Yellowstone National Park Bison Management Plan

Environmental Impact Statement

National Park Service
US Department of the Interior

You're Invited!

The National Park Service (NPS) is requesting your input in developing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for bison management at Yellowstone National Park (YNP). Your participation is important to our planning process.

Publication of the Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register will initiate the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and begin a 30-day public scoping period. As part of the public scoping process, the NPS will host two virtual meetings via webinar. You are invited to attend these meetings to learn more about the project scope, issues, and alternatives and ask NPS representatives questions. For additional information on the EIS process, the public meetings, and how to provide comments, please visit https://parkplanning.nps.gov/YellowstonebisonEIS.

INSIDE

Public Meetings

To register for a virtual meeting, please follow directions at the below links:

WEBINAR #1

February 9, 2022, 5:30 - 7 p.m. MST

- https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/2460364395865970700
- **Webinar ID:** 856-248-035
- **Or Join by Phone:** +1 (415) 655-0052
  Access Code: **902-543-158**

WEBINAR #2

February 10, 2022, 12 - 1:30 p.m. MST

- https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/3873438048186311436
- **Webinar ID:** 889-739-083
- **Or Join by Phone:** +1 (415) 930-5321
  Access Code: **456-608-998**

Background

The largest conservation population of plains bison lives in and near YNP. The YNP Protection Act of 1872 (16 USC 21 et seq., 17 Stat. 32) preserves about 2.2 million acres (890,300 hectares) in the states of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho as a public park for the benefit and enjoyment of people. Yellowstone bison have high genetic diversity and move across a vast landscape where they are exposed to natural selection (also known as survival of the fittest) through competition for food and breeding opportunities, predation, and survival under challenging environmental conditions. As a result, they have adaptive capabilities that are continually honed compared to bison kept in fenced pastures with no predators and the removal of older bulls to simplify management. In addition, many tribes consider Yellowstone bison the last living link to the huge herds of bison that once roamed across North America and provided them with food and other resources for centuries.

Unfortunately, domestic cattle or wild elk infected Yellowstone bison with brucellosis by the early 1900s. This nonnative disease is caused by the bacteria Brucella abortus, which can induce abortions and be transmitted back to cattle and elk if they contact infectious birthing tissues. Brucellosis concerns livestock producers because, if cattle become infected, there is lost income from killing infected cattle, additional testing requirements, and possible restrictions on interstate transport and international trade. These concerns have substantially influenced the management of Yellowstone bison and constrained their conservation and distribution across the Greater Yellowstone Area and elsewhere.

The Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior and the Governor of Montana signed an Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) in December 2000. Under the IBMP (2001 to 2021), the agencies and tribes have successfully sustained a viable, wide-ranging population of plains bison, while preventing the transmission of brucellosis from bison directly to livestock. There are three primary methods to control the park's bison population, including: 1) tribal and state hunting; 2) shipment of slaughtered bison to tribal partners; and 3) the Bison Conservation Transfer Program. All three of these approaches directly and substantially benefit Yellowstone's tribal partners. Multiple tribes now hunt Yellowstone bison in coordination with the NPS and other IBMP partners. The NPS has also successfully partnered with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to distribute bison meat and hides to tribal members each year. Finally, the NPS has partnered closely with the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes at Fort Peck and the Intertribal Buffalo Council to coordinate the transfer of live bison to tribal lands across the country through the Bison Conservation Transfer Program.

Scope, Purpose & Need

SCOPE:

The plan will focus on actions the NPS may take to manage bison within YNP and consolidate various actions and environmental compliance analyses conducted over the past two decades into a contemporary plan. Other tribal and governmental agencies play important roles in bison management outside of the park, and the NPS intends to continue to work cooperatively with these groups.

PURPOSE:

