

Briefing Statement

Bureau: National Park Service
Issue: Key Messages Regarding Bison
Park Site: Yellowstone National Park
Date: February 25, 2015

Restoration: Since 2000, the population has averaged 3,600 bison at the end of winter with no transmission of brucellosis to cattle, few conflicts in local communities, and decreasing state involvement with management.

- Bison managers are sustaining a fluctuating population averaging about 3,600 bison at the end of winter (range ~2,800 to 4,300) with breeding herds in the central and northern regions of the park.
- This population objective will maintain a viable population, historic genetic lineages and existing diversity, and frequent migration to lower-elevation winter ranges in Montana to support public and treaty hunting.

Management: Sustaining ~3,600 bison requires removing 300 to 900 bison per winter using harvests and culls. A portion of the culls involve bison transferred to quarantine for testing and eventual release (see next section). Also, hundreds of bison are shipped to slaughter in some winters due to the lack of tolerance in surrounding states.

- Bison managers are working to facilitate the dispersal of bison and hunters across the landscape and away from the park boundary, rural residences, and roads to improve the efficiency of the hunt and reduce the need for shipments to slaughter.
 - Six American Indian tribes hunt bison on land outside the park boundary in Montana. These tribes are working on a unified harvest strategy with standardized regulations for all hunters.
- Allowing bison to distribute across the landscape and learn other refuges than the park will contribute to better hunting experiences and enable more traditional autumn hunts.

Quarantine: Bison managers are working with APHIS, the State of Montana, and the Fort Peck tribes to identify brucellosis-free bison and restore them to acceptable landscapes to meet public and tribal trust responsibilities.

- These partners are using facilities in Yellowstone, north of the park in Montana (APHIS), and on the Fort Peck Reservation to increase the efficiency of providing live bison to tribes and agencies for restoration.
- Fifty-eight male and 21 female bison are undergoing quarantine within the park. The male bison should be transferred to the Reservation in autumn 2019 for 1-year of post-quarantine testing and release. The female bison need to undergo breeding (2019), calving (2020), and post-calving testing (2020-21) before transfer.
- Yellowstone bison are a valuable source population for restoration because they have high genetic diversity compared to many other populations of plains bison and no evidence of cattle introgression.

Disease Risk:

- Bison managers are continuing to manage the already low risk of brucellosis transmission from bison directly to cattle to protect public health, animal health, and the economic viability of rural producers.
- Low risk and separation with cattle can be maintained while allowing for an incremental and success-driven increase in bison distribution using risk mitigation actions such as fencing, hazing, and hunting.

Visitation:

- About 80% of surveyed visitors indicated bison are one of the most important resources in the park, equivalent with Old Faithful geyser. The sight of hundreds of bison moving across the landscape, reminds them of our country's pioneer heritage and a wildness rarely experienced by most people today.

Local Residents

- Studies by the University of Montana indicate attitudes toward migratory wildlife, including bison, are strongly favorable because these animals are seen as a boon to the economy and integral to the environment, recreation, and social character of the area.
 - Most residents thought bison should be managed more like elk through hunting, rather than shipments to slaughter. Instead of brucellosis, residents mostly worried about property damage, risks to motorist safety, and the potential effects of intrusive management on area livelihoods like wildlife tourism.

Contact:

Cameron Sholly, Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park, 307/344-2002, cam_sholly@nps.gov