

An Information Sheet on the Yellowstone Park Bison Management Challenges

Yellowstone's bison are a national treasure. Many visitors revel in the simple pleasure of being able to see these wild creatures in the Yellowstone ecosystem. However, this situation is not so simple. As a matter of fact, bison management has been a complex issue for many years. In late March of 2007, Yellowstone National Park released its late winter bison population estimate at 3,600 bison. This was prior to the spring calving estimates. Unconfirmed reports have now increased this number to over 4,000.

According to Yellowstone National Park Service, about half of Yellowstone's bison test positive for exposure to brucellosis, a disease historically believed to cause bison and domestic cattle to abort their first calf. Brucellosis has had little impact on the growth of the bison population.

The Park Service has also conducted research to better understand bison movement. Observations of bison movement have detailed that in the west management zone (which includes West Yellowstone, MT and surrounding areas), groups of ten or less adult male bison migrate outside of the park from late September until early June. Groups of adult females move into this area in late winter and remain well into the birthing season. These movement patterns can be affected by population abundance, summer drought indices, and winter snow accumulations.

A five-year study (completed in September of 2005) assessed NPS bison management actions. The NPS also established five summary objectives published in a Final EIS and Bison Management Plan: maintain genetic integrity of the bison population, maintain a wild, free-ranging bison population, maintain and preserve the ecological function that bison provide in the Yellowstone area, lower brucellosis prevalence because it is not a native organism, reduce risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle.

Montana's beautiful scenery and remarkable wildlife make it unique and appealing. The uniqueness is also evident in the Montana people and their way of life. Historically, in Montana living off the land is part of a heritage. In addition to protecting resources, many feel they also have to protect their livelihood.

The goal of the State of Montana is to protect as many bison as possible, while also maintaining the state's brucellosis-free status that is critical to the livelihood of many small Montana ranchers. The goal is to maintain a free-ranging bison population with an appropriate amount of wildlife habitat and incorporate bison into wildlife management plans like we do deer, elk, bear, wolves and the more than 600 other wildlife species in Montana.

At the same time, Montana FWP and the Department of Livestock have the responsibility, by law, to manage bison in Montana, which includes reducing the risk of disease transmission. The Department of Livestock and the Stockgrowers believe that losing our brucellosis-free status would have a devastating effect on our ranchers. To address the disease issue, land managers and conservation groups continue to experiment with a number of management techniques, including herding bison back into Yellowstone, searching for a vaccination effective against brucellosis and purchasing livestock grazing allotments for bison and other wildlife uses.

The Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) was developed by five state and federal agencies (the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Montana Department of Livestock and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks) to reduce the risk of transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle; preserve a viable, wild population of Yellowstone bison; protect private property; and maintain Montana's

brucellosis-free status. Representatives of all five agencies signed the IBMP in December 2000. The IBMP has been successful in that the Yellowstone bison population has grown to over 4,200, transmission of the disease from bison to cattle has not occurred, and Montana has maintained its brucellosis-free status (2005 study results).

Additional resource links:

- Yellowstone National Park, “*Yellowstone Bison*,” information page with multiple articles, <http://www.nps.gov/yell/naturescience/bison.htm>.
- Montana Department of Livestock, “*Greater Yellowstone Area Bison/Brucellosis Information*,” http://mt.gov/liv/animalhealth/diseases/brucellosis/bison/bison_intro.asp.
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, “*The Interagency Bison Management Plan*,” <http://fwp.mt.gov/hunting/plan.html>.
- The Greater Yellowstone Coalition, “*The Great Bison: Symbol of the American West*,” <http://www.greateryellowstone.org/ecosystem/wildlife/bison.php>.
- APHIS (USDA), “*Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Interagency Bison Management Plan for the State of Montana and Yellowstone National Park, August 2000*,” <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppd/es/bison.html>.
- Website for the Buffalo Field Campaign, <http://www.buffalofieldcampaign.org/>