Buffalo Field Campaign

PO Box 957 West Yellowstone, MT 59758
(406) 646-0070 phone (406) 646-0071 fax
www.bisonfieldcampaign.org

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Suzanne Lewis
Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park
P.O. Box 168
Yellowstone National Park, WY 82190–0168

RE: Comments on the response from the State party to the World Heritage Committee's Draft Site Progress Report to the World Heritage Committee for Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana.

Dear Ms. Lewis,

Please fully consider and review comments submitted on behalf of Buffalo Field Campaign for Yellowstone National Park's draft progress report to the World Heritage Committee.

As it is clear that the draft report was written no later than December 2009, Buffalo Field Campaign requests the Park Service to update its report to reflect changes that have occurred in the past several months, particularly those related to the February 2, 2010 Interagency Bison Management Plan meeting. The Park Service must fully inform the World Heritage Committee about recent actions by the Montana Department of Livestock to unilaterally disregard adaptive management changes agreed to by all the agency partners and to shut-out public involvement in Interagency Bison Management Plan proceedings.

The willingness of the Montana Department of Livestock to break its commitment to adaptive bison management is indicative of the fundamental flaws that surround the multi-agency plan: the disregard for and lack of science in decision making to the detriment of wild bison, Yellowstone National Park and healthy ecosystems, and the contempt shown for public involvement by failing to announce meetings to all concerned and manipulate proceedings by selecting who is to be allowed to know about and participate in the few public forums that take place. As long as U.S. Congressional funding continues to flow without scrutiny or demand for substantive change, the Interagency Bison Management Plan is incapable of conserving wild bison populations for future generations or protecting state's brucellosis-free cattle marketing status.

1. The Committee requests the State Party to continue to address the threats identified in this and previous reports in particular:

a) Accelerate the adaptive management changes under the bison management plan:

Based on the 2008-2009 annual report and the 2008 adaptive changes, the Park Service is still demonstrating a shortsighted view of Yellowstone bison conservation and taking steps backwards from previous positions held by the agency. While it is commendable that the Park Service is finally producing some valuable research about brucellosis and its relationship to Yellowstone bison, it is very disturbing to see research leading to ecological carrying capacities within Park boundaries that will be used to determine population targets for wild bison. No other wildlife species that inhabits Yellowstone National Park is managed for confinement within the boundaries of the Park. Bison are a migratory species yet the rhetoric and tenor of the annual report indicate that Yellowstone National Park wishes to manage bison as a zoo animal, its range restricted to boundaries that do not meet long-term viability needs. In order to conserve wild bison for future generations, populations must be allowed to utilize the entirety of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

Several studies referred to in the annual report clearly demonstrate that the emphasis placed on wild bison and brucellosis transmission risk is unjustified. First, all of the cases where cattle in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem became infected with brucellosis indicate elk were the source or potentially cattle. According to Beja-Pereira (2009), while the *B. abortus* isolates in infected cattle and elk were nearly identical they were "highly divergent from bison isolates" and "elk, not bison, were the reservoir species for these cattle infections." Second, a study looking at bison to elk transmission concludes that "levels of elk exposure to *B. abortus* (2-4%) were similar to those in free-ranging elk populations that do not commingle with bison (1-3%), suggesting that *B. abortus* transmission from bison-to-elk under natural conditions is rare." (NPS staff and Drs. Robert Garrott and Kelly Proffitt, 2008-09 annual report). Yet even with all of this information in hand, the Park Service is still managing disease as if it is solely a problem of one wildlife species that has not transferred brucellosis to cattle in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem. We implore the Park Service to address and challenge the political barriers created by the Montana Stockgrowers Association and the Montana Department of Livestock to thwart recovery and conservation of wild bison in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

