

Dunfey, the producer, explained the reason the time was ripe for the topic. Writer Duncan noted the team drew up the proposal after talking about it for roughly a decade, and Dunfey said they knew about the buffalo being saved from their work on "The National Parks: America's Best Idea."

They also knew the tale of the Dust Bowl from their work, "an ecological, environmental morality tale," Dunfey said. That documentary told the story of the ecological disaster humans inflicted on the plains and the exodus of people that ensued, and Dunfey said the story of the buffalo is similar.

She said the timing was right in part because she and Duncan both talked about retiring. Also, to applause, she said the buffalo story is also an ecological morality tale, but it's one that hasn't ended yet.

"It speaks to us. It speaks to, 'We can make choices to go in a different direction, to reverse that,'" Dunfey said.

The line to get into the screening wrapped around part of a downtown block in Missoula. Discover Montana puts seating capacity at the Wilma at 850, and the theater was full for the viewing and panel discussion.

Given the location of the screening, in a state where the animals are a topic of debate, Twigg also asked the panelists about their choice in naming the series: "Buffalo? Bison? Bison? Buffalo?"

Burns said the filmmakers nailed down the title pretty early. People use the terms fairly interchangeably, he said, but one is a scientific designation, bison, and the other is the application of a name, a designation made by cultures around the world.

He said the series wasn't going to parse the difference, and the team wanted to simply make sure people weren't uneasy about it in the story.

To laughter, Duncan, the writer, said they thought about changing the posters to "Bison Bill's Wild West" show, and thought about how the names of cities and towns in the U.S. would be different, such as "Bison, New York."

"I... actually get a little frustrated by it, to be very honest," Duncan said.

He said people argue buffalo aren't the same species as the water buffalo or cape buffalo, for example, but he said "prairie dogs ain't dogs." As a writer, he said he wants to communicate clearly, and there's no confusion around the identity of the animal in the title.

"Are they bison? Or are they buffalo? The answer is, 'yes,' and 'yes,' and let's just sleep well tonight," Duncan said.

So what happens next, after the series?

Plugging her fellow panelists, LaPier said a companion book is also being released, "Blood Memory: The Tragic Decline and Improbable Resurrection of the American Buffalo," by Duncan and Burns. She said it offers expanded interviews, information that couldn't fit in the series.

Moving forward, LaPier also said a conversation needs to take place about restoration of bison as a free species, not one that's behind fences. She said tapping into knowledge of Indigenous people in wildlife biology, anthropology and other topics will be critical.

"I think that we just really need to take time to allow Indigenous people to be able to be the ones that take the lead," LaPier said.

YNP expected state to sue over bison plan

HELENA DORE
Chronicle Staff Writer

Boreman Chronicle 5/11/23

Documents obtained through a March records request suggest that in 2022, the National Park Service believed the state of Montana was poised to litigate if Yellowstone bison were not vaccinated and aggressively culled toward a target population of 3,000 animals.

The documents also align with previous comments in which Montana's governor rejected three alternatives for a new Yellowstone National Park bison management plan on the basis that all supported maintaining a population of more than 3,000 bison.

At the time when the comments were given in early 2022, Yellowstone's bison population numbered around 5,500. That changed this past winter, when tribal and state



RACHEL LEATHE/CHRONICLE

Cars give a herd of bison a wide berth as they travel along Highway 89 in Yellowstone National Park.

hunters capitalized on the cold, snowy weather that drove thousands of the animals out of the park and into areas where they could legally be harvested.

Over 1,500 Yellowstone

bison were culled over the winter — more than a quarter of the population. Most animals were removed through hunting, but others were consigned to slaughter

and enrolled in a brucellosis quarantine program that transfers disease-free bison to tribal lands.

More BISON | A7

Bison/from A1

Jared Pettinato, an attorney who has represented Neighbors Against Bison Slaughter in a lawsuit against the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service, obtained the April 27, 2022, briefing statement this May. The document was addressed to the U.S. Deputy Secretary of the Interior's office.

The briefing statement mentions that on Feb. 28, 2022, Gov. Greg Gianforte asked the National Park Service to withdraw its notice of intent to update its Yellowstone National Park bison management plan, and instead "engage in consultation to identify mutually acceptable alternatives."

