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Final Briefings 1 of 4

1 message

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Amy, in order to assure these briefs get into the Secretary's hands prior to his departure I am sending directly to you. I have also copied the regional and Washington offices. If we have any changes to these briefs I will get them to you as quickly as possible.

Briefs

- Bison Issues, Population, Quarantine, Removal/Winter Operations

Attachments

- Bison Management
- Bison Quarantine
- Bison Grazing Effects

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8 attachments**noname.html**

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**Bison Grazing.doc**

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Bison Grazing Effects on Northern Grasslands

Key Points:

- Bison numbers in northern Yellowstone have doubled since 2011, but migrating and dispersing bison are generally not tolerated in surrounding states. As a result, increasing bison densities in the park have led to concerns about high grazing intensities on some summer ranges that may not be sustainable over time.
- Research during 2012 to 2016 found bison grazing intensities in some grassland areas were higher than previously reported for elk, especially in dry areas. Consumption of vegetation exceeded 70% in some areas and the amount remaining at summer's end was approximately 30% of what was available in areas where grazing was excluded.
- Yellowstone and other members of the Interagency Bison Management Plan are implementing actions to substantially decrease the number of bison in northern Yellowstone this winter, using hunting in Montana and culling (primarily shipments to slaughter) to remove as many as 1,300 bison.
- Scientists are monitoring indicators and drivers of undesired plant community changes and will continue to evaluate the impacts of grazing by bison on plant productivity, species composition, and nutrient cycling.
- Yellowstone National Park is not a ranch with domesticated animals and human-controlled animal, nutrient, and water inputs, but rather a wilderness where untamed, free-roaming animals and natural processes with wide-ranging variations are allowed to prevail in an environment not dominated by humans.

Background:

- Numbers of elk in northern Yellowstone exceeded 20,000 during the 1990s, which led to contentious debates about whether they were irreversibly damaging the landscape by removing too much vegetation, compacting soils, and reducing the diversity of plants. An independent investigation by the National Research Council concluded in 2002 that the grasslands were not overgrazed.
- The recovery of predators such as bears and wolves by the mid-2000s contributed to the reduction of numbers of northern Yellowstone elk by ~70%. Subsequently, bison numbers in northern Yellowstone quadrupled and intense grazing by bison in some areas such as the Lamar Valley rekindled the debate about grazing effects on grasslands. The transition from an elk- to a bison-dominated system on grassland communities is unprecedented and, thus, effects are unknown.
- Plants subject to excessive grazing may be unable to maintain leaf tissue growth, which makes overgrazed areas susceptible to loss of rare species, reduced productivity, increases in bare ground, loss of plant litter, and exotic vegetation introduction; thereby beginning a cascade of events that changes the state of the vegetation community.
- Invasion by exotic winter annuals such as cheatgrass, annual wheatgrass, and desert alyssum has occurred in some grassland and shrub land communities in northern Yellowstone, which has fundamentally changed those communities. Also, portions of the Lamar Valley were managed as hayfields during the early 20th century.
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Current Status:

- Bison were recently declared the national mammal. The Yellowstone population is considered the only ecologically and genetically viable population of plains bison in existence due to its large size, genetic diversity and purity, and continuous persistence in its original range.
- The State of Montana and the Society for Range Management have expressed concerns over grassland conditions in northern Yellowstone and the size of the bison population, calling for assessments of conditions by their scientists, drastic reductions in numbers of bison and elk, and the hunting of bison in the park.
- The Lacey Act of 1894 prohibits hunting and the possession or removal of wildlife from Yellowstone. Hunting in the park would affect the behavior of many wildlife species and drastically change the experiences of visitors.
- Scientists are monitoring grazing effects on grassland production and nutrient cycling at 16 sites in Yellowstone.
- Climate is the single most important driving factor of plant community composition in northern Yellowstone. Over the past 50 years, temperatures have warmed and precipitation has decreased in northern Yellowstone. Further warming could increase the combined effects of climate and grazing on grassland sustainability.