Additionally, the 2008 adaptive management changes agreed to by the agency partners virtually guarantees that trigger points to remove bison will be exceeded and that management actions targeting bison will still occur in the absence of any disease concern. The only significant adaptation that will provide some measure of benefit to Yellowstone bison is the allowance of bull bison south of Duck Creek. However, even this concession was only granted because of the high probability that any bull bison out of the Park will be shot by a state or tribal hunter. The limited level of tolerance granted to bison on the Horse Butte peninsula is belatedly accepted only for years when the bison population and subsequently bison migration is relatively small. If and when the population recovers from the massive agency slaughters that are sure to reoccur under the current scheme, bison will again be unnecessarily forced to flee habitat, to undergo captivity in pens and transportation to slaughterhouses from a landscape that is free of cattle year round. From a risk management standpoint the May 15 "deadline" to remove bison from outside Yellowstone National Park is absurd in the face of the facts that bison calving has already taken place and will soon be over while the elk calving season begins and runs through June.

It is clear that the objective of the Interagency Bison Management Plan "to maintain a wild, free-

ranging population of bison..." (Interagency Bison Management Plan FEIS 2000) is not being adequately addressed and will never be achieved as long as the state of Montana continues to resist every effort to make habitat available for wild bison. Bison are still limited exclusively to zone 2, subject to annual removal from National Forest land by May 15 and have no secure year round habitat in Hebgen basin to support a viable population. Despite millions of public tax dollars poured into habitat acquisition and conservation in the Gardiner basin wild bison have yet to benefit at all, and likely never will benefit under the Interagency Bison Management Plan. Suitable habitat on public lands in Zones 2 and 3 is unnecessarily excluded as habitat for bison when these lands are clearly part of the population's native range. To subject bison that are following their natural migratory instincts to the livestock management practices of hazing, capture, slaughter, vaccination and quarantine is an impingement upon their wild nature. Ten long and expensive years later with an investment of over $30 million dollars in public funds to kill several thousand wild bison and the agency partners are still no closer to achieving any goal of the plan. It is painfully obvious that adapting the plan based on science is impossible to come by. The Interagency Bison Management Plan must be scrapped and replaced with an entirely new approach based on sound science, solid evidence, and the integrity required to honestly assess if the goal of maintaining a wild, free-ranging bison population is actually being achieved.

While the 2008 adaptive changes approved by the Interagency Bison Management Plan partners are woefully inadequate, the recent proposals by the Montana Department of Livestock to change the trigger points for management actions to remove bison from National Forest land and the livestock agency's intent to make these changes unilaterally clearly demonstrates the failings of the Interagency Bison Management Plan. The new trigger points established by the Montana Department of Livestock guarantee that management actions will occur as soon as bison migration begins and that bison will no longer enjoy even the brief respite on the Horse Butte peninsula under the 2008 adaptive changes. Attached to this document are the correspondences between the Park Service, Montana Department of Livestock and InterTribal Bison Cooperative about the state of Montana's commitments to bison. If the Park Service is to maintain any integrity with the public, it is imperative that a formal protest be made to Montana and its Congressional delegation. In the face of Montana's intransigence, the Park Service must refuse to participate in any management actions targeting bison for capture or removal inside and outside Yellowstone National Park. This controversy must be brought to the attention of the World Heritage Committee in the Park Service's report.

Additionally, the Park Service draft report does not honestly represent several significant facts that demonstrate the failures of the Interagency Bison Management Plan to produce achievable goals and successfully follow through on adaptive management changes. The 2008-2009 annual report states: "There has been little progress on new vaccines, delivery technologies, or diagnostic tests for *B. abortus* since 2005 due to the lack of market incentives and funding." The report also states that: "the immunologic responses of bison to hydrogel vaccination with SRB51 during 2007 indicated poor proliferation and interferon response compared to parenteral injection (S. Olsen, unpublished data). These findings suggest the vaccine has uncertain effects or there are consistency issues with vaccine hydrogel formulation and/or encapsulation in biobullets." The Park Service draft report goes on and states that the annual report summarizes the "progress" of vaccine delivery and development and new diagnostic tests. It should state that there has been no positive progress and actually more reason to doubt that remote delivery vaccination or

improved diagnostic tests will actually materialize. This information is particularly relevant to the lack of progress by the agencies implementing the Interagency Bison Management Plan to adapt management changes based on scientific findings. The agencies made Park wide bison vaccination a condition to moving to Step 2 – expected to be achieved several years ago – and it is uncertain how the agencies will respond to this development.