According to the document, Gianforte's request was surprising, since "two of the preliminary alternatives fit into contemporary management practices

expressed dissatisfaction with all three of the alternatives," and "would not support any alternatives not tied to the original IBMP population target of 3,000 bison. The state may litigate if the NPS does not reduce numbers towards 3,000 and vaccinate bison," the document says.

The briefing statement also notes that maintaining a population of 3,000 would "require aggressive culling of bison in the interior of the park, which would lessen the long-term viability of the population and eliminate most tribal hunting opportunities due to a lack of migration outside the park."

Such actions "are not necessary given 20 years of experience managing bison at higher numbers with no brucellosis transmission to cattle and fewer property and safety conflicts," it says.

In response to the document, a spokesperson for Gianforte's office pointed to comments the governor submitted

"As Montana was not consulted in the formulation of these alternatives, NPS' alternatives are premature, and NPS should withdraw them and consult with Montana on mutually acceptable alternatives for presentation and analysis," they say.

A Yellowstone spokesperson did not respond to a request for comments before Wednesday's deadline.

Pettinato said he filed two Freedom of Information Act requests with the National Park Service to find out more about what's going on with the agency internally, since it doesn't disclose very much information about the bison management plan update beyond regular status reports.

Back in 2019, Pettinato sued the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service on behalf of Neighbors Against Bison Slaughter — a group of

the 2000 Interagency Bison Management Plan.

Through the IBMP, federal, state and tribal authorities seek to maintain a viable population of bison in Yellowstone while reducing the risks of a brucellosis transmission to livestock. They use hunting, slaughter and the transfer program to keep bison numbers steady within the park.

Wild bison from Yellowstone aren't tolerated in Montana because a sizable portion of the animals have been exposed to brucellosis. Due to strict federal regulations around the bacterial disease, transmissions carry significant economic risks for livestock producers in the state.

A March 14, 2023, park briefing statement, also obtained by Pettinato, notes that there "has been no detected transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle," but "wild elk have transmitted brucellosis

“Federal and state agencies have set up this crazy, extraordinarily dangerous situation where dozens of hunters are shooting at hundreds of bison at the same time,” he said. “We are in support of the treaty rights of tribes, but we want more bison on the landscape.”

As a part of the case, the court ordered the National Park Service to conduct a new environmental analysis that updates the guidance around managing Yellowstone bison, according to Pettinato.

In the winter of 2022, Yellowstone National Park announced it was considering three preliminary alternatives for the new bison management plan, which would function under the umbrella of numbers.

Gardiner landowner Bonnie Lynn, a plaintiff in Pettinato’s lawsuit, said it’s traumatic to see the bison hunting in Beattie Gulch each year, but she hopes her efforts will result in a five-star win for wildlife, Native Americans, the state of Montana, her neighbors and “the animals that can not speak.”

Achieving the right to an environmental impact statement in court is vital for making a difference, but plaintiffs in the case are still waiting for the Park Service to complete its analysis, Lynn said.

Last July, park officials requested a deadline extension due to record-breaking flooding in the park, according to Pettinato. They are now seeking to file a final decision in 2024, he said.

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alternatives the park has considered, one calls for staff to maintain a wild bison population of roughly 3,500 to 5,000 animals. Hunting, shipment to slaughter and the transfer program would be the methods used to control bison numbers.

Under a second option, the park would allow the bison population to climb toward 4,500 to 6,000 animals. Staff would de-emphasize the use of slaughter as a management tool, and they would continue to support tribal hunting outside of Yellowstone.

The third alternative supports a bison population of between 8,000 and 10,000 animals. Under that option, shipment to slaughter would cease until the carrying capacity is reached. Natural selection and hunting outside of the park would regulate bison numbers.

The comments say that while the park service purports to focus on Montana officials’ were a cooperating agency, in the document that as Park officials claimed released.”

“The Governor the (notice of intent) was planning process before alternatives, and the the plan, preliminary purpose and need for bison inside of Yellowstone, either “expressly set forth activities to take place in Montana, or “are only successful with Montana’s full and unmitigated cooperation.”

Bison/from A10

That's what drove the Eastern Shoshone tribe from participating in the bison kill, despite their treaty rights to do so, Baldes said.

