximately 60% of Yellowstone bison are infected with the disease currently.
- There have been no known instances of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle in the Yellowstone area.
- Elk also carry and transmit brucellosis. Anywhere from 10-40% of the elk population within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem are infected with the disease. Over 30 cases of brucellosis transmission have occurred between elk and livestock since 1998.
- Brucellosis concerns livestock producers because, if cattle become infected, producers lose income from killing infected cattle, additional testing requirements, and possible restrictions on trade. These concerns have substantially influenced the management of Yellowstone bison and constrained their distribution.
- A brucellosis-free classification allows producers to export cattle to other states or nations without testing. Currently, all 50 States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands are designated Class Free for brucellosis (USDA APHIS VS, 2014). The Greater Yellowstone Area is the only known location within the United States where *Brucella-abortus* is still present, specifically in wild bison and elk.

What is the Designated Surveillance Area?

- The Designated Surveillance Area (DSA) is an area in southwest Montana where brucellosis infected wildlife (mostly infected elk) exist and can expose cattle and domestic bison to the disease of brucellosis. As a result, cattle are required to participate in Montana's brucellosis testing program.

- The purpose of the DSA is to prevent an infected animal from moving out of the area and to limit disease transmission. These regulations promote trading partner confidence in the brucellosis-free status of Montana's livestock. Approximately 5.1% of Montana's cattle (113,000 animals) are located within the DSA.
- While elk occupy the entire DSA, Yellowstone bison are not allowed to move into most of the DSA with the exception of the small tolerance zones on the north and west sides of the park (see below).

What are the Bison Tolerance Zones?

- Prior to 2011, Yellowstone bison were generally constrained to the park boundary. Culling and hunting of the population generally occurred on the boundary or immediately adjacent until 2015.
- In 2015, Montana authorized expanded tolerance "zones" for bison moving outside of Yellowstone National Park. These zones are located on the north and west sides of Yellowstone, within Montana.
- The tolerance zones allow Yellowstone bison to move out of the park within a limited geographical area.

What are the Primary Means of Controlling the Bison Population?

- A series of NPS bison management plans between the 1960s and 1990s put specific boundaries and lethal control measures in place to prevent bison from moving into Montana. In 1996–97, a particularly harsh winter with deep snow and ice conditions sent hundreds of bison toward park boundaries, seeking accessible forage at lower elevations. Severe winter conditions resulted in the removal of 1,123 bison in the five months between November of 1996 and April of 1997.
- The park has used shipment to slaughter, Tribal/state hunting, and a recently developed Bison Conservation Transfer Program (BCTP) of live, brucellosis-free bison to manage the population.
- Over the past four years, Yellowstone has communicated an intent to substantially reduce shipments to slaughter and rely more on Tribal/state hunting and live transfer to American Indian Tribes.

How does the Slaughter Program Work?

- Shipment to slaughter is one of the most unpopular methods of population reduction. Public opinion is starkly against slaughter and the park has worked hard to move away from the program.
- Bison are captured in the capture facility on the boundary. They are then transferred in trailers to livestock slaughter facilities where they are killed and the meat and hides are distributed to Tribal members, primarily in partnership with the Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

How does the Tribal/State Hunt Work?

- Hunting Yellowstone bison outside the park began in 2006. In 2023, there were a record eight Treaty Tribes hunting bison on the boundary. The park has reduced shipments to slaughter to provide more Tribal hunting opportunities.
- Higher numbers of bison in the population usually means larger migrations out of the park, when snowpack is deep at higher elevations and less food is available, which provides more hunting opportunities.
- Montana also issues a limited number of bison hunting tags for state hunters.

How does Live Transfer/Quarantine Work?

