

Briefing Statement FY 2017

Bureau: National Park Service (NPS)

Issue: Bison Management: Long-term Strategy

Park: Yellowstone National Park (YELL)

Key Points

- The conservation of bison requires cooperation and negotiation among multiple agencies and tribes with different mandates, philosophies, and treaties. The Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) has been implemented in YELL and Montana since 2001 to conserve a viable, wild population with no brucellosis transmission to cattle.
- Despite this success, persistent disagreements among IBMP members have led to independent decision-making and incompatible management practices. Also, it is difficult to respectfully and responsibly implement treaty hunts for bison in modern society when hunts are simultaneously conducted by multiple, competing tribes.
- The IBMP members need a new, unified, management approach. The Director of the NPS and the Secretary of the Interior could facilitate this effort by engaging the Governor of Montana, Secretary of Agriculture, and tribal leaders to reach an agreement in principle to develop a sustainable, long-term strategy (see page 2).

Background

- Members of the IBMP include the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Forest Service, InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC), Montana Department of Livestock, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Nez Perce Tribe, NPS, and the Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation.
- Some of the persistent disputes among the IBMP members include:
 - The appropriate abundance, distribution, and treatment of wild bison, as well as the condition of their habitat;
 - The State of Montana's repeated calls for hunting in the park, which was prohibited by Congress in 1894 and would permanently change the nature of the park and experiences of visitors;
 - Concentrations of hunters along the park boundary that create safety issues and prevent bison from migrating further into Montana to learn the landscape and enhance future conservation and hunting opportunities;
 - The State of Montana's withdrawal (circa 2011) from participating in the capture, culling, and distribution of bison; leaving the NPS to solely conduct these activities designed to protect Montana's livestock industry;
 - Culling within YELL reduces the number of migrating bison available for treaty hunting opportunities in Montana, leading to disputes about treaty rights and trust responsibilities;
 - Quarantine and relocations of bison, which are viable options for reducing the number of bison shipped to slaughter to reduce abundance, but have been opposed by the State of Montana citing various regulations;
 - The Montana Governor invoked an Executive Order in 2011 and 2017 to prevent bison shipments due to disputes about quarantine, thereby disrupting management and resulting in additional population growth; and
 - What can and should be done about brucellosis in bison given current inadequate technology and vaccines, the already low risk of transmission from bison to cattle, and the disease's independent spread in elk?
- There is very limited tolerance for wild bison in Montana due to concerns about competition with cattle, human safety, property damage, and brucellosis transmission. Idaho and Wyoming do not want wild bison outside parks.
- About 5,500 bison were counted during summer 2016. High bison densities can degrade other resources and result in mass migrations into Montana. Managers intend to harvest and cull (slaughter) up to 1,300 bison this winter.
- The State of Montana and five tribes have hunted bison on public lands in Montana adjacent to YELL, including the Nez Perce, Salish and Kootenai, Shoshone-Bannock, Umatilla, and Yakama tribes. The State of Montana and each sovereign tribe develop and enforce their own harvest permits, regulations, and seasons.
- By itself, hunting has not been sufficient to attain management removal objectives. Thus, hundreds of bison are culled by the NPS during some winters at the Stephens Creek facility in the northern portion of YELL. The culling and shipment of bison to slaughter facilities is extremely controversial and generates negative publicity.
- The tribes are opposed to culling in YELL because it reduces the number of migrating bison available for treaty hunting opportunities outside the park. However, the NPS provides all bison captured for slaughter to several tribes and a tribal organization (ITBC) for the subsequent distribution of meat and hides to their members.
- Culling needs to occur throughout the winter (January through March) because there is a limited number of processing facilities, limited capacity (150-200 bison) for processing bison each week, and females are late in pregnancy by April. Typically, facilities will not accept bison during autumn due to cattle processing operations.

Long-Term Management Strategy

- Population size
 - Manage for 4,250 bison (range: 3,500-5,000), with less than 3,000 in the central or northern regions of YELL
 - Remove 300 to 800 bison per winter using harvests and shipments to quarantine, research, and slaughter
 - Maintain the historic lineages (central [indigenous]; northern [Pablo-Allard]) and existing genetic diversity
- Culling
 - Make capture, culling, shipping, and distribution operations a shared commitment among the agencies
 - Establish and use capture facilities outside YELL near the outer boundaries of the northern and western management areas, perhaps on National Forest System lands
 - Initiate discussions between the State Attorney General and Department of Justice regarding the Executive Order preventing bison shipments, which is counterproductive, likely invalid, and possibly unenforceable
- Hunting
 - Allow many hundreds of bison to migrate outside YELL to support public and treaty hunting opportunities
 - Develop a unified harvest strategy that disperses hunters in space and time, standardizes regulations, and initiates autumn hunts in year-round tolerance areas for bison
 - When possible, use hunters to harvest bison that move outside the northern and western management areas
- Quarantine
 - Implement a surveillance program that accommodates at least 50 male and 50 female bison each year to provide brucellosis-free bison for relocation to public and tribal lands
 - Use the Stephens Creek facility in northern YELL to conduct brucellosis screenings for quarantine and then complete the testing protocol elsewhere (alternatively, the facility could be redesigned for quarantine)
 - Continue to refine quarantine procedures, including testing frequency and duration, as new data become available
- Tolerance and relocation
 - Encourage an incremental and success-driven shift in Montana from a zone-based management approach with delineated tolerance areas to targeted, site-specific management (similar to elk)
 - Increase year-round tolerance for bison on all public lands near YELL, similar to elk, by incrementally allowing for increased seasonal and year-round use by female and young bison in suitable habitats
 - Work with Montana to plan and relocate bison to the upper Gallatin watershed and other suitable areas
- Conflict resolution
 - Identify likely conflict areas for targeted surveillance and monitoring, and initiate conflict resolution activities when necessary
 - Use targeted fencing, hazing, and hunting to maintain separation between bison and cattle and protect people and property (similar to elk)
 - Capture and/or lethally remove animals that cannot be hazed or pose an imminent risk to humans, property, or livestock
 - Coordinate with the State of Montana to reduce speed limits and vehicle strikes of wildlife on Highways 89 and 191
- Brucellosis
 - No brucellosis suppression actions would be taken, but collaborative research on brucellosis dynamics, diagnostic procedures, and various potential suppression methods would be conducted
 - Continue to manage the already low risk of brucellosis transmission from bison directly to cattle
 - Monitor brucellosis exposure and culture rates over time
- Organization and Involvement
 - The State of Montana could establish a Bison Working Group (similar to elk) representing a broad set of interests to increase public participation and input into decision-making
 - Establish an Intertribal Council/Alliance to discuss bison management topics and provide recommendations
 - Establish an independent scientific panel to periodically review data, analyses, plans, and outcomes
 - Continue to hold quarterly meetings with local officials
 - Continue to hold public meetings and consider workshops on relevant management issues

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Last Updated: Wednesday, March 8, 2017