Eight tribes have exercised their treaty rights to hunt the Yellowstone bison outside the park, but the competition and limited space for hunting makes the practice dangerous, Baldes said. One member of the Nez Perce tribe was accidentally shot by fellow hunters this fall.

Baldes described it as a slaughter rather than a hunt because Yellowstone bison have adapted to not fear people. That means they won't run when approached by a human with a high-powered rifle. They cross the invisible park boundary and are gunned down.

"It's good for these tribes to be exercising their sovereignty and their treaty rights," Baldes said. "But we have to recognize that Montana opened up the hunt to the tribes to use them as a scapegoat to do their own dirty work."

While state leaders have hailed the bison cull as an important part of native cultures, "they don't really appreciate or respect sovereignty or self-determination in any other instance, except for this one, when the tribes can be used as their pawn to slaughter these animals on their behalf," Baldes said.

But other native hunters, like Tom McDonald, chairman of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes on the Flathead Reservation, say the hunt is

important for both treaty rights and population management.

Anytime native people can engage in bison hunting like their forefathers did, considering the cultural and spiritual significance, it's a good day, McDonald said.

"Of the tools you can use to reduce the buffalo to the carrying capacity — as defined by all the contemporary issues today — hunting is always the primary way to manage any wildlife population," McDonald said. "To return our people to that landscape in such a meaningful way, it's a win-win."

The Department of Livestock said the carrying capacity of Yellowstone's habitat is an important factor for bison management, given how fast the animals can reproduce. Decisions aren't only driven by the threat of brucellosis, said Montana state veterinarian Marty Zaluski.

Removal of bison from the ecosystem has to happen, regardless of whether they have brucellosis, Zaluski said. But because some 60% of Yellowstone bison have been exposed to the bacteria that causes the disease, their options for relocating are highly limited or shut off.

Because of its wildlife, Montana is one of three U.S. states to have additional safeguards to prevent brucellosis from infecting cattle, Zaluski said.

The state has a designated surveillance area around Yellowstone, where cattle are at elevated risk for brucellosis because of overlapping range with bison

and elk

Managing the DSA involves testing 90,000 cattle annually and costs the state about \$2 million a year, Zaluski said. But it's the lynxpin for Montana's brucellosis-free status, which allows ranchers here to export cattle with fewer testing requirements.

Montana lost that status once in 2008, when brucellosis was found in two herds two years in a row. That meant ranchers were subject to 19 different testing requirements and lost market opportunities from other states — ultimately costing the Montana cattle industry between \$5 and \$15 million, Zaluski said.

Still, officials found it was likely elk that spread brucellosis to those cattle, rather than bison. There hasn't been a recorded case of bison to cattle transmission for brucellosis.

Just because there hasn't been a case doesn't mean the risk isn't there, Zaluski said — more bison have been exposed to the disease than elk have.

"When you compound that higher level of disease prevalence with the fact that bison use geography and winter range in a way that's much more similar to cattle than elk do, that makes it really difficult to say that bison and cattle can be out on the range together," Zaluski said.

The state has already done what it can to restore bison, and the range around the park for them has slowly expanded, Zaluski said. Moving wild bison elsewhere in

the state would probably require another costly surveillance area, he added.

"The challenge with bison management is that the easy answers, the low hanging fruit, have been picked already," Zaluski said. "We have already allowed bison to an area that is manageable and mitigated the risk to cattle."

"Going forward, I don't see an easy way for us to continue that range expansion," Zaluski said.

Still, some groups have called upon the federal government to intervene. The Gallatin Wildlife Association sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, Montana Democratic Sen. Jon Tester, and leaders in the Forest Service and U.S. Department of Agriculture, asking them to do something about the management situation.

"The bloodshed from killing defenseless bison flows deeper and redder than ever... we are allowing these herds to be decimated, suffering, and injured, while at the same time, many officials seem to behave in willful ignorance to the severity of the problem," Gallatin Wildlife Association President Clint Nagel said in the letter.

"We firmly believe you could help develop a better, more scientific approach in bison management should you choose to do so," Nagel wrote.

The federal government has the authority to move bison to federal lands, like the CMR wildlife refuge, Nagel said. As of Wednesday, no one had responded to his letter.

