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P R E S S R E L E A S E

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National Wildlife Federation, United States Forest Service Reach Agreement to Save Yellowstone Buffalo

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK -- The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has reached an agreement with the United States Forest Service that will help settle an ongoing dispute between state and federal livestock agencies and conservationists over the co-mingling of cattle and buffalo near Yellowstone National Park, said Thomas France, Director of the NWF Northern Rockies Project Office in Missoula, Montana.

Under the new agreement, livestock operators who have been grazing the Horse Butte Allotment with cattle will move their operation to another allotment where there are no conflicts with buffalo. Horse Butte is a 2,400-acre public land allotment located in the Gallatin National Forest about five miles west of the park boundary.

The Munns Brothers, area ranchers who hold a public grazing permit on the Horse Butte Allotment, will now graze their cattle on an Idaho allotment as part of a grazing allotment swap brokered by the National Wildlife Federation.

NWF paid two Idaho-based ranchers to waive their grazing rights on grazing allotments in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest back to the Forest Service. This allowed the Forest Service to move the Munns to the new allotment in exchange for their Horse Butte allotment grazing permit.

The innovative land trade was financed through the generosity of the Walla Walla, Washington-based Michael Murr Family Foundation. Hank Fischer, Special Projects Coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation, acted as the NWF's principal negotiator in the land use swap.

“This is a common-sense 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.”

The Horse Butte Allotment has been at the center of a heated and often bitter conflict between area livestock officials and a coalition of conservationists, Native American tribes and wildlife advocates over the true likelihood of brucellosis-exposed buffalo transmitting the disease to livestock.

There has never been a documented case of brucellosis transmission between free-ranging buffalo and range cattle, notes Torbit.

Under current management protocols, buffalo wandering out of Yellowstone are subject to being shot or sent to slaughter based on the justification that they might transmit brucellosis to cattle that enter the area later in the spring. During the harsh, snowy Yellowstone winters, park buffalo traditionally seek out more snow-free areas like Horse Butte for the forage they need to survive. This annual migration has triggered conflicts with livestock agencies that claim, with no evidence of its actual occurrence, that buffalo may spread brucellosis to their herds.

Over the past 15 years, thousands of Yellowstone bison have been killed in the Horse Butte area by the Montana Department of Livestock as part of a program aimed at protecting livestock from what amounts to a theoretical threat that the buffalo might infect cattle with brucellosis. At Horse Butte, the cattle do not even occupy the area until several months after the buffalo have returned to summer range.

In July 2000, the National Wildlife Federation and three other conservation groups, including the InterTribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC), filed suit in federal court against the Forest Service over its decision to renew a 10-year permit that allowed grazing on the allotment and that continued to allow Idaho cattle to be trucked into the Yellowstone area every summer for grazing on Horse Butte.

In May 2002, a federal judge in Washington, DC, ruled in NWF’s favor and issued an injunction banning livestock grazing on Horse Butte Allotment. Tensions over the ban have mounted steadily in the year since, leading NWF to seek a solution acceptable to all parties.

The NWF-Forest Service agreement over the Horse Butte Allotment comes at a propitious time. Officials from the U.S. Departments of the Interior and Agriculture are set to meet with the governors of Montana, Wyoming and Idaho on April 23-24 to discuss brucellosis eradication in Yellowstone Park.

Conservation groups including the National Wildlife Federation warn that this may be the opening salvo in a campaign by federal and state officials that could seriously damage Yellowstone’s buffalo and elk herds in the name of brucellosis eradication.

Torbit warns that such an eradication campaign would not only have dire effects on the buffalo and elk, many of which would be killed as part of anti-brucellosis policy, but on the park's bears, wolves, raptors and other wildlife that depend on healthy populations of large grazers for food. Additionally, such a campaign – likely conducted over a four-to five-year period – could have deleterious effects on the Yellowstone economy as a whole because of the region's dependence on tourism, hunting and fishing.

“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,” said Torbit. “We plan to continue working with area livestock producers, the Forest Service and other agencies to build a buffalo management program that really works.”

“The Horse Butte agreement epitomizes the common-sense approach championed by the National Wildlife Federation throughout its history – bringing people together to find solutions that ensure everyone's needs are met,” added France.

The National Wildlife Federation is the nation's largest member-supported conservation education and advocacy group. The Federation has educated and inspired Americans to uphold the conservation tradition since 1936.

