

West District

2011 Bison Relocation Summary

Overview and Statistics

Westside bison operations began on May 1, 2011 and ended on June 29, 2011. Eighteen separate operations were conducted requiring 474 National Park Service employee man-hours. The initial relocation efforts to meet the projected May 15th date were not met due to late spring snowmelt and green-up. On May 1, 2011 there was 34 inches of snow at the West Yellowstone SNOTEL site. Weekly conference calls reported total snow depth and potential green-up dates. It was agreed on the May 27th conference call that the partners would protect Zone 3 from intrusion and wait until the week of June 1, 2011 to begin the initial haze back into Yellowstone.

Between May 1, 2011 and June 29, 2011 eighteen separate hazing events occurred that NPS personnel participated in. This represents a total of 474.5 NPS man hours. Five horses were used for relocation efforts for a total of 341 miles. MTDOL contract helicopter was used for 3 of the 20 hazing operations for a total of 7.5 flight hours inside Yellowstone National Park. A total of 1547 bison were hazed during the twenty hazing operations.

Operation

Bison operations began on May 1st when Montana Dept. of Livestock (MT-DOL) located 25 bison in Zone 3/ Red Canyon/HWY 287. From May 1st to May 11th six separate hazing operations were conducted along Montana Highway 287 for a total to 105 bison hazed. These were typically the same cow/calf herd of twenty five that were grazing along the road corridor which typically presents the first grazing opportunities of the season. Areas outside the road corridor were snow covered with no or limited grazing opportunities.

On May 16th 8 bison were hazed from the Denny Creek Road/Zone 3 to the old burn on the Madison Arm Road/Zone 2. On May 18th eight bull bison (1 bull from Zone 3) were hazed east along HWY 287 to an area south of the highway that had limited grazing opportunities. On May 23rd during an aerial survey by MTDOL, 20+ bison were observed in Zone 3/Denny Creek Rd. These bison were allowed to stay in Zone 3 until May 25th when a cow/calf group of 38 bison were hazed from the Denny Creek Rd/Zone 3 to Barns Hole YNP/Zone 2.

Members of the IBMP eventually reached an agreement that June 1, 2011 would be the haze back date to begin moving all bison back into Yellowstone National Park. During the first week of June between June 1st and June 3rd, 969 bison were hazed (24 from Zone 3, 353 from Zone 2, 592 from Zone 1

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YNP). During the second week of June between June 8th and 9th 92 bison were hazed (0 from Zone 3, 92 from Zone 2, 0 from Zone 1). During the third week of June, 128 bison were hazed on June 14th (0 from Zone 3, 98 from Zone 2, 30 from Zone 1 YNP). During the fourth week of June 192 bison were hazed from June 22nd to June 23rd (0 from Zone 3, 77 from Zone 2, 115 from Zone 1 YNP). On June 29th seven bulls were hazed from north of Duck Creek – Zone 2 to Cougar Meadows – Zone 1 YNP.

After June 29th there were no other hazing operations that NPS personnel participated in. Yellowstone National Park employees did not participate in the lethal removal of a bull bison by MTDOL personal that was on US Forest Service land in Zone 2.

Operational Facts

- Cattle arrived in the Hebgen Basin on or about June 17th.
- On May 1st there was 34 inches of snow at the West Yellowstone Snotel Site. Previous years registered 0 inches of snow. Snotel Site registered 0 inches on May 16, 2011
- MTDOL continued to push for the May 15th haze back date even with snow on the ground and no available grazing opportunities in Yellowstone National Park
- Cow/calf herds were easier to haze on June 1st than the previous year.
- Hazing large groups of bison still requires assistance from MTDOL contract helicopter
- There were ten separate breaches of Zone 3 for a total of 169 bison.
 - HWY 287 / Zone 3 had seven breaches for a total of 99 bison
 - May 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 9th, 11th, 18th
 - Denny Creek Road / Zone 3 had 3 breaches for a total of 70 bison
 - May 16th, 25th and June 1st

