

NPS Briefing Statement FY2024

Unit:	Yellowstone National Park
Members:	Sen. Tester (D-MT), Sen. Daines (R-MT), Rep. Zinke (R-MT-1), Rep. Rosendale (R-MT-2) Sen. Barrasso (R-WY), Sen. Lummis (R-WY), Rep. Hageman (R-WY-AL)
Issue:	Bison Restoration and Management

Key Points:

- Yellowstone bison are the largest wild wide-ranging population (~6,000 in summer 2022) of bison in North America and many scientists consider them the only ecologically and genetically viable population.
- There is limited tolerance for wild bison migrating into Montana due to concerns about competition with cattle, human safety, property damage, and brucellosis transmission. Thus, the abundance and distribution of bison is regulated by capture and culling near the park boundary and public and tribal hunting in Montana.
- There has been no transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle while a viable, wild population of bison has been sustained. Elk have transmitted brucellosis to cattle in the Yellowstone area ~30 times since 2000.
- During 2019 to 2023, 294 Yellowstone bison completed quarantine and were certified brucellosis-free and sent to the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana. The InterTribal Buffalo Council subsequently transferred at least 170 Yellowstone bison to 23 tribes in 12 states.
- Yellowstone initiated additional NEPA analysis on bison management to update information and changed circumstances since the original plan in 2000. Staff released a notice of intent in January 2022, evaluated scoping comments, and prepared a draft Environmental Impact Statement for release this spring.

Background:

Bison Management

- The federal government and State of Montana are signatories to the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP), which has been implemented since 2001 to manage bison migration into the state and reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle. Several adaptive adjustments have been made since 2006.
- Current members of the IBMP include APHIS, Salish and Kootenai tribes, Forest Service, Intertribal Buffalo Council, Montana Department of Livestock, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, NPS, and the Nez Perce tribe.
- Several tribes have hunted bison outside the park boundary in Montana, including the Salish and Kootenai, Nez Perce, Shoshone Bannock, Umatilla, Yakama, Blackfeet, Northern Arapaho, Northern Cheyenne, and Crow.
- The park has partnered with tribes to provide meat to their members, improve the efficacy and safety of tribal hunts, and provide them with brucellosis-free bison for restoration to tribal lands.
- Snowpack severity progressively decreased over the previous four winters, resulting in fewer bison migrating to the park boundary and being removed from the population and, in turn, a 27% increase in numbers since 2020.
- The current management strategy is to capture bison to enter eligible animals into the Bison Conservation Transfer Program (BCTP; see below) and provide ineligible animals to tribes for meat and hides. Other bison are allowed to move towards park boundary and support tribal hunting opportunities. As numbers of migrating bison increase, more animals are captured up to the capacity of the quarantine facilities (250 to 300).
- Thus far during the severe winter of 2022-2023, 484 bison have been harvested by hunters after migrating into Montana and 497 were captured for testing to see if they are eligible for the BCTP.

Bison Conservation Transfer Program

- In 2017, the NPS partnered with the Fort Peck Tribes, APHIS, and the Montana Department of Livestock to identify brucellosis-free bison and transfer them to the tribes for release instead of shipping them to slaughter.
- Testing phases include: 1) a group of bison is tested repeatedly for brucellosis exposure until all positive animals are removed and the remainder test negative for two consecutive months; 2) bison undergo additional testing based on their age and sex following protocols outlined in APHIS' 2003 *Uniform Methods and Rules*; and 3) brucellosis-free bison are tested at 6 and 12 months for assurance, after which they can be released.
- During 2021-2022, the NPS partnered with Yellowstone Forever and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition on a \$1 million dollar capital campaign to double the capacity of the BCTP and reduce the number of bison testing negative for brucellosis sent to slaughter. The expanded facility was completed last autumn.
- Up to 250 bison could be placed into quarantine this winter.