Briefing Statement

Bureau: National Park Service
Issue: Bison Issues (Population, Quarantine, Removal/Winter Operations)
Park Site: Yellowstone National Park
Date: March 2017

Key Points:

- Bison management and the migration of bison outside of Yellowstone National Park (YELL) remains a contentious issue involving the National Park Service (NPS), State of Montana, Animal Plant Health and Inspection Service (APHIS), Native American tribes, U.S. Forest Service, and assorted stakeholder interests (livestock, conservation, animal rights).
- Bison are currently migrating to lower elevations in search of forage due to snow accumulation in the higher elevations of the park. Winter operations, including harvests in Montana outside the park and capture/culling in northern YELL, are being conducted pursuant to the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP).
- Twenty-four male bison have been held in isolation at the Stephens Creek capture facility in northern YELL since March 2016, pending transfer to nearby quarantine pastures leased by APHIS. After completing a brucellosis surveillance period lasting 1 year, bison remaining test-negative will be transferred to, and released on, the Fort Peck Reservation in their wild conservation/cultural herd upon approval of environmental assessment.
- As of March 13, about 460 bison have been harvested/removed, 660 shipped to slaughter, and another 100 are being held in the park's capture facility for shipment next week. Tribes transport bison to slaughter and distribute meat and hides to their members.
- Bison management requires communication and cooperation among multiple federal and state agencies and tribes with different mandates, philosophies, and treaties. Complicating any movement of bison outside the park are Montana and APHIS requirements about brucellosis-free certifications and a Montana executive order regarding state approval to transport bison on state roads. If those parties are in disagreement with NPS actions, they may reach out to DOI leadership for engagement.

Background:

- Yellowstone bison are important due to their large population size, high genetic diversity, lack of interbreeding with cattle, and wild behaviors and adaptive capabilities like their ancestors.
- Many bison are infected with the disease brucellosis, which was introduced by cattle and induces abortions, reduces pregnancy rates, and poses a risk of transmission back to cattle.
- Brucellosis and concerns about property damage, human safety, and competition with cattle limit tolerance for bison outside Yellowstone and prevent relocations elsewhere to restore the species.
- Yellowstone bison have high reproductive and survival rates, with few animals perishing due to old age, predators, and severe winter conditions. Thus, some bison need to be culled from the population.
- Alternative strategies for bison management have been constrained by legal and administrative factors, including federal trust responsibilities to tribes, Montana statutes and executive orders having to do with brucellosis-free certification and state approval for any transport of bison within the state, and APHIS' "uniform methods and rules" with regard to protocols for quarantine.

Current Population Size and Management Actions

- The federal government and State of Montana are signatories to the IBMP, which they have implemented since 2001 to sustain a viable population of Yellowstone bison and reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle.
- Bison numbers have almost doubled since 2008, and there are concerns that high grazing intensities on some summer ranges may not be sustainable over time. Population size was about 5,500 bison during summer 2016. To date, no cases of brucellosis transmission directly from Yellowstone bison to cattle have been detected. However, there have been at least 20 documented cases of transmission from infected wild elk to cattle in the Greater Yellowstone Area in the past 15 years.
- High bison densities can result in the migration of thousands of bison into Montana, which can overwhelm managers' abilities to maintain separation with cattle and protect people and property.
- Consistent with the IBMP, managers developed an operations plan to decrease bison numbers by 750 to 1,300 during the winter of 2017 through public and treaty harvests in Montana and culling in YELL at the Stephens Creek capture facility.
- The NPS has signed agreements with several tribes to provide them with bison for direct transfer to meat processing facilities and subsequent distribution to their members.
- The effectiveness of hunting in Montana has been limited by concentrations of hunters near the park boundary that prevent bison from distributing, wound bison, and cause safety issues.
- The shipment of bison to processing facilities is extremely controversial and generates negative publicity. The State of Montana and APHIS object because of the risk of brucellosis transmission; animal rights groups object on humane treatment grounds.