Aviation

MT-DOL helicopter and/or a contract helicopter were involved in hazing bison from Horse Butte and the South Fork into YNP. The helicopter also hazed bison from Cougar Meadows to Seven-Mile Meadows inside YNP. The helicopter worked well when trying to move bison long distances through vast meadows and re-growth lodgepole forests. The helicopter was under MT-DOL operational control. YNP Fire Cache conducted flight following for the helicopter while operating within the boundary of YNP. The helicopter was involved on 3 hazing missions for a total of 7.5 flight hours inside YNP. Helicopter operations were conducted within DOI aviation policies and guidelines. There were no safety issues or policy concerns identified during helicopter operations.

A no-fly-zone was implemented for a portion of Cougar Meadows to protect the Cougar Wolf Pack den site. No observations of grizzly bears and wolves were reported.

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Visitor Impacts

On three occasions bison were hazed from Cougar Meadows to Seven Mile Meadows. Traffic was stopped on the West Entrance Road during these events for 45 minutes while the bison swam the Madison River and were hazed across Seven Mile Bridge to the eastern end of Seven Mile Meadows.

There were no extended 2 hour delays as in previous years while bison were hazed along the West Entrance road to Madison Junction.

Law Enforcement

Members of the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC) were active each day bison operations were being conducted. A proactive approach was emphasized between NPS Rangers and members of BFC. Director of BFC Mike Meese was contacted on five separate occasions in an effort to be proactive and educational. Open communication and dialog enhanced understanding and expectations on both sides. BFC personnel will comply if given direct and articulate orders from law enforcement personnel. They routinely followed hazing operations into Cougar Meadows. BFC documented operations with video and still cameras. Although members of BFC were given several lawful orders while inside YNP they were far more compliant and respectful to YNP Rangers. No violation notices were issued.

MTDOL was informed that NPS Rangers would not participate in hazing operations outside YNP unless there was a law enforcement presence from Gallatin County Sheriffs and/or Montana Highway Patrol.

Lessons Learned

“What worked well?”

- West District Maintenance maintained the corrals during the winter months to facilitate operational readiness by May 1st.
- Early communication with wolf and grizzly bear biologists contributed to early identification of “no fly zones” in Cougar Meadows
- June 1st haze back date resulted in less effort to move bison back into YNP. Refer to 2010 and 2011 Haze Back Stats for comparison.
- Jamie Hanson assisted with bison hazing operations at Stephen’s Creek and participated in horse training.
- Training and annual leave was cancelled during May hazing operations. This increased flexibility and available resources

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- Housing for the trail crew packers was activated by May 1, 2010. This allowed them to stay at West and not travel back and forth from Mammoth each day.
- Coordinating YNP research flights with bison operations worked well. The maps they produce assisted with locating bison and estimating the number of bison outside YNP.
- Although the helicopter works well for hazing bison, it has a negative impact on visitor experience and disturbance of other wildlife i.e. bears and wolves.
- Rick Wallen's bison ecology team was a great asset to bison operations. It's very helpful to have the team assessing the health of bison during hazing operations and interpreting how bison use the landscape. Tracking collared bison helped identify bison movements within YNP and ones that returned to areas outside YNP.
- Dave Ross is the dedicated Bison Operation Supervisor. Dave coordinated horse operations and assigning riders. This command and control structure works well for scheduling, communication and operational effectiveness.
- Madison Ranger Gary Nelson was instrumental in tracking bison movements along the Madison Corridor.
- Although Incident Action Plans greatly enhance organizational efficiency, safety and operational understanding for individuals assisting from other districts, no IAPs were completed due to the decreased complexity of this season's operation.
- Assistance from other Districts was great and very much appreciated.

“What requires attention”

- MTDOL pushed to begin hazing bison May 15th when there was 34 inches of snow on the ground throughout Zone 2 and Zone 1 on May 1st
- Realistic approach to identify “green up” in YNP that is not tied to the May 15th haze back date.