Briefing Statement

Bureau: **National Park Service**
Issue: **Yellowstone - Interagency Bison Management Plan**
Park Site: **Yellowstone National Park**
Date: **March 8, 2006**

Background:

A Record of Decision (ROD) to implement an Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) for the State of Montana and Yellowstone National Park was signed in December 2000. The plan directs the National Park Service (NPS), Gallatin National Forest, and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to collaborate with the State of Montana in implementing bison management operations to resolve both brucellosis management and population management issues to preserve a free-ranging population of bison at Yellowstone. The IBMP is designed to preserve the largest wild, free-ranging population of bison in the United States while minimizing the risk of brucellosis disease transmission between bison and cattle, thus protecting the economic interest and viability of the Montana livestock industry. Through adaptive management, the IBMP is designed to progress through a series of management steps that initially tolerate only test-negative bison on winter range areas outside the national park, but will eventually tolerate limited numbers of untested bison on public land within these IBMP management areas during winter when cattle are not present.

A five year status review was conducted by the interagency partnership and a report released in September 2005. The report notes that the agencies have made some progress addressing the uncertainties of Brucella abortus survival in the local environment and determined that the vaccine RB51 is safe for use in bison and is reasonably effective at conveying some immunity against brucellosis in the form of reduced abortagenic responses by animals initially infected with the disease. Consequently, a bison vaccination program has been initiated at both (north and west) boundary management facilities. Spatial and temporal separation of bison and cattle has been maintained by increasing efforts to work collaboratively during hazing and capture operations at both boundary management areas. This review determined that the IBMP remains in step one of the adaptive steps to increase tolerance for bison on low elevation winter ranges outside Yellowstone National Park.

Current Status:

- The bison population was estimated at approximately 4,900 animals in August 2005 and to date, natural mortality in the population due to predation and accidents is likely to be less than 100 animals since August, based on observations by the field ecology staff at the park.
- The bison population was estimated at approximately 3,500 animals in March 2005. This population estimate is based on the late-winter aerial survey, while also taking into account the 2005 late summer population estimate, known brucellosis risk-management mortalities, and estimates of over-winter natural mortality rates.
- Temporal and spatial separation of bison and cattle has been successful in managing the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle near Yellowstone National Park.
- The park conducted numerous hazing operations along the northern boundary this winter from late November to mid January. When hazing became unfeasible to prevent bison from leaving the park's northern boundary and entering private lands occupied by cattle, the park began capture operations at the Stephens Creek capture facility. Between January 11 - February 15, park staff placed approximately 939 bison into the capture facility. Subsequently, 96 bison (all calves of 2005) were tested for brucellosis exposure and 87 were consigned to the USDA quarantine research project in Corwin Springs, Montana. The remainder of the captured bison were consigned directly to slaughter, with the exception of 3 bison that died in the holding facility.

- The State of Montana has stood down their participation in transport of bison to slaughter facilities. USDA APHIS has stepped in to assume these duties and has evolved a very efficient system of working with NPS staff for humane treatment of bison in transferring them to slaughter.
- The State of Montana is collaborating with USDA APHIS to study the feasibility of quarantine procedures to certify Yellowstone bison as brucellosis free and provide opportunities for Yellowstone bison to contribute to gene flow between other federal and state bison populations, as well as provide opportunities to establish new conservation populations where appropriate. The study was initiated in 2005 and the NPS has just recently assisted the cooperators in attaining the complete first cohort of study animals. Montana and APHIS currently have a draft EA undergoing public review to adapt the study facilities to incorporate one additional holding facility and consequently increase the operational efficiency of the program. The review period ends February 13, 2006.
- The State of Montana has authorized a public hunt of Yellowstone bison within two hunting areas on lands within the state. This first year of the hunt there were 25 permits issued for each of two hunting periods during a season that was open from mid November to mid February.

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