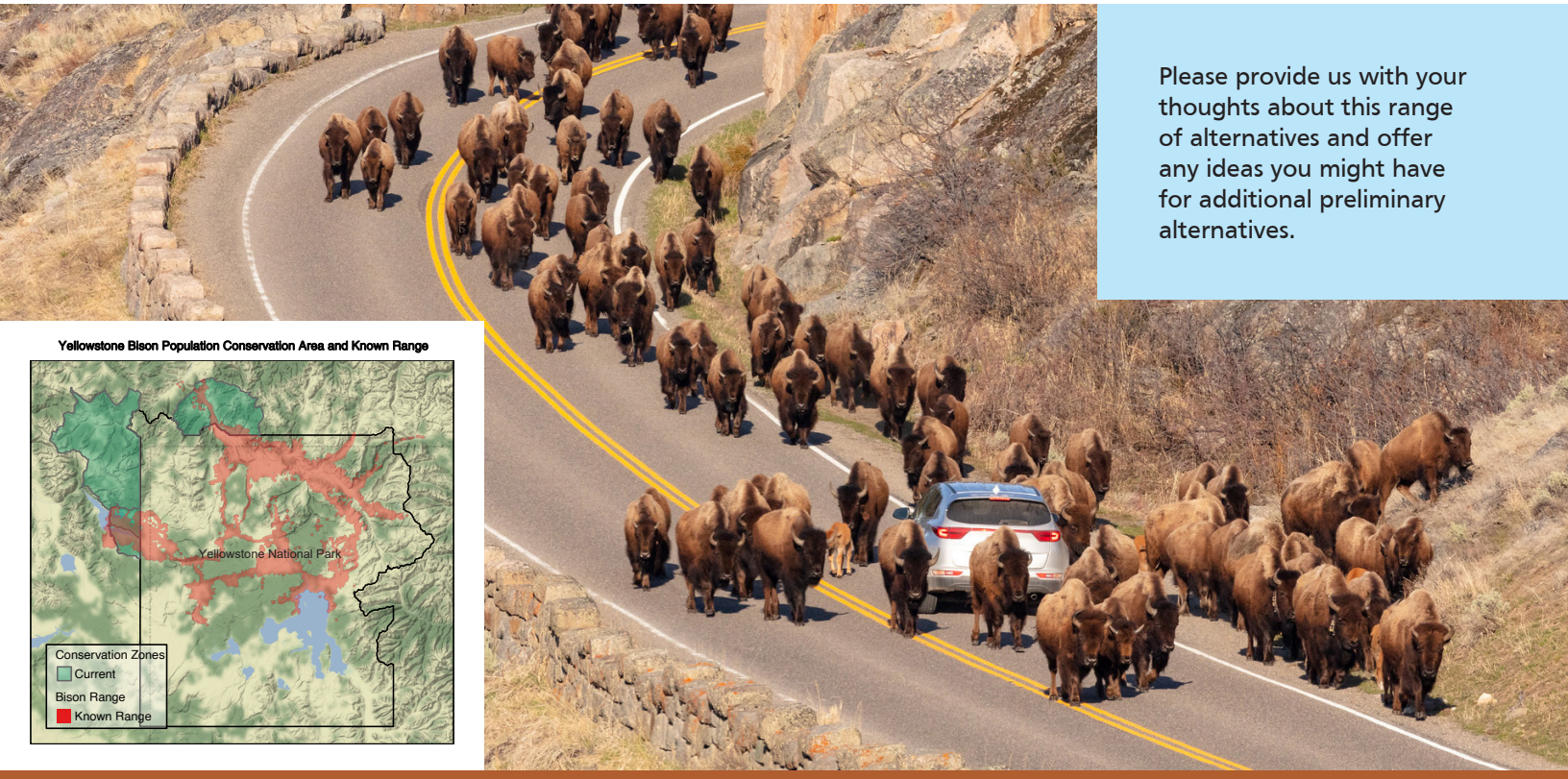
The purpose of the plan is to preserve an ecologically sustainable population of wild, migratory bison while continuing to work with partners to address brucellosis transmission, human safety, and property damage and support tribal hunting outside YNP.

NEED:

Action is needed because new information obtained since the approval of the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) in 2000 indicates some of the premises regarding disease transmission in the initial plan were incorrect or changed over time. In addition, fewer cattle are near the park and federal and state disease regulators have taken steps to lessen the economic impacts of brucellosis outbreaks in cattle. Since 2006, seven tribes have hunted bison on national forest lands adjacent to the park pursuant to long-standing treaties with the federal government.

Preliminary Alternatives

The NPS's proposed action is to prepare and implement a new plan that provides YNP with tools to manage bison that reflect the best available information and current circumstances on the ground. Actions common to all alternatives would include: the NPS continuing to support the 2014 Buffalo Treaty and 2020 Bison Conservation Initiative by engaging Buffalo Nations associated with Yellowstone bison; continue research by park scientists and collaborators to ensure there is sufficient forage; continue to meet with the other federal, state, and tribal agencies to coordinate bison management using the existing framework and partnership protocols for the IBMP; and continue to explore other activities outside YNP with partners to advance the purpose of this plan.