The Alliance for the Wild

Rockies sent a similar letter, asking for the federal government to use its authority to expand bison range.

The group has also helped sponsor eight billboards throughout the state, reading, "It's not a hunt. It's a slaughter," to raise public awareness about bison management at Beattie Gulch.

Both wildlife groups are also petitioning for the Yellowstone bison to be listed as endangered. The species is up for consideration for listing, after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service opened a year-long study to explore the option last June.

That would shut off hunting opportunities for the buffalo until its population recovers enough to warrant delisting, said Mike Garrity, director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies. It would also force managers to agree on the animal's carrying capacity in the Yellowstone ecosystem.

"Having the state of Montana decide how to solve this problem — it's like asking Mississippi to solve the civil rights problem in the 60s. They were part of the problem," said Mike Garrity, the alliance's director.

"The federal government stepped in then, and the federal government needs to step in now to support Montana."

Isabel Hicks is a Reporter for America corps member. She can be reached at 406-582-2651 or hicks@dailychronicle.com.



RACHEL LEATHE/CHRONICLE

Cars are stuck in a bison jam on Northeast Entrance Road in Yellowstone National Park on Feb. 16.

Bison/*from A1*

The cull number is decided by officials involved in the Interagency Bison Management Plan. Created in 2000, the group brings together eight stakeholders, including the National Park Service, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Livestock, and the Intertribal Buffalo Council, to collaborate on managing bison.

But last November, the agencies couldn't agree on a target population for the bison herds — so no specific cull number was set.

That non-decision meant there was no guidance for how many animals hunters could take. As of April 17, the park reported a record year, removing 1,548 bison from the park population. There were 1,172 animals killed by hunters, 94 consigned to slaughter, and 282 enrolled in a transfer program to tribes.

The cull numbers are always higher in years with harsh winters. In other years, few bison leave the park — in 2021, no animals were removed, and in 2022, only 50 were.

Even still, this year's numbers are record-breaking. The last winter with comparable numbers was 2007–2008, where roughly 1,350 bison were culled. That year, hunters killed only 166, and 1,087 were sent to slaughter.

Now, hunting is the primary method to manage the population. But there are concerns about the hunt's severity and safety that could be addressed if the area where bison could roam was bigger, Christensen said.

Robert Magnan, director of Fish and Game for the combined Sioux and Assiniboine Tribes, who also oversees the bison transfer program, said since its launch in 2019, the program has distributed some 300 Yellowstone bison to 28 different tribes across 14 states.

animals, Christensen said. That means building wildlife crossings and using prescribed burns to recover more native grasses for feed. The Taylor Fork tolerance zone is rarely used by bison, because it's near impossible for them to access it.

Federal government studies have also found Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in central Montana a prime place for wild bison restoration, as there's no cattle grazing in close proximity.

But efforts to move more bison onto public lands in Montana have been stonewalled, both through lawsuits and legislation to prevent any bison restoration in the state.

This month, the Montana Legislature passed a joint resolution opposing wild bison grazing on the CMR refuge, even though the land is federally owned.

Livestock industry interests have resisted compromising about bison

the Intertribal Buffalo Council and member of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe on the Wind River Reservation, has helped restore bison to 65 tribes across 20 states.

The Yellowstone bison are specifically important to tribes because of their genetics, Baldes said. The Yellowstone herds are ancestors of the last buffalo that remained after they were nearly exterminated by colonizers in the 1800s.

"It's very important that we get this buffalo back into our diet. It's important that we restore them to our landscapes. It's important that people understand the history of what happened to the buffalo and similarly happened to Native people."

Some of the bison in the Eastern Shoshone herd came from the Fort Peck Indian Reservation as part of Yellowstone's transfer program.

Robert Magnan, director of Fish and Game for the combined Sioux and Assiniboine Tribes, who also oversees the bison transfer program, said since its launch in 2019, the program has distributed some 300 Yellowstone bison to 28 different tribes across 14 states.

In its first year, the program started with just five animals. But this year, that number expanded to over 100, and it's expected to be even higher next year.

The program can transfer disease-free animals to tribes after a nearly two-year quarantine process, which tests the bison for brucellosis every few months.

