

Briefing Statement

Bureau:	National Park Service
Issue:	Bison Restoration and Management
Park Site:	Yellowstone National Park
Date:	May 20, 2021

Key Points

- Yellowstone bison are the largest wild, wide-ranging population of plains 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 treaty 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 2021, 154 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 transferred 82 Yellowstone bison to 16 American Indian tribes across 9 states during 2020 and 2021.
- 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 Notice of Intent. A more-detailed briefing will need to occur on this proposal.

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.
- Seven tribes hunt bison outside the park boundary in Montana, including the Salish and Kootenai, Nez Perce, Shoshone-Bannock, Umatilla, Yakama, Blackfeet, and Northern Arapaho.
- The park has partnered with the tribes to transport captured bison to slaughter and provide meat to their members, improve the efficacy and safety of tribal treaty 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 initiate a program to identify brucellosis-free bison and transfer them to the Reservation for eventual 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 25 males currently are in quarantine and undergoing testing in Yellowstone. Forty-seven females and 2 males are undergoing testing in a nearby facility operated by APHIS. The next transfer of bison to Fort Peck could occur in December 2021 (22 males, 4 females, and 4 calves).
- 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 transfer-eligible animals 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 will remain in effect until this decision is reached.
- 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, and property damage. Cooperating agencies include the members of the IBMP.

- 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 maximum aerial count of bison during summer 2020 was 4,680, including 3,437 in the northern breeding herd and 1,243 in the central breeding herd. Another count will be conducted in late July or August.
- The Greater Yellowstone Coalition and Yellowstone Forever are well on their way to achieving a \$1-million-dollar capital campaign to raise the funds needed to double the capacity of Yellowstone's quarantine facility.
- Next steps for the new NEPA analyses are to develop content for public scoping, obtain approval to move forward with public scoping, and initiate a 30-day public comment period. The park is planning to publish a Notice of Intent this summer or autumn.

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