Please provide us with your thoughts about this range of alternatives and offer any ideas you might have for additional preliminary alternatives.

Alternative 1: No-Action

The NPS would continue to manage bison pursuant to the 2000 IBMP as adaptively adjusted and implemented and would maintain a population range of bison similar to the last two decades (3,500 to 5,000 bison after calving). The NPS would continue hunt-trap coordination to balance population regulation in the park using culling at Stephens Creek with hunting opportunities outside the park, increase the number of brucellosis-free bison relocated to tribal lands, and work with the State of Montana to manage the already low risk of brucellosis spreading from bison to cattle.

Alternative 2: Enhance Restoration and Tribal Engagement

Bison would be managed within a population range of about 4,500 to 6,000 bison after calving with an emphasis on using the Bison Conservation Transfer Program and tribal hunting outside the park to regulate bison numbers. The NPS may use proactive measures such as low stress hazing of bison toward the park boundary to increase tribal hunting opportunities outside the park. The NPS would reduce shipment to slaughter based on the needs and requests of tribes.

Alternative 3: Food-Limited Carrying Capacity

The NPS would rely on natural selection, bison dispersal, and public and tribal harvests in Montana as the primary tools to regulate bison numbers, which would likely range from 5,500 to 8,000 or more bison after calving. Trapping for shipments to slaughter would immediately cease. The NPS would continue captures to maintain the Bison Conservation Transfer Program as in Alternatives 1 and 2.

Cooperating Agencies

This EIS is being prepared in cooperation with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC), Nez Perce Tribe, State of Montana – Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Department of Livestock, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and Forest Service – Custer Gallatin National Forest. YNP has also invited the following tribes with treaty hunting rights to participate as cooperating agencies (responses are forthcoming): Blackfeet Tribe of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation of Montana, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Crow Tribe of Montana, Northern Arapaho Tribe of the Wind River Reservation, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of Fort Hall Reservation, and the Yakama Nation.

The EIS Process

Winter 2022 — Public scoping period begins January 28

Spring to Summer 2022 — NPS develops Draft EIS

Fall 2022 — Draft EIS expected to be made available

Fall 2023 — Final EIS expected to be made available

At least 30 days after the Final EIS is available, the record of decision will be completed in accordance with applicable timeframes established in 40 CFR 1506.11

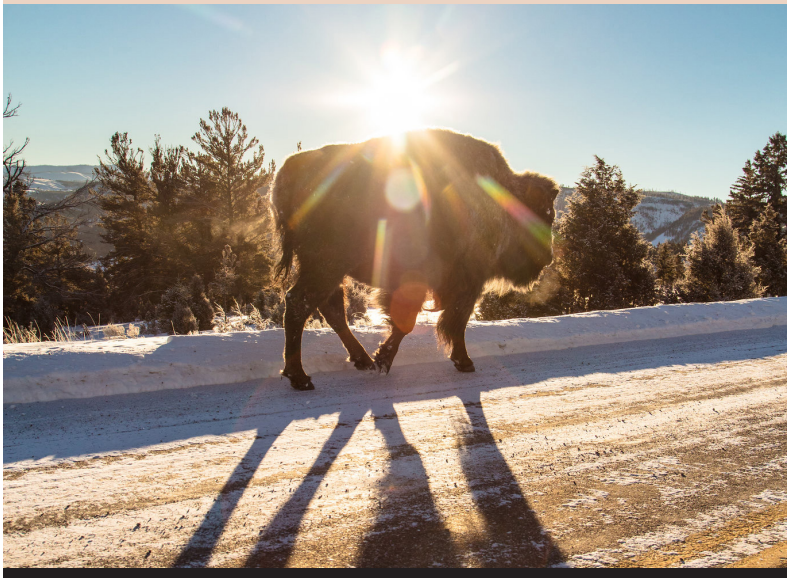
WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK

How to Comment

All written comments must be postmarked, and all electronic comments must be submitted no later than Monday, February 28th.

Submit comments electronically (preferred method) at: **https://parkplanning.nps.gov/YellowstonebisonEIS**

Mail or hand-deliver written comments to Park headquarters:
Superintendent, Attn:
Bison Management Plan,
PO Box 168,
Yellowstone National Park, WY 82190



Note: *Comments will not be accepted by fax or any other way than those specified above. Please also note that your entire comment—including personal identifying information such as your address, phone number, and e-mail address—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. Comments submitted by individuals or organizations on behalf of other individuals or organizations will not be accepted.*