"The importance is it gets the



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Bison/ from A1

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But there are concerns about the

hunt's severity and safety that could

be addressed if the area where bison

could roam was bigger, Christensen

said.

Hunting occurs when the bison

migrate onto tolerance zones around

the park—north of Gardiner 11

miles to Yankee Jim Canyon, and west

of West Yellowstone onto Horse Butte

and the Taylor Fork drainage. Those

zones were established to support

hunting and limit the hazing of

animals back into park boundaries.

But outside of those tolerance

zones, wild bison aren't allowed in

Montana, including on public land.

That's because they risk spreading

brucellosis, a disease also spread by

elk that can cause cattle to abort or

produce weak young.

Existing tolerance zones could

be improved to accommodate more

Robert Magnan, director

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Livestock industry interests have

resisted compromising about bison

restoration in any capacity, and that

restistance is stalling progress on the

issue, Christensen said.

"Until we can get to the heart of the

issue and start to come up with some

workable solutions—which I believe

there are many—we're going to be

stuck in this cycle of conservation and

Yellowstone National Park declined

multiple interview requests for this

story, saying park staff were busy and

there was nothing new to comment on.

Other groups are working

to expand bison range outside

Yellowstone through returning

disease-free animals to tribes.

Jason Baldes, vice president of

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two-year quarantine process, which

tests the bison for brucellosis every few

months.

"The importance is it gets the

buffalo out of the park alive instead of

just killing them," Magnan said of the

program. "But I feel sad for the bison.

It's been years we've been doing these

quarantines and we've never, ever had

a positive case."

Magnan noted the thousand-plus

animals that were killed this year

coming out of the park—animals he

said are worth keeping alive, despite

politics.