i) carry out a risk analysis for disease transmission from bison to cattle and include other ungulates by including a review of scientific knowledge on disease transmission, bison behavior and genetics, and seasonal factors:

Disease Transmission Risk Analysis – According to the draft report and the 2008-2009 annual report, the UC Davis study should have been completed in December 2009. Is this study complete? If so, it should immediately be made available to the public and the results of the study should be forwarded to the World Heritage Committee in the final Park Service report.

Genetics – The 2008-2009 annual report includes this section on bison genetics:

National Park Service staff collaborated with Drs. Gordon Luikart and Fred Allendorf and Flo Gardipee from the University of Montana to test the hypothesis that bison from different breeding ranges would be genetically differentiated based on amplified mitochondrial DNA from fecal samples. Findings suggest that:

- There is significant genetic differentiation between bison using the northern and central breeding ranges in [Yellowstone National Park], likely due to strong female fidelity to breeding areas.
- Studies using nuclear microsatellites should be conducted to further assess population genetic subdivision and establish a genetic monitoring program.

However, the Park Service's draft report leaves out the most important finding in this research, that *there **IS** significant genetic differentiation between the northern and central herds*.

The Park Service's draft report makes the following claim: “Large-scale management removals likely remove a disproportionate level of calf-mother pairs and reduce rates of genetic recombination through non-random harvest of bison from each breeding herd leading to higher probability of lost genetic diversity. Cumulative available scientific evidence suggests that, notwithstanding this non-randomness, the conservation of an overall bison population of 2,500–4,500 (i.e., 1,000 to 2,000 bison in each of the central and northern herds) likely will retain 90–95% of genetic diversity and alleles in Yellowstone bison over the next 200 years.” Are there studies by conservation geneticists that support this claim? If so, the science should be presented to the public and to the World Heritage Committee for review. The implications of continuing large scale slaughter of wild bison under the Interagency Bison Management Plan has not been addressed by any agency concerned. Potentially catastrophic impacts on the long-term future of Yellowstone bison may not be avoided under the government’s failing plan.

Behavioural (sic) and Seasonal Factors – According to the draft report: “A post-winter population of 2,500–4,500 bison should satisfy collective interests concerning the park’s forage base, bison movement ecology, retention of genetic diversity, brucellosis risk management, and

prevailing social conditions." The word "should" needs to be carefully considered in this statement. The phrase, "prevailing social conditions" are more accurately described as prevailing political conditions as there is local support for wild bison to roam on public and private lands where the agencies have not tolerated bison. Additionally, Traill (2009) and colleagues found that populations of endangered species are unlikely to persist in the face of global climate change and habitat loss unless they number around 5000 mature individuals or more. "Conservation biologists routinely underestimate or ignore the number of animals or plants required to prevent extinction," says lead author Dr. Lochran Traill, from the University of Adelaide's Environment Institute. "Often, they aim to maintain tens or hundreds of individuals, when thousands are actually needed. Our review found that populations smaller than about 5000 had unacceptably high extinction rates. This suggests that many targets for conservation recovery are simply too small to do much good in the long run." The implications on the future of Yellowstone bison are significant and should be fully examined by the Park in its report.

ii) consider changing cattle management practices so that bison can migrate naturally:

According to the Park's draft report: "Since 2007, nine US Forest Service cattle grazing allotments adjacent to the park have been permanently closed to preclude livestock grazing as a future management option." However, the important detail left out of the Park's draft report but included in the Interagency Bison Management Plan 2008-2009 annual report is this statement: "No adaptive management changes specific to these cattle allotment changes are proposed. These allotments had all been vacant or inactive for some time and were not, by virtue of their existence, previously a barrier to adaptive management steps." Therefore, citing the closure of these allotments is not an honest response to the World Heritage Committee recommendation. Included as an attachment are comments submitted by the Buffalo Field Campaign pertaining to cattle grazing allotments that **DO** have significance on the ability of bison to "migrate naturally" in the ecosystem. The Park needs to include up-to-date information on the status of active cattle grazing allotments in the bison's range and the potential for renewal or retirement of public lands grazing allotments.

While it is significant that Horse Butte is now completely cattle free year round, it is a reflection of the inadequacies of the Interagency Bison Management Plan that bison cannot utilize this habitat year round. In fact, now, under the new "adaptive changes" as interpreted by the Montana Dept. of Livestock, bison are unlikely to have any significant time on Horse Butte without some type of government harassment or harm.

As for accountability of the public's investment of $13,000,000 in 1998/1999 and another $1,500,000 in 2009 to conserve the Royal Teton Ranch it is essential to inform the World Heritage Committee that only 25 captured, tested, vaccinated, and implanted bison will be allowed access to these lands on a limited, seasonal basis. This is a far cry from "migrating naturally" and selection of habitats by wild bison populations. After going through captivity in Stephens Creek and surviving the livestock gauntlet bison are subjected to, and navigating a narrow fenced corridor with little native grass, the bison will make it to an area where they may be shot by hunters. Bison not hunted or killed for migrating into Zone 3 could be subject to capture or forced removal by early spring. Additionally, there is no guarantee in the deal with the Church Universal and Triumphant that bison numbers going through their land will increase.

If their previous record is any indication, we can expect very little progress or tolerance for wild bison on Church Universal and Triumphant lands. The only real solution here, as everyone knows, is to purchase remaining holdings of the Royal Teton Ranch from the Church Universal and Triumphant and protect it as public lands as should have been done thirty years ago when Malcolm Forbes made the proposal to the Park.

iii) promote and enhance stakeholders' participation and accountability and transparency on the implementation of this plan:

The ibmp.info website is a long overdue and an appreciated resource for the public and "stakeholders". However, the site is still lacking the type of detailed information necessary for the public to adequately understand the issues related to bison management and make educated judgments about agency actions and decisions. The annual report is chock full of references to government funded studies about bison and brucellosis. Many of these studies are incorporated by reference in the Park Service draft report to the World Heritage Committee. The public must have full access to the complete library of scientific studies related to bison management on the ibmp.info website. Financial disclosure of total agency expenditures, and what if anything was achieved by these expenditures, is notably absent. The disposition of bison heads, hides and meat needs to be transparent and fully disclosed.

Finally, the recent actions of the Montana Dept. of Livestock in their role as the current lead agency under the adaptive management changes in failing to notify the interested public and stakeholders of the February 2, 2010, Interagency Bison Management Plan meeting is unacceptable and must be addressed by the Park Service in the draft report. The Montana Dept. of Livestock has consistently subverted the public interest on bison management. This is not surprising given their mission to promote the livestock industry. Attached to these comments is a letter from Buffalo Field Campaign requesting the agencies to reform how it conducts the public's business. The Park Service must alert the World Heritage Committee to the degeneration of the Interagency Bison Management Plan adaptive management process as it relates to the latest actions of the Montana Dept. of Livestock and the state of Montana.

Thank you for your review and inclusion of Buffalo Field Campaign comments on the status of Yellowstone National Park and the indigenous population of wild bison that inhabit the ecosystem.

/s/
Joshua Osher
Policy Coordinator
Buffalo Field Campaign
P.O. Box 957
West Yellowstone, MT 59758
406-646-0070
policy@bisonfieldcampaign.org