

Yellowstone Bison Given More Room to Roam

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HORSE BUTTE, Idaho, April 29, 2003 (ENS) - Conservationists scored a victory for the nation's last free roaming bison herd last week by brokering a deal to remove livestock grazing from some public lands near Yellowstone National Park. And some hope the agreement is a sign that working solutions can be found to help resolve the heated controversy that surrounds the management of the Yellowstone National Park bison herd.

"The situation in around Yellowstone has been fairly polarized," said Thomas France, director of the National Wildlife Federation's (NWF) Northern Rockies Project. "This is our effort at finding a better solution. It is an important step forward in creating winter range for bison where there are no conflicts with livestock."

Under the agreement, livestock operators will no longer graze cattle on the Horse Butte allotment inside Gallatin National Forest, thereby reducing the potential for the wild bison to commingle with cattle.

The ranchers will instead graze their cattle on an Idaho allotment thanks to a swap organized by NWF.

This 2,400 acre public land allotment, which sits some five miles west of the Yellowstone National Park boundary, has emerged as a critical part of the debate over the management of the herd.



Millions of bison once roamed the nation's Great Plains.
(Photo courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS))

The Yellowstone bison often migrate outside the boundaries of the National Park and onto Horse Butte in the winter and early spring, as they forage for food and seek shelter from severe cold and heavy snows.

Montana state officials have said the bison could transmit brucellosis to livestock grazing on Horse Butte and other lands outside the park and this fear is the lynchpin of a management plan that permits state and federal officials to haze and kill bison found outside the boundary of Yellowstone.

Some 240 bison were killed this year by federal and state officials because of the brucellosis fear.

Yellowstone bison have been shown to frequently carry the disease, which can cause spontaneous abortion and stillborn calves, but there has never been a documented transmission of the brucellosis from wild bison to cattle.

Bull and calves can not transmit the disease. It is transferred by the consumption of afterbirth from a mothering animal that is infected.

"This is a commonsense solution that will help remove another excuse used by state of Montana livestock officials to justify their unnecessary slaughter of Yellowstone buffalo," said Steve Torbit, NWF's Buffalo Project Leader and director of its Rocky Mountain Natural Resource Center in Boulder, Colorado. "It also takes into account the needs and livelihood of the ranching community."

NWF, a national conservation group, paid two Idaho based ranchers \$110,000 to waive their grazing rights to the allotment in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest back to the U.S. Forest Service. This freed up the allotment for the Munns family, who in return agreed to vacate the Horse Butte grazing land.

The Forest Service has agreed to retire the livestock grazing allotment on Horse Butte for this year and will consider permanent removing grazing rights when it revises its management plan for Gallatin next year.

"This is a rare opportunity to solve a problem in a positive way," said Jerry Reese, forest supervisor for the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. "It is not often that these decisions benefit all, but in this case, it has worked out for everyone."



The Yellowstone bison are descended from 23 wild bison that survived the massive slaughter of the 19th century. (Photo courtesy by Jesse Achtenberg courtesy FWS)

The Munns family had grazed cattle and horses on the Horse Butte allotment since 1961, but last year grazing was prohibited because of a court decision that found the Forest Service had violated the National Environmental Policy Act. The agency, the court said, failed to do any environmental analysis before re-issuing a 10-year grazing permit for the Horse Butte allotment on December 19, 2000.

The court intervened because of a lawsuit brought by NWF and other conservation groups that challenged the Forest Service's renewal of the grazing permit.

Forest Service officials asked NWF to help find a solution, explained France, because they recognized there was "a chronic livestock wildlife management problem."

"Resolving the conflict between buffalo and cattle at Horse Butte is an important first step in developing equitable, lasting solutions to the Yellowstone buffalo issue," Torbit said.

But the agreement does not change either the terms of the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IMBP) nor can it change the views of the Montana state government, which appears determined to continue hazing and culling bison that migrate outside of Yellowstone.

