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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR Mail - Removals of Bison during Winter 2017-2018



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## Removals of Bison during Winter 2017-2018

1 message

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Thu, Mar 22, 2018 at 2:47 PM

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Attached for your consideration.

--

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**Rationale\_BisonRemovals\_Winter2017-2018\_v3.docx**

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March 22, 2018

Memorandum

From: Bison Ecology and Management Program  
To: Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park  
Through: Director, Yellowstone Center for Resources  
Subject: Bison Removals during Winter 2017-2018

During September 2017, we recommended removing up to 1,250 bison breeding in the northern portion of Yellowstone National Park (YNP) to decrease overall bison numbers to about 4,200 to 4,400 after calving during summer 2018. We recommended not removing or harvesting bison migrating west of the park due to decreasing numbers of bison breeding in the central portion of the park during recent years, and to focus harvest and capture on bison breeding in the northern portion of the park.

In December 2017, managers of the Interagency Bison Management Plan signed a winter operations plan that included "optimize hunter harvest take while assuring combined hunt/trap take of 600 bison to 900 bison." Direction from leaders of the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service (NPS) was to decrease bison numbers during 2017-2018 and subsequent winters towards a range of 3,500 to 4,200 at the end of each winter, which translates to about 3,800 to 4,500 bison after calving.

During December 2017, public and treaty hunters began harvesting bison west of YNP, ignoring NPS recommendations. Also, reported harvests of bison north of YNP lagged well behind monthly removal goals defined in the winter operations plan:

- 75-115 by the end of November 2017 (reported harvest in north was 8 bison by December 7, 2017)
- 225-335 by the end of December 2017 (reported harvest in north was 8 bison by January 8, 2018)
- 372-560 by the end of January 2018 (reported harvest in north was 21 by February 2, 2018)
- 522-785 by the end of February 2018 (reported harvest in north was 146 by March 8, 2018)
- 600-900 by March 15, 2018 (reported harvest in north was 206 bison by March 14, 2018)

Given the low reported harvest of bison north of YNP by mid-February, the NPS began capturing bison at Stephens Creek on February 16, 2018. Winter conditions contributed to a relatively large bison migration into the Gardiner basin during late February and March, a condition that only happens a few times per decade. About 800 bison were captured at Stephens Creek over a 3-week period, while another 800 bison occupied the Gardiner Basin from Mammoth Hot Springs to Yankee Jim Canyon.

Approximately 695 bison will be shipped to slaughter by the end of winter 2018, and 4 bison died in holding pens. Another 98 yearling bison (25 females; 73 males) testing negative for brucellosis exposure were moved to isolation pastures for further testing to identify test groups for quarantine.

As of March 21, 2018, about 248 bison were reported harvested north of YNP (including 5 wounded/dispatched and 3 poaching) and 87 bison were reported harvested west of YNP (including 1 discarded/left). Hunters were more successful after capture operations began, with about 172 bison harvested during the month after the first capture of bison, while only about 77 bison were harvested during the 30 days prior to capture. Also, many harvests north of YNP occurred, or were reported, after March 11, 2018, when bison captures at Stephens Creek ended.

In total, about 1,132 bison will be removed from the Yellowstone bison population during winter 2017-2018 (699 captured/shipped/pen mortality; 335 harvested; 98 captured/quarantine). This total includes at least 87 bison harvested west of YNP that did not contribute to the goal of decreasing bison numbers breeding in northern YNP.

Overall bison abundance after calving during summer 2018 is forecast to be about 4,300 +/- 500 bison, which is in accordance with guidance from U.S. Department of the Interior and NPS leadership, as well as recommendations from biologists at YNP given the current limited tolerance for bison outside the park.

- If this projection is realized, the summer count of bison during 2018 is expected to meet the NPS objective of less than 4,500 bison for the first time since 2012.

### **Conclusions**

We removed approximately 1,100 bison, which was more than the IBMP-negotiated range of 600-900, because winter was more severe than predicted and caused a large migration during late February and early March. The late migration allowed continued capture of animals, while tribal hunters continued to have successful hunts. More than 500 bison occupied areas north of YNP during late winter.

Choosing to remove more bison was a difficult, but appropriate, decision because the NPS has been trying to gradually reduce bison abundance towards 4,250 animals since 2012. A removal of 1,100 bison provided the highest chance of a summer 2018 count near 4,250 bison compared to other alternatives.

The systematic approach of balancing hunting and trapping over the past six years has successfully reduced bison abundance toward NPS objectives, while supporting state and tribal harvests such that harvests have accounted for approximately 41% of removals since 2012 (about 1,750 harvests) and the NPS avoided sending more than 800 animals to slaughter in any one winter.

An abundance of about 4,250 bison will provide an opportunity for progress on difficult issues the NPS has had trouble advancing, including more dispersal into the conservation area; reduced hunting pressure; and moving the trap to the far end of the conservation area. The lack of progress has been, in part, due to concerns over the size of the population and fears we could 'lose control' under severe weather conditions. Thus, the NPS has prioritized removing large numbers of bison over making progress on these issues.

Future removal objectives to stabilize population growth will be one-half of what was necessary to reduce the population size (i.e., 400-500 rather than 1,000-1,200).

- Removing fewer bison via capture and culling can shift focus to working with public and tribal hunt managers to reduce hunting pressure near the park boundary and allow bison to naturally move out of the park.
- Removing fewer bison also provides an opportunity to work with IBMP managers to establish temporary capture facilities at the northern extent of the conservation areas, when needed. The current Stephens Creek facility could then be used to prioritize successful quarantine.