NEPA Compliance

- The NPS is in litigation regarding the adequacy of NEPA compliance for the IBMP and concentrated tribal hunting along the boundary of the park. In December 2020, the District Court for the District of Montana granted the NPS a voluntary remand without *vacatur* to conduct additional NEPA analysis of the IBMP and issue an appropriate final decision. The IBMP would remain in effect until this decision is reached.
- The purpose of additional NEPA analyses is to evaluate the effects of alternative approaches for preserving an ecologically sustainable population of wild migratory bison while continuing to work with other agencies to address issues related to brucellosis transmission, human safety, property damage, and tribal hunting outside the park. Cooperating agencies include the IBMP partners and two other tribes that hunt bison (Umatilla, Yakama).
- Alternative 1 prioritizes maintaining a negligible risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle to assure veterinarians in other states and countries that management will prevent the transmission of brucellosis from bison to livestock. The NPS would continue to implement the IBMP as adjusted since 2000 through consensus decisions and annual operations plans by the agencies involved with bison management. The NPS would continue to rely substantially on captures of migrating bison at the Stephens Creek Administrative Area (inside the northern boundary of the park) and shipments of bison to slaughter to regulate numbers and provide bison to tribes. When space is available, some captured bison testing negative for brucellosis exposure would be placed in quarantine as part of the BCTP to increase the number of live brucellosis-free animals relocated to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana and eventually other tribal and public lands. The NPS would continue to coordinate with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and tribes hunting bison in Montana to balance population regulation in the park using captures with hunting opportunities outside the park.
- Alternative 2 would prioritize better fulfilling the NPS' trust responsibilities to American Indian tribes by using the BCTP to restore bison to tribal lands and treaty hunting outside the park to provide tribes with access to traditional resources. Bison numbers likely would be somewhat higher than under Alternative 1. The NPS would shift away from shipments to slaughter by entering more animals into the BCTP for eventual transport to tribes and continuing hunt-capture coordination with tribes to increase subsistence harvests in Montana.
- Alternative 3 would prioritize treating bison more like elk in the Yellowstone area which also have been exposed to brucellosis but are not subject to intense disease management like bison. Captures of bison for shipments to slaughter would immediately cease, with natural selection and public and tribal harvests in Montana being the primary factors limiting bison numbers. The NPS would continue captures to maintain the BCTP, but release bison not suitable for the program. Bison numbers likely would increase and be substantially higher than under Alternatives 1 and 2. If bison numbers approach the estimated food-limited carrying capacity of the park (b)5 Draft-Deliberative the NPS would reinstitute shipments to slaughter like Alternatives 1 and 2.
- Under all alternatives, the NPS would maintain a population between (b)5 Draft-Deliberative bison. The agency would continue engaging with tribes associated with Yellowstone bison to explore ways to increase the efficiency and safety of hunting outside the park and increase the restoration of brucellosis-free bison to tribal lands through the BCTP. The NPS also would work with partners to explore other management options outside the park, including streamlining testing protocols for the BCTP and construction of additional quarantine facilities and capture facilities near the outer boundaries of management zones (if applicable).

Current Status:

- The Governor of Montana has indicated he will not support any alternatives not tied to the 2000 IBMP population target of 3,000 bison and may litigate if the NPS does not reduce numbers and vaccinate bison.
- Maintaining 3,000 bison would require aggressive culling of bison in the interior of the park, which would lessen the long-term viability of the population and eliminate most tribal hunting opportunities due to a lack of migration outside the park. Such actions are not necessary given 20 years of experience managing bison at higher numbers with no brucellosis transmission to cattle and fewer property and safety conflicts.
- The NPS concluded in a 2014 record of decision that the park-wide vaccination of bison would not succeed due to the lack of an easily distributed and highly effective vaccine and limitations of current diagnostic and vaccine delivery technologies. The National Academies of Sciences agreed with this conclusion in 2017 and recommended not implementing aggressive management actions, such as test-and-slaughter or vaccination of bison, until tools become available to eliminate brucellosis in elk.

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