Development of a New Interagency Bison Management Plan

- The NPS and the State of Montana have entered into an agreement to co-lead the development of a new Yellowstone Bison Management Plan. There are also six cooperating agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, the Nez Perce Tribe, and the InterTribal Buffalo Council. The states of Wyoming and Idaho, as well as APHIS, declined to participate.
- The EIS is managed by the NPS, who is providing sole funding for the EIS effort at this time.
- Public scoping was initiated in 2015 that included a newsletter identifying alternative concepts. About 8,300 individual comments were received. Since that time, the NPS and Montana have met on several occasions to develop a range of alternatives for a Draft EIS.
- To assist with alternative development, the co-leads contracted the Udall Foundation, U.S. Institute on Environmental Conflict Resolution, to provide third-party, neutral facilitation and engagement services for the EIS process. The Udall Foundation completed a situational assessment of co-lead and cooperating agencies perspectives on bison management, and provided facilitation at one meeting between the NPS and Montana.
- There has been little agreement on many facets of bison management, both under the existing IBMP and in this new EIS process. Montana has two agencies involved, the Department of Livestock and Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Both of these state agencies differ in their perspectives on bison management and thus, there is no "unified" state approach towards bison management from Montana. This has made it very difficult to come to agreement on a range of alternatives, tools for management, and overall objectives and goals.
- In addition, relationships are strained due to the conflict over the NPS bison quarantine proposal and current management under the existing IBMP. There may need to be a reevaluation of goals and objectives, as well as renewed State of Montana commitment, to a new bison management plan in order to move forward.

Current Status:

- YELL will retain the 24 male bison in isolation at Stephens Creek until APHIS is ready for them to be transported to their leased quarantine pastures.
- Shipments of other captured bison to slaughter may continue through March.
- The Intermountain Region is prepared to complete its work on the quarantine Environmental Assessment and sign the Finding of No Significant Impact.
- The tribal hunt outside the park should largely end next week.
- Critical bison management issues-Bison Management Status, Bison Grazing Effects on Northern Grasslands, and Quarantine Program for Yellowstone Bison- (see attached)

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Supporting documents:

- Bison Management
- Bison Grazing Effects on Northern Grasslands
- Quarantine Program for Yellowstone Bison

Bison Management

Key Points:

- 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.
- Approximately 5,500 Yellowstone bison were counted during summer 2016. High bison densities can degrade other resources and result in the migration of thousands of bison into Montana, which can overwhelm managers' abilities to maintain separation with cattle and protect people and property.
- In December 2016, YELL and other members of the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) agreed to manage for a decreasing population this winter, using hunting in Montana and capture/culling (primarily shipments to slaughter) to remove more than 750 bison; possibly as many as 1,300 bison.
- As of March 13, 2017, 460 bison have been harvested, 660 have been shipped to slaughter, and 23 have been removed by other means (1,143 total). Another 100 bison have been captured, but not yet shipped to slaughter. Additional captures and shipping may continue through March.
- The shipment of bison to meat processing (slaughter) facilities is extremely controversial and generates negative publicity. However, there is limited habitat inside the park and limited tolerance for bison outside the park.

Background:

- The federal government and the State of Montana are signatories to the IBMP, which has been implemented since 2001 to manage Yellowstone bison and reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle.
- The plan has been successful at conserving a viable population of wild, wide-ranging bison and there have been no transmissions of brucellosis from bison to cattle. Other members involved with the IBMP include the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, *Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation*, Forest Service, InterTribal Buffalo Council, and the Nez Perce Tribe.
- Five tribes have hunted bison on open and unclaimed lands in Montana adjacent to YELL, including the *Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes*, Nez Perce Tribe, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation, and the Yakama Nations.
- There are recurring ethical, public relations, and safety issues in communities of Montana adjacent to YELL due to concentrations of hunters, gut piles near roads and residences, shooting across roads, shooting elk, and hunting practices perceived to be unethical (e.g., firing lines of hunters along the park boundary; "flock" shooting).
- Hunting is prohibited in YELL. However, when bison migrations into Montana are small or late, tribal hunters become frustrated and assert that treaty rights include hunting bison inside the park; a point that is encouraged by the Montana legislature, state veterinarian, and organizations associated with the livestock community.