- Yellowstone started the BCTP in 2018 in partnership with the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes at Ft. Peck, USDA – APHIS, and the State of Montana.
- In the BCTP, bison are captured, quarantined, tested multiple times for brucellosis over several years under an APHIS approved brucellosis protocol. The protocol timeframes are roughly two years for males and three years for females.
- Once bison pass the initial phases of the protocol, they are deemed brucellosis-free and are then transferred to the Tribes at Ft. Peck for one additional year of assurance testing. The InterTribal Buffalo Council then works with the Ft. Peck Tribes to transfer bison to Tribes around the country.
- The park has transferred nearly 300 bison to Ft. Peck since 2019. These bison have been transferred to 23 Tribes in 12 states across the country.
- The park recently invested \$1 million to double the quarantine capacity in the park and has entered 282 new bison into the facility in 2023.
- Yellowstone is working closely with APHIS to reduce the length of the protocol.

How is Climate Change Affecting Bison Migrations and Population Numbers?

- Bison move to lower elevations primarily when weather conditions are harsh, and they are unable to find forage at higher elevations. They remain in the park when snowpack is lower and winters are warmer.

- Since harsh winters are less frequent with the climate warming, bison migrate out of the park less predictably. When that happens, the population size increases because fewer bison are harvested outside of the park. The bison population grew to 6,000 in 2022 due to several mild winters prior.
- The winter of 2023 was a very difficult winter for bison and other species due to prolonged, deep snow at higher elevations and cold temperatures. A record migration out of the park occurred resulting in a record number of Tribal and state harvests.

What has Changed since the Original IBMP?

- Many things have changed since 2000 when the original IBMP was signed. Most notably, there are far fewer cattle adjacent to the park in 2023 which substantially reduces the risks of brucellosis transmission. Hunting was not available as a primary population control tool in 2000 and now eight Treaty Tribes and state hunters help reduce the population through hunting. Additionally, the creation of the tolerance zones has given bison some limited room to move beyond the Yellowstone boundary.

What has Happened in 2023 to Cause so Much Attention?

- Due to light migrations out of the park over the past several winters, very few bison were removed from the population in the previous several winters. The bison population in Yellowstone grew to approximately 6,000.
- Significant snowfall and cold temperatures beginning in November of 2022, caused a record number of bison to move to lower elevations and leave the northern end of the park.
- Eight Treaty Tribes hunting on the boundary coupled with a record number of bison available for harvest resulted in approximately 1,100 bison killed by Tribal members. Another 75 bison were killed by state hunters. This has caused substantial media attention across the country.
- Yellowstone captured an additional 282 bison to enter the Bison Conservation Transfer Program and shipped 88 to slaughter in January after committing a small number to the Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

What are the Politics Currently?

- The current Montana governor is adamant that bison numbers return to 3,000 identified in the original IBMP.
(b)5 Deliberative
- The governor has indicated a possibility of litigation if the bison population does not return to 3,000.
- (b)5 Deliberative

What are the Successes and Challenges?

- All IBMP objectives continue to be met. Higher numbers of bison have proven to have substantial positive ecological benefits within the park and are providing Tribes with larger harvest opportunities.
- The Bison Conservation Transfer Program has been a major success and will continue to supply live, brucellosis-free bison to Tribes across the country. Larger opportunities exist for future collaboration.
- The park must continue engaging the public/media to help them understand this complex issue.
- (b)5 Deliberative

Why is Yellowstone Doing a New EIS and Bison Management Plan and what is the timeframe for completion?

- In 2022, YNP initiated a new bison management plan to update information and address changed circumstances since the original plan in 2000. The NPS released the Yellowstone National Park Bison Management Plan Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) in August 2023.
- The NPS received 27,150 total correspondences, 2,778 of them were unique correspondences, the rest were form letter formats.
- The NPS is currently preparing a response to comments and the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for release next summer.
- The NPS is in litigation regarding the adequacy of NEPA compliance for the IBMP and the impacts of concentrated Tribal hunting along the boundary of the park on nearby residences and businesses.
- NPS will continue working within the IBMP framework after the EIS process is completed.