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5. PARKS: Bison return to Yellowstone as Montana worries about brucellosis outbreak

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

Montana officials have relented from their threat to kill a herd of some 300 bison that repeatedly roamed outside the northwestern boundaries of Yellowstone National Park looking for forage this spring. After several attempts, the recalcitrant herd was hazed back to several miles within the park Friday and appear to be finding enough food to remain in the Cougar Meadows area, Yellowstone spokesman Al Nash told *Land Letter* this week.

Late reports, however, indicated that as many as 50 of the bison had once again left the park, meaning they could be rounded up and moved to a holding pen at the north end of Yellowstone.



This herd of bison has repeatedly left the confines of Yellowstone National Park searching for forage and nearly faced the prospect of slaughter until a new agreement was reached between NPS and the state of Montana this week. Photo courtesy of the Buffalo Field Campaign.

Meanwhile, state livestock officials were conferring with the U.S. Department of Agriculture about the status of investigations into a recent outbreak of brucellosis in seven cattle in the Bridger area northeast of the park three weeks ago. While no direct linkage between Yellowstone bison and the Bridger herd has been documented, the state is very concerned about preserving its brucellosis-free status.

A June 4 report from Montana's acting state veterinarian Jeanne Rankin noted that once brucellosis is detected, "an exhaustive investigation that confirms no other cases of diseased livestock must be completed within 60 days for the state to retain its disease-free status, which was hard won in 1985." Those investigations are currently under way. If the disease is found in a second herd in the state, it would lose its brucellosis-free status, she said, forcing an expensive testing process on any cattle shipped out of state, costing between \$5 million and \$15 million annually, she said.

Rankin reported that all cattle from the Bridger herd have been quarantined and will soon be slaughtered. The owners will be compensated by USDA. So far, no disease has been found in a second herd owned by the same family or anywhere else.

The incidents are the latest in a continuing situation that was most recently the subject of hearings before Congress, during which Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer (D) pleaded with members of the House Natural Resources Committee to help protect Montana cattle from disease and find new ways for the federal government to manage the bison in Yellowstone National Park ([E&E Daily](#), March 21).

Among the ideas floated during the hearings was for the federal government to increase buyouts of leases for grazing land north of the park, to allow a greater buffer between places where the bison roam and cattle graze.

A variation on the concept was raised last week by the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, with regard to the bison that roamed outside the park's western boundaries. In a letter to Gov. Schweitzer, GYC executive director Michael Scott,

offered a plan to compensate landowners and cattle grazers if they would delay putting their herds in the Hebgen Basin out for summer pasture by at least two weeks. Scott also implored the state to refrain from killing the recalcitrant bison and continue efforts to return them to the park until June 18.

As it turned out, however, the offer to pay for lost income proved unnecessary as state agents on horses and in a helicopter pushed the herd completely back into the park on June 1. But the continuing problem of bison roaming is far from resolved.

"We hope this situation highlights the need for a dialog to reach a better bison management solution," said Amy McNamara, GYC's national parks program director. "We create artificial boundaries for bison and we don't do the same for other wildlife. We need to be looking for habitat and tolerance for wildlife."

As part of a joint management agreement announced by Gov. Schweitzer and Yellowstone Park Superintendent Suzanne Lewis this week, tolerance was the message. "If bison come back out after the latest activity they will be moved to the northern edge of the Park rather than being slaughtered," Schweitzer said.

"Bison are unpredictable. Every year brings something new, and Montana is in an unprecedented situation right now," he added. "This will keep bison off of private land and at the same time prevents us from having to destroy calves."

Recurring events

"It's not unusual for us to see some bison outside the park boundaries in late spring," Nash said. But this year, there were as many as 800 that had moved west of the park to search for food. Early hazing efforts returned about 500 of them into Yellowstone, but a group of about 300 repeatedly returned to public and private lands outside the park during calving season.

On May 27, the Montana Department of Livestock announced that unless efforts to haze the bison back into the park were successful by June 4, they would authorize rounding up the herd and sending them to slaughter.

This announcement raised a public outcry from bison advocates, including the Buffalo Field Campaign of West Yellowstone, which brought international attention to the situation.

Mike Mease, co-founder of the campaign group, expressed relief that none of the herd would be killed, but said, "Unfortunately, we are stuck in the usual paradigm of accepting the lesser of two evils."

The group promotes more open ranges for the wild bison and said it acted to prevent a repeat of last year, when over 1,000 bison were sent to slaughter or killed in the first state-sanctioned hunt in over 15 years ([Land Letter](#), May 25, 2006).

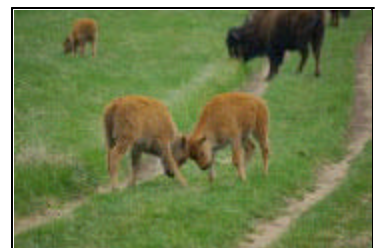
According to NPS management reports, in 2006, 915 bison were captured and sent to slaughter, 87 were shipped to a disease research facility, and 46 were killed by hunters in the state hunt. In addition, 19 died in traffic incidents and about 450 died from natural causes or predation. The most recent estimate of the Yellowstone population is 3,900, down from 4,900 in October 2005.

"People are getting fed up, and the cattle hysteria is getting out of control," Mease said. "Finally the cattle industry showed it is willing to do anything because of the fear of bison transmitting brucellosis" even though the herd in question is far from any cattle. "It was impressive to see the governor standing up to the industry," he added, referring to Schweitzer's joint appearance with Yellowstone Supervisor Suzanne Lewis on June 1 to announce the joint management agreement not to kill the bison. "The next step is to work with the governor to acquire habitat outside the park."

The group has been trying to raise money for purchase or easements on a ranch in Horse Butte Peninsula, that is a traditional bison winter grazing and spring calving area, Mease said.

Additionally, the state is negotiating to retire grazing rights on the Royal Teton Ranch north of the park, that could also provide added buffer lands for wildlife.

Attempts to reach officials from the Montana Stockgrowers Association for comment were unsuccessful.



Bison calves from the recalcitrant herd are already displaying butting behavior, somewhat like the butting heads of parties that support and oppose free roaming for the bison that live in the Yellowstone ecosystem. Photo courtesy of the Buffalo Field Campaign.