"What makes me so mad is they

don't test to see if they have brucellosis

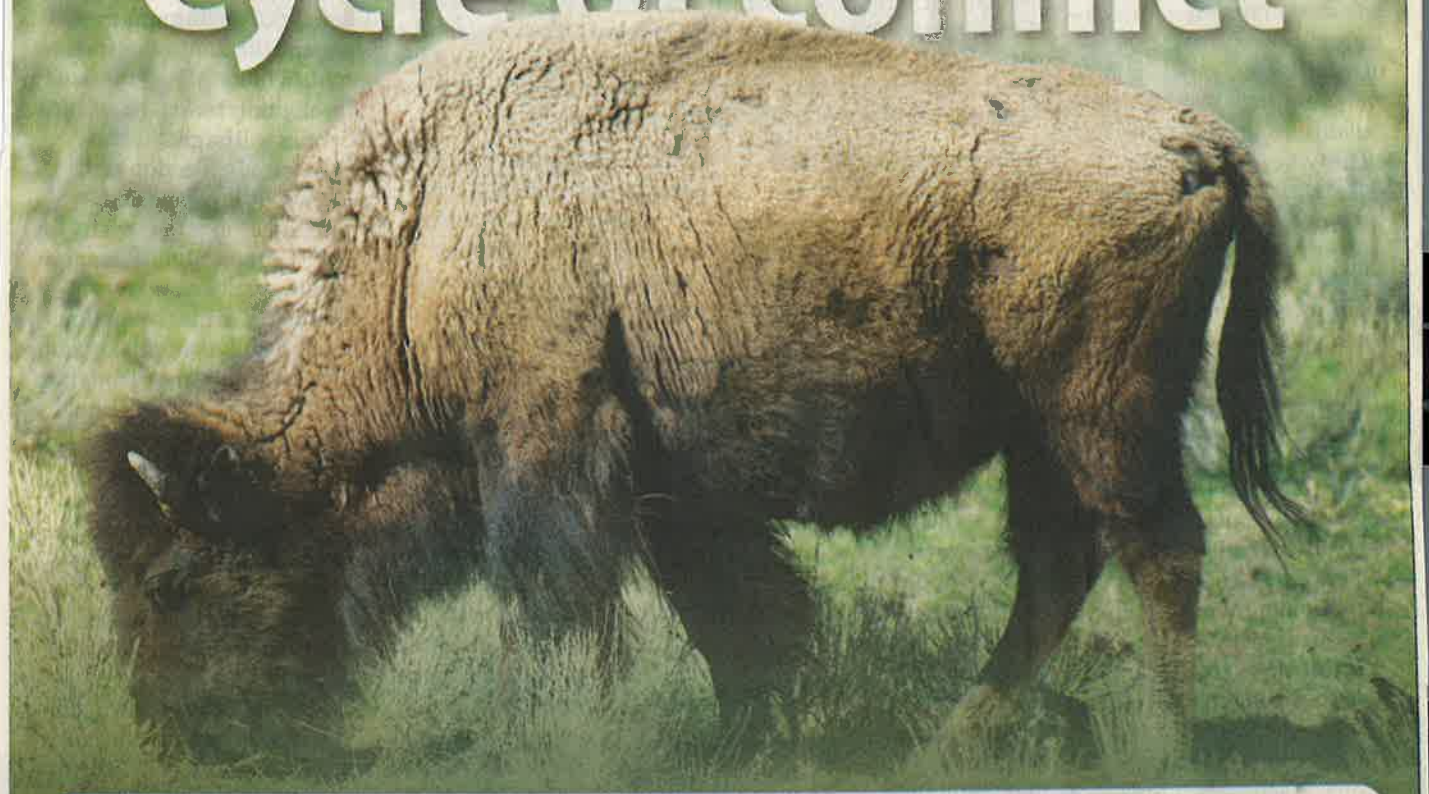
or not. They just round them up and

slaughter them. There could have been

some good animals that we could have

taken care of," Magnan said.

'Cycle of conflict'



Groups renew push to change Yellowstone bison management

ISABEL HICKS
Chronicle Staff Writer

Calls to change how Yellowstone bison are managed have been given new life this spring, following the deadliest year on record for the national park's wild herds.

Nearly 1,200 bison were killed by tribal and state hunters this year, after a harsh winter drove the animals to leave the park in high numbers. That's close to one-third of the park's bison



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for bison and returning the animals back to Native people. But there are still steep political barriers to any changes. In exploring solutions, the goal is to get as many Yellowstone bison as possible out of the park alive, said Scott Christensen, executive director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. Managers must cull a certain number of bison annually, so the ecosystem doesn't get overrun with animals. The Yellowstone bison population has recovered from under 500 animals in 1965 to around 6,000 today.

More BISON | A10



PHOTOS BY SAMUEL WILSON/CHRONICLE/REPORT FOR AMERICA

TOP: A bison grazes near the North Entrance of Yellowstone National Park on Thursday. **MIDDLE:** Bison loiter on the North Entrance Road on June 19, 2022. **ABOVE:** Bison cross the Gardner River on Thursday.

Industry from their potential and tribes say. The deadly winter has again fueled calls for alternatives — like expanding allotted habitat way, environmental groups

one-third of the park's bison population, which hovered around 6,000 at last count. Aerial footage from wildlife groups show the bison cull near Gardiner, where blood and scattered carcasses, picked over by birds, litter Beattie Gulch. The animals leave in search of better food and calving grounds. But once the bison cross outside their defined range, they can be shot by tribal and state hunters.

The hunt is the result of decades of debate on how to best manage bison in the Yellowstone ecosystem. Because of their genetics, the Yellowstone herds are important to Native tribes — but also deemed a threat by the state's livestock

OPINION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: CITYDESK@DAILYCHRONICLE.COM

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An opportunity to plan a better future for bison

SCOTT CHRISTENSEN

Guest columnist

Seven generations ago, 30 million to 60 million bison freely roamed across North America. And yet, the fact that bison exist today is a miracle. Tens of millions of bison were systematically exterminated in an act of war against Native American Tribes that depended on them. By 1902, only two dozen wild bison remained in the bastion of Yellowstone National Park.

Today, the park is the only place in the world with large, fenced herds of wild American plains bison.

Despite this inspiring comeback story, Yellowstone bison management is one of the most complex and politically charged issues in our region. This past winter, the tribal hunt of bison brought national attention to Yellowstone and underscored the challenges of managing the bison while navigating the many

different opinions on the issue.

I've spent a lot of time reflecting on this winter for two reasons: Many of the factors that led to the events of this winter were independently positive, and because Yellowstone National Park is currently updating its Bison Management Plan.

Consider the factors that contributed to this winter. The deepest snowfall in recent memory brought needed precipitation to the ecosystem and pushed record numbers of bison along ancient migratory routes out of the park and into the Gardner basin. This is positive.

