

Published on Saturday, April 26, 2008

Guest Opinion: A template for resolving wild-bison impasse

By HANK FISCHER

Yellowstone bison have been mired in hopeless controversy for more than a decade. Some people argue for killing every bison that leaves Yellowstone Park. Others believe that bison should be allowed to roam without restriction. Practical people all ask the same question: Isn't there an option that treats bison like a valued wildlife species while respecting the needs of private landowners and livestock interests?

The National Wildlife Federation believes there is, and leasing of grazing on the Royal Teton Ranch north of Yellowstone National Park is a critical first step in that vision.

We believe that the key to resolving the bison controversy lies in establishing areas outside of Yellowstone Park where bison can migrate at critical times of the year. This approach requires leasing or retiring a small number of grazing allotments - some on public land, some on private. Such retirements would involve negotiation with willing sellers who would receive fair compensation for the grazing they give up.

This approach benefits all parties. By providing winter habitat for bison outside the park, it meets the needs of bison and their supporters. By eliminating those cattle-grazing areas where the risk of bison-cattle interaction is highest, it serves the livestock industry that is concerned about disease transmission from bison to cattle.

Further, establishing areas outside the park for bison is a critical step toward managing numbers within Yellowstone National Park. We have watched as bison populations have grown larger and larger over the past several years, everyone knowing that a hard winter would trigger a mass movement.

The bison slaughter we've experienced this year was not only predictable, it will happen again unless there's change. Providing habitat for bison outside the park can create increased opportunity for fair-chase hunting that can keep bison in better balance with habitat and forage available to them. It's the same successful approach that the state of Montana has used for decades to keep elk and deer populations healthy while remaining sensitive to landowner concerns.

We know this method can work. A few years ago the National Wildlife Federation negotiated a grazing retirement with the ranchers who leased the Horse Butte allotment on the Gallatin National Forest, near West Yellowstone. We secured equivalent grazing land for these ranchers, closer to their home base. Recently, cattle grazing on private land on Horse Butte ceased, and now the stage is set for agencies to allow bison to use this historic winter range once again.

Retirement of grazing on the Royal Teton Ranch is not the lip service some well-intentioned but shortsighted bison activists have suggested. Nor is this the attack on the cattle industry that some livestock representatives have suggested. Rather, it's a hugely critical first step that creates an important template for resolving the Yellowstone bison controversy. The reason grazing retirements and leasing can work is because this approach recognizes both the economic concerns of ranchers and the value of a wild bison population.

The inability of interest groups to recognize the genuine concerns of their adversaries is what has stymied resolution of the bison controversy. It's time to move on.

Hank Fischer is special-projects coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation in Missoula.

Copyright © The Billings Gazette, a division of [Lee Enterprises](#).