

Briefing Statement

Bureau:	National Park Service
Issue:	Bison Restoration and Management
Park Site:	Yellowstone National Park
Date:	January 18, 2022

Key Points:

- Yellowstone bison are the largest wild wide-ranging population (~5,400) of bison in North America and many scientists consider them the only ecologically and genetically viable population within their original range.
- There is limited tolerance for wild bison migrating into Montana due to concerns about competition with cattle, human safety, property damage, and brucellosis transmission. Thus, the abundance and distribution of bison is regulated by capture and culling near the park boundary and public and tribal hunting in Montana.
- There has been no detected transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle while a viable, wild population of bison has been sustained. Wild elk have transmitted brucellosis to cattle in Montana ~30 times since 2000.
- During 2019 to 2022, 182 Yellowstone bison were certified brucellosis-free and sent to the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana. The InterTribal Buffalo Council subsequently transferred 82 Yellowstone bison to 18 American Indian tribes in 10 states.
- Yellowstone has initiated additional NEPA analysis on bison management to update new information and changed circumstances since the original plan was released in 2000. Park staff have developed a range of alternatives and plan to release a notice of intent on or about January 27, 2022.

Background:

Bison Management

- The federal government and State of Montana are signatories to the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP), which has been implemented since 2001 to manage bison migration into the state and reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle. Several adaptive adjustments have been made since 2006.
- Current members of the IBMP include APHIS, Salish and Kootenai tribes, Forest Service, Intertribal Buffalo Council, Montana Department of Livestock, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, NPS, and the Nez Perce tribe.
- Eight tribes have hunted bison outside the park boundary in Montana, including the Salish and Kootenai, Nez Perce, Shoshone Bannock, Umatilla, Yakama, Blackfeet, Northern Arapaho, and Crow.
- The park has partnered with tribes to transport captured bison to slaughter and provide meat to their members, improve the efficacy and safety of tribal hunts, and provide them with more brucellosis-free bison for restoration to tribal lands.

Bison Conservation Transfer Program

- In 2017, the NPS partnered with the Fort Peck Tribes, APHIS, and the Montana Department of Livestock to identify brucellosis-free bison and transfer them to the tribes for release instead of shipping them to slaughter.
- Testing phases include: 1) a group of bison is tested repeatedly for brucellosis exposure until all positive animals are removed and the remainder test negative for two consecutive months; 2) bison undergo additional testing based on their age and sex following protocols outlined in APHIS' 2003 *Uniform Methods and Rules*; and 3) brucellosis-free bison are tested at 6 and 12 months for assurance, after which they can be released.
- Twenty-five females and 3 males currently are in quarantine and undergoing testing in Yellowstone. The park intends to place another 80 to 120 bison into quarantine this winter.
- The park has partnered with Yellowstone Forever and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition to double the capacity of the Bison Conservation Transfer Program during 2021-2022 and lower the number of animals testing negative for brucellosis exposure that are sent to slaughter from 75% to 35%.

NEPA Compliance

- The NPS is in litigation regarding the adequacy of NEPA compliance for the IBMP and concentrated tribal hunting along the boundary of the park. In December 2020, the District Court for the District of Montana granted the NPS a voluntary remand without *vacatur* to conduct additional NEPA analysis of the IBMP and issue an appropriate final decision. The IBMP would remain in effect until this decision is reached. This decision has been appealed and a hearing is scheduled for February 11, 2022.
- The purpose of additional NEPA analyses is to evaluate the effects of alternative approaches for preserving an ecologically sustainable population of wild migratory bison while continuing to work with other agencies to

address issues related to brucellosis transmission, human safety, property damage, and tribal hunting outside the park. Cooperating agencies include the members of the IBMP. The park also asked the other tribes that hunt bison to be cooperating agencies. The notice of intent includes three preliminary alternatives.

- Under *Alternative 1, Continue Current Management*, the NPS would continue bison management informed by the 2000 IBMP and implemented through decisions and annual operations plans by the federal, state, and tribal agencies involved with bison management. The NPS would maintain a population of 3,500 to 5,000 bison after calving, which is within the range experienced over the last two decades of the IBMP. The NPS would continue to rely substantially on captures of migrating bison at the Stephens Creek Administrative Area (inside the northern boundary of the park) and shipments of bison to slaughter to regulate numbers and provide bison to tribes. When space is available, some captured bison testing negative for brucellosis exposure would be placed in quarantine as part of the Bison Conservation and Transfer Program (BCTP) to increase the number of live brucellosis-free animals relocated to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana and eventually other tribal and public lands. The NPS would continue to coordinate with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and tribes hunting bison in Montana to balance population regulation in the park using captures with hunting opportunities outside the park.
- Under *Alternative 2, Enhance Restoration and Tribal Engagement*, bison would be managed at a somewhat higher population range of about 4,500 to 6,000 bison after calving with an emphasis on using the BCTP and tribal hunting outside the park to regulate bison numbers. Management of bison within the park would be like Alternative 1 and the NPS may use proactive measures such as low-stress hazing of bison towards the park boundary to increase tribal hunting opportunities outside the park. The NPS would shift away from shipments to slaughter based on the needs and requests of the tribes. The NPS would continue expanding quarantine capacity and capture some bison migrating out of the park to enter more animals into the BCTP for eventual transport to tribes. The NPS would continue hunt-capture coordination with partners as described for Alternative 1. As the BCTP expands and hunter harvests increase over broader areas in Montana, the NPS would reduce captures for shipments to slaughter.
- Under *Alternative 3, Food-limited Carrying Capacity*, the NPS would allow bison numbers to increase and rely on natural selection and public and tribal harvests in Montana as the primary tools to regulate bison numbers, which would likely range from 5,500 to 8,000 or more bison after calving. Captures for shipments to slaughter would immediately cease. The NPS would continue captures to maintain the BCTP as in Alternatives 1 and 2. Substantially larger harvests would have to occur outside the park for this alternative to be effective, which would require the state and tribes to allow bison to distribute and hunt them across a larger landscape. As bison numbers approach the estimated food-limited carrying capacity of the park (>8,000 bison), the NPS would reinstitute shipments to slaughter as described for Alternatives 1 and 2.
- Under all alternatives, the NPS would continue engaging with tribes associated with Yellowstone bison to explore ways to increase the efficiency and safety of hunting outside the park and increase the restoration of brucellosis-free bison to tribal lands through the BCTP. Staff from other federal and state agencies could inform these discussions with the Custer Gallatin National Forest and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks participating in consultations about hunting and APHIS and the Montana Department of Livestock participating in consultations about the BCTP. The NPS also would work with partners to explore other management options outside the park, including expanding designated management (tolerance) zones, streamlining testing protocols for the BCTP, and construction of additional quarantine facilities and capture facilities near the outer boundaries of management zones (if applicable).
- The NEPA analysis is being managed by the NRSS Environmental Quality Division (EQD) using a contractor (WSP) to complete tasks. Funding is from the EQD-EIA (Environmental Impact Analysis) source.

Current Status:

- The Greater Yellowstone Coalition and Yellowstone Forever achieved a \$500,000 dollar capital campaign to double the capacity of Yellowstone's quarantine facility and upgrade utilities. Construction is ongoing.
- The cooperating agencies have been briefed on the preliminary alternatives in the notice of intent. Next steps for the new NEPA analyses are to move forward with public scoping and initiate a 30-day public comment period.

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