Current Status:

- While hunting and meat processing are currently available tools for managers, quarantine and release of live, brucellosis-free animals are being considered as a future option.
- Montana recently decided to provide for some additional tolerance of bison north and west of the park. In addition, the NPS and Montana have initiated the preparation of a new environmental Impact Statement to consider changes in the management of bison and brucellosis given substantial new information, changed circumstances, and the passage of 15 years since the IBMP was initiated.

Quarantine Program for Yellowstone Bison

Key Points:

- The NPS has proposed to transfer Yellowstone bison testing negative for brucellosis exposure for several months from YELL to a facility on the Fort Peck Reservation for the completion of the quarantine testing protocol and eventual release on the Reservation. Bison transport would necessarily occur on highways through Montana.
- The State Veterinarian maintains the shipment of Yellowstone bison through Montana to the Fort Peck Reservation is not allowed per Montana Code Annotated [MCA] 81-2-120 until the bison complete quarantine and are certified as brucellosis-free. Otherwise, he maintains Montana's livestock industry will be threatened.
- The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) maintains quarantine facilities must be located in or near YELL and approved by state and federal animal health officials per the Uniform Methods and Rules (2003; 91-45-013). This livestock rule was not declared prohibitive during collaborative planning from 2012 to 2016.
- The actual risk of brucellosis transmission from wild bison in quarantine to cattle is negligible due to the state-of-the-art facility, rigorous and proven testing protocol, and commitments from the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes at the Fort Peck Reservation to collaborate with the Montana State Veterinarian and APHIS on further testing.

Background

- A quarantine feasibility study (2006-2010) by the State of Montana and APHIS north of YELL demonstrated Yellowstone bison repeatedly testing negative for brucellosis exposure could be considered brucellosis-free. Since that study, APHIS has used the facilities for fertility control research.
- In 2012, the Secretary of the Interior directed the NPS to explore options for quarantine for Yellowstone bison. The purpose of quarantine is to (1) augment or establish new conservation/cultural herds, (2) enhance cultural and nutritional opportunities for Native Americans, and (3) reduce shipments of bison to slaughter.
- During 2012 to 2016, Yellowstone bison numbers increased to about 5,500 and biologists have observed high grazing intensities on summer ranges that may not be sustainable. There is a need to regulate bison numbers inside YELL unless and until there is additional tolerance for them to migrate and disperse outside the park.
- Culling bison from the population is necessary for the proper management of YELL under the NPS' statutory authorities. Shipments of bison to slaughter are disdained by the public and, as a result, bison managers have investigated alternatives such as quarantine to preserve valuable brucellosis-free bison for augmenting or creating new herds with the diverse genetics and unique adaptive capabilities inherent in Yellowstone bison.
- The Fort Peck tribes constructed a double-fenced quarantine facility, within a larger fenced pasture, that meets the specifications used by APHIS and the State of Montana during the quarantine feasibility study and agreed to use the same brucellosis testing requirements (as specified in the Uniform Methods and Rules developed by APHIS).

Current Status:

- Despite extensive discussions since March 2016, the State of Montana and APHIS remain steadfast that the shipment of Yellowstone bison through Montana to the Fort Peck Reservation cannot occur until bison have completed quarantine. They maintain the NPS should build and operate a quarantine facility within or near YELL.
- The NPS has prepared a decision document (i.e., FONSI) which is currently under review at the Intermountain Region. The NPS is not proposing to conduct quarantine within, or to

release Yellowstone bison onto, lands under the jurisdiction of Montana. Rather, the NPS is proposing to conduct initial brucellosis testing inside YELL, which is an exclusive federal jurisdiction, and then send bison to the Fort Peck Reservation, which is a sovereign domestic-dependent nation, to complete the quarantine testing protocol.

- The Fort Peck tribes are frustrated the NPS has not released a decision document and by the State of Montana's and APHIS' refusal to allow the quarantine of bison at Fort Peck.
- The NPS is currently holding 24 male bison testing negative for brucellosis since March 2016 for relocation in the near future to the quarantine facility north of the park leased by APHIS. The bulls will complete quarantine (~1 year) and, eventually, be relocated to the Fort Peck Reservation. The Governor of Montana has agreed to this plan.