

## **Briefing Statement**

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**Bureau:** National Park Service  
**Issue:** Bison Management, Winter 2022-2023  
**Park Site:** Yellowstone National Park  
**Date:** April 7, 2023

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### **Key Points:**

- There is limited tolerance for wild bison migrating into Montana due to concerns about competition with cattle, human safety, property damage, and brucellosis transmission. Numbers are limited by state and treaty harvests outside the park and capture of animals inside the park with captured animals translocated to tribes, sent to slaughter, or released in spring.
- In 2014, the State of Montana authorized small tolerance zones outside of the park on the north and west sides. Bison are prohibited by the State from moving beyond those zones.
- Snowpack was low during the previous two winters, with very few bison moving out of the park where they can be hunted because food was readily available at higher elevations. As a result, bison numbers increased 27% to about 6,000 in summer 2022, which is the largest number of bison recorded in the history of the park.
- The winter of 2022-2023 has been the most severe and prolonged since the mid-1990s, with deep crusted snow. More than 4,000 bison moved to lower elevations near the northern boundary of the park to find food. About 2,000 bison have used low-elevation areas near the park boundary since January 1<sup>st</sup>, with 100 to 500 animals out of the park daily and occasionally more than 1,000. However, bison did not mingle with cattle and only 150 bison are outside the park now.
- Yellowstone has initiated additional NEPA analysis on bison management to update information and changed circumstances since the original plan was signed in 2000. Staff have prepared a draft Environmental Impact Statement for release in June. The Director was briefed on March 17, 2023, and Department briefing is scheduled for Monday April 10, 2023.

### **Background**

- Approximately 60% of the bison population has been exposed to brucellosis which can, under the right circumstances, induce abortions in cattle if they are allowed to comele during the transmission period.
- 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.
- Several 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. Yellowstone does not control the number of bison harvested by Tribes or state hunters.
- The park has partnered with tribes to provide meat to their members, improve the efficacy and safety of tribal hunts, and provide them with brucellosis-free bison for restoration to tribal lands.
- The current management strategy is to capture bison to enter eligible animals into the Bison Conservation Transfer Program (BCTP; see below) and provide ineligible animals to tribes for meat and hides. Other bison are allowed to move towards park boundary and support tribal hunting opportunities. As numbers of migrating bison increase, more animals are captured up to the capacity of the quarantine facilities (250 to 300).
- Under the IBMP, there has been no transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle while a viable, wild population of bison has been sustained. Elk have transmitted brucellosis to cattle in the Yellowstone area ~30 times since 2000.

### **Current Status:**

- As of April 6, 2023, about 1,160 bison have been harvested, the vast majority by treaty tribes (75 by state hunters). Most tribal hunting for the season has been completed, though the Blackfeet, Crow, and Northern Arapaho tribes have indicated they may continue their hunts through April.
- Yellowstone has successfully taken 282 bison into its recently expanded Bison Conservation Transfer Program. This program allows for live bison to be transferred to tribal lands across the country once they are deemed brucellosis-free.

- During 2019 to 2023, 294 Yellowstone bison completed quarantine and were sent to the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana. The InterTribal Buffalo Council subsequently transferred at least 170 Yellowstone bison to 23 tribes in 12 states.
- Yellowstone transferred a near record low number of bison to slaughter (88) at the request of the Salish and Kootenai tribes for dissemination of meat and hides to their tribal members.
- The park is currently holding about 800 bison in the Stephens Creek facility near the northern boundary for release as snow melts and grass begins to green up over the next several weeks. Yellowstone does not plan on shipping any further bison to slaughter.

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