The large out-migration was spurred by the fact that at roughly 6,000 animals, the Yellowstone bison population was as large as it's been in 150 years. Also positive.

This winter the park entered more bison than ever into the Bison Conservation Transfer Program and made good on a commitment to move away from

the ship-to-slaughter management tool. This exciting program helps manage Yellowstone's bison population at the same time it supports herd restoration on tribal lands. Another positive.

Tribes with treaty rights exercised these rights and their sovereignty, which is also positive. It's not the tribes' fault the only place to hunt bison is a cramped piece of land near Gardiner.

While the park and tribes were catching flak all winter, the state of Montana was quietly avoiding criticism despite being responsible for many of the reasons bison management is so intractable.

Montana refuses to allow wild bison into the state, forces Yellowstone to slaughter bison each winter, confines the tribal hunt to a dangerously small area, and insists the species be managed as livestock instead of wildlife. All negatives.

Which brings us back to the park's new Bison Management

Plan. As Yellowstone sets its eyes on the future, you can bet the state of Montana will try to drag us back into the past. Don't fall for their misinformation.

Here are the facts. By taking such an uncompromising stance regarding bison management, the state has essentially refused to participate in the process, excluding itself from collaborating on the complicated issues involved with managing our national mammal.

There has never been a documented case of bison transmitting brucellosis to cattle (a disease also prevalent in elk, which are managed like wildlife), bison grazing improves range quality, and the bison population is below Yellowstone's ecological carrying capacity.

And a recent poll of Montana voters found overwhelming bipartisan support for the idea that bison should be managed as wildlife with a population objective based on science and

suitable habitat, not politics.

Kudos to Yellowstone's leadership for updating the park's bison management plan. When the draft plan is released soon, please join the majority of Montanans in supporting provisions that create a better future for bison. A future where bison have access to quality habitat outside the park during cold, snowy winters. A future where productive collaboration and problem-solving between the park, tribes, state, and conservation advocates is the norm. A future where these widely loved animals can safely coexist with communities through successful conflict mitigation measures and where Yellowstone bison are increasingly used to restore herds on tribal lands across North America instead of being shipped to slaughter.

Scott Christensen is the executive director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

'Absolutely epic': Blackfeet release wild bison on tribal land

NORA MABIE
Missoulian



THOM BRIDGE/INDEPENDENT RECORD
Bison from the Blackfeet Buffalo Program graze on their winter range along the Two Medicine River.

As he watched the half-ton buffalo jump in the waist-high grass at Chief Mountain, Blackfeet Councilman Lauren Monroe Jr. said he thought of his ancestors.

"I thought of the demise they went through," he said. "If they were to understand that our language, our culture, our buffalo would come back one day... it was absolutely momentous as a Blackfeet to be on our land within our sovereignty and do this. We're the leaders. We're choosing our future as we

see it."

On Monday, the Blackfeet Nation transferred 30 wild buffalo (initially in the Blackfoot language) to tribal lands near Chief Mountain, an area steeped in Blackfeet cultural significance in the northwest corner of the reservation bordering Glacier National Park. The buffalo were brought to the Blackfeet from Alberta in 2016 after testing negative for diseases. In the seven years since, the tribe has been growing the captive herd in preparation for the release.

On Monday, the exploratory herd was loaded

into trailers and hauled to a temporary paddock within sight of Chief Mountain. There, they grazed quietly until wranglers opened the gate.

Then every buffalo rushed through, formed a single-file line and rumbled toward a distant tree line. Monroe called the moment "absolutely epic."

Rosalyn LaPier, Blackfeet and Métis, and her family own 120 acres in the foothills of Chief Mountain. She said the tribe has created a conservation district in the area to allow for grazing.

Bozeman Daily Chronicle 6/29/23

Bison/ from A3

"Our land isn't fenced," she explained. "So bison, like bears and elk and deer and moose and antelope, can walk freely across the land."

LaPier, a historian, said to her knowledge, there is no other place in North America that allows free-roaming buffalo.

"Bison are almost always behind a fence, even when in a large area," she said. "It's unlike any other wild animal species that are allowed to roam freely and jump over fences, go under fences and ruin fences."