Under the IMBP, state and federal agency officials attempt to haze bison that leave Yellowstone back within the park's borders. Bison that cannot be moved back usually are captured and tested for brucellosis and those that test positive are slaughtered.

But if the population of bison within the park exceeds 3,000 and the animals are migrating onto cattle grazing lands outside the park, the Park Service can slaughter the bison without testing for the disease. This is what occurred this year, resulting in the slaughter of some 240 bison, regardless of whether or not they had the disease.

In forming the management plan, federal and state officials cited a 1998 National Academy of Sciences report found that when the population exceeds 3,000 and winters are severe, the bison are much more likely to forage for food outside the park.

It is bison leaving the park and mingling with cattle that makes Montana state officials nervous.

The U.S. government and cattle industry have spent billions of dollars to contain and eradicate brucellosis in cattle and have been successful in these efforts.



Helicopters are frequently use to haze the roaming bison back into the park. (Photo courtesy Buffalo Field Campaign)

State officials say the economic risk of infection, which could cause the state to lose its certification as brucellosis free, justifies the slaughter.

Few outside of Montana agree and many believe the Montana Department of Livestock is using the theoretical risk of brucellosis to justify an inhumane, inefficient and expensive policy.

Less than 3,000 cattle graze on Montana lands near Yellowstone National Park and the lands are only suitable for grazing part of the year, explained Mike Mease, a spokesman for the Buffalo Field Campaign, which is the only group in the field working to stop the slaughter of Yellowstone's wild buffalo.

Mease points to what he labels "inconsistencies" in the state's brucellosis policies and said Montana appears to be "prejudiced against bison."

For example, elk can carry brucellosis and there are documented cases of transmission from elk to cattle. But elk, which far outnumber bison and are permitted to range beyond the park, are not considered a brucellosis concern by federal or state agencies.

Severe winters force bison to roam further for food. (Photo by Steve Maslowski courtesy FWS)

Montana's determination to continue hazing and killing buffalo for fear of brucellosis is at odds with how other states handle the situation. Wyoming ranchers routinely vaccinate their livestock for brucellosis, but Montana officials claim the vaccine is only 65 to 75 effective and say that the burden of vaccination should not be put on its ranchers.



But cattle and bison have intermingled in the Grand Teton National Park for 40 years, Mease said, with no evidence of brucellosis transmission.

"I am at a loss to explain the hysteria of Montana," said Mease, a native of the state.

Of further concern to conservationists is legislation under discussion in Montana's state legislature that would allow the sport hunting of bison that leave Yellowstone and enter into Montana. Although it has been sharply criticized by conservationists and some hunting groups, it appears to have traction with state officials.

"We should be honored that we are one of three states that can even talk about this problem," said Mease. "But our state is more apt to take the fifty cent solution which is the bullet. What is a hunt going to do to curb brucellosis?"

At a public meeting last week, federal and state officials who are part of the Greater Yellowstone Interagency Brucellosis Committee discussed a variety of options to try and meet its goal of eradicating the disease from Yellowstone by 2010.

Many conservationists believe this is an unrealistic goal and bristle at the suggestion that perhaps the bison should be vaccinated. The bison, they argue, belong in Yellowstone and should be allowed to exist without constant hazing and harassment.



Brucellosis can only be transmitted by calving females. (Photo by Jesse Achtenberg courtesy FWS)

The Yellowstone herd is descended from 23 wild bison that survived the mass eradication of the 19th century. It is the largest remaining single population of genetically pure bison.

The NWF plans to build on its success with Horse Butte to broker further solutions that take public - and private - lands out of the grazing equation so that Yellowstone's bison can safely roam a tiny part of their former range.

France said he hopes the Munns family will complete negotiations with the Forest Service to sell a 700 acre private holding within the Horse Butte peninsula to the federal government.

This sale could be a critical next step in resolving the bison issue with Montana state officials, France explained.

"If Horse Butte becomes public land with no grazing livestock on it, the facts will be significantly different than when the Interagency Bison Management Plan was adopted," he said.

