

Briefing Statement

Bureau:	National Park Service
Issue:	Bison Conservation Transfer Program
Park Site:	Yellowstone National Park
Date:	July 10, 2023

Current Status

- The Bison Conservation Transfer Program (BCTP) is a collaborative effort between the NPS, APHIS, State of Montana, and Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes at Ft. Peck to transfer live bison to other Tribes after a prolonged quarantine for brucellosis.
- Since 2019, nearly 300 bison have been transferred to the Ft. Peck Tribes with approximately 175 of those moved through Ft. Peck to at least 22 other Tribes in 12 states.
- A record 282 bison were entered into the BCTP during winter 2023, because of a record winter migration and recent NPS Yellowstone facility expansion.
- The NPS operates a 200-animal facility within Yellowstone and APHIS leases a 75-animal facility outside the park nearby in Montana, which supports up to eight individual cohorts simultaneously undergoing quarantine.
- The timeframe for completing quarantine is about two years for male cohorts and three years for female cohorts, after which the State of Montana Veterinarian provides brucellosis-clearance allowing their transport to assurance testing facilities outside the state Designated Surveillance Area for brucellosis (DSA).
- The Ft. Peck Tribes operate the only BCTP assurance testing facility that provides for one year of additional testing before the animals can be integrated into other herds.
- The InterTribal Buffalo Council works with the Ft. Peck Tribes to transfer bison that have complete assurance testing to Tribes around the country.
- Secretarial Order 3410 (SO 3410) directs the NPS to collaborate with Tribes and other conservation partners to increase quarantine capacity to facilitate additional bison transfers to Tribes.

Shortening Timelines

- APHIS is currently revising rules for quarantine protocols through the Code of Federal Regulations, Program Standards, and interim guidance documents.
- These changes could shorten the timeframe to completion for males to 300 days, reduce age restrictions on brucellosis clearance, and reduce the number of tests required during assurance testing.
- Shortened timelines could allow entering 100-150 animals into the program annually versus entering 100-200 animals every 2-3 years.
- Implementing these rule changes could double the current BCTP capacity and allow for enrollment of up to 140 new animals into the program in 2024. Without revising the rules, no new animals could enter the BCTP for several years.

Additional Quarantine Facilities

- The recent Yellowstone quarantine facility expansion combined with potential shortened protocol timelines could increase capacity for moving live bison through existing facilities. However, this is dependent on APHIS retaining the leased facility within the Gardiner Basin beyond the current 5-year lease.
- No analyses have been completed to determine the need for additional new quarantine facilities beyond the current Yellowstone and APHIS facilities within the DSA. APHIS rules require all quarantine facilities be located within the DSA. Assurance testing may be completed outside of the DSA for certified brucellosis-free bison.
- Montana would likely oppose a new facility and critical conversations with Wyoming or Idaho have not been initiated. Moreover, no Tribes own land within the DSA.
- If necessary, the NPS could consider expanding the YELL facility in support of SO 3410 by pursuing a lease on agricultural lands in the Gardiner Basin to support additional pens, but this can only occur with approval from the State of Montana.

Additional Assurance Testing Facilities

- Additional assurance testing capacity may be needed to accommodate the increase in quarantine capacity, which could include (b)5 Draft-Deliberative

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- The current BCTP hinges on support from APHIS and the State of Montana and requires coordination between several state agencies, including the Department of Livestock, State Veterinarian, Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and the Governor's office. (b)5 Draft-Deliberative

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Tribal Dynamics and History

- Ft. Peck Tribes:
 - built their bison facility for all phases of the program, but only can complete assurance testing due to USDA-APHIS rules;
 - argue their facility has never operated at capacity and that it can handle up to 600 animals;
 - committed to transferring 70% of animals completing assurance testing to ITBC;
 - want to transfer bison completing assurance testing to Tribes and other entities that are not ITBC members;
 - (b)5 Draft-Deliberative
 - believe their role in returning bison to Tribal lands is limited by only operating as assurance testing and see sharing assurance testing with other Tribes as a further reduction in their role; and
 - would benefit from DOI support for staffing and facility improvements.
- ITBC:
 - receive and distribute 70% of bison completing assurance testing only to their member Tribes;
 - want to be the primary entity distributing Yellowstone bison to Tribal lands;
 - request changes in program rules and implementation to reduce or eliminate the role of States;
 - desire the first right of refusal for receiving DOI surplus bison including bison from YELL;
 - may advocate to receive all bison reaching brucellosis-clearance and controlling their distribution to Tribal assurance testing facilities; and
 - would benefit from DOI support for equitable distribution of animals among Tribes.

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