The Chief Mountain release, LaPier said, is not just momentous for the tribe but also presents scientists with a new opportunity.

"One thing scientists don't know is where bison want to go," she said. "They've always been fenced in so we have no idea, as scholars and scientists, where they want to go when they roam. Even in Yellowstone, the bison are killed or relocated when they leave the border of the park. So this will be really interesting to see what happens."

Gerald "Buzz" Cobell, director of Blackfoot Fish and Wildlife, said leaders from Glacier and Waterton Lakes national parks were supportive of the release. Representatives from Glacier National Park did not respond to requests for comment on Monday, but have stated publicly in the past they looked forward to welcoming the new wildlife.

Cobell said the location data will help the tribe keep members of the public safe.

"The bison have always been there," Cobell said, referencing the area that is now Glacier National Park. "And now they're coming back."

TRIBES AND BUFFALO

Since time immemorial, Native Americans have used buffalo for food, shelter, tools, clothing, jewelry and ceremony. Buffalo and Native people were so connected that biologists say the two mammals co-evolved.

But in the 19th century, settlers and U.S. soldiers killed millions of bison to devastate the tribal communities that relied on them. Ungulate diseases spread by domestic cattle are suspected of killing herds the hunters didn't reach.

From 1820 to 1880, the bison population fell from around 30 to 60 million to fewer than 1,000. Some estimate that only 300 bison survived what's now known as "the Great Slaughter."

Monroe compared the attempted buffalo extermination to colonization and assimilation efforts.

"When colonizers attempted to exterminate us, we lost our wildlife, our land and we temporarily lost access to who we were," he said. "Like the buffalo, the Indian was the same way. We were cleared from the plains to make way for 'progress,' as they called it."

As the bison population declined,

lands nationwide. Most tribes in Montana maintain their own herds, but until earlier this week, none had released wild buffalo on their land.

'WE ARE NOT FEARFUL ANYMORE'

Blackfoot's domestic herd has grown to 700 head, and the buffalo still take care of the community, just as they once did hundreds of years ago.

The Blackfoot Buffalo Program harvests about 20 buffalo each year and distributes meat to food banks, ceremonies and elders in the community. The tribe also regularly sells its own buffalo meat at Glacier Family Foods grocery store in Browning at \$7.99 a pound, so community members can afford it.

In February, the Blackfoot Nation offered its first trophy buffalo hunt, where members of the public could enter a lottery to participate in a hunt on the reservation. The trophy hunt earned the Buffalo Program at least \$75,000, which will be reinvested in food distribution efforts to benefit the community.

Monroe said he expects the free-roaming herd will also bring tourism dollars to the reservation, especially in the summer as millions travel to the nearby Glacier National Park. He said some tourists showed up at the release by coincidence and were "absolutely floored" by the event.

Given the history of colonization and the

wander into Glacier, but for now, Cobell said the tribe has to wait and see where the buffalo want to go. Some of the roaming buffalo have collars and solar ear tags, so the tribe will be able to monitor them and know their location. Because some people hike Chief Mountain,

some states and the federal government passed laws to protect the animals. By the late 19th century, dozens of bison occupied Yellowstone National Park.

Today, through partnerships with national parks and organizations, buffalo have returned to tribal

near extermination of buffalo, Monroe said the release of the wild herd symbolizes an important shift.

"We are not fearful anymore to be Blackfeet," he said. "We don't need to ask permission to be Blackfeet. This means a lot. It means we are going to do what we need to do to survive."

hunt's severity and safety that could be addressed if the area where bison could roam was bigger, Christensen said.

Hunting occurs when the bison migrate onto tolerance zones around the park — north of Gardiner 11 miles to Yankee Jim Canyon, and west of West Yellowstone onto Horse Butte and the Taylor Fork drainage. Those zones were established to support hunting and limit the hazing of animals back into park boundaries.

But outside of those tolerance zones, wild bison aren't allowed in Montana, including on public land. That's because they risk spreading brucellosis, a disease also spread by elk that can cause cattle to abort or produce weak young.

Existing tolerance zones could be improved to accommodate more

grazing on the CMR refuge, even though the land is federally owned.

Livestock industry interests have resisted compromising about bison restoration in any capacity, and that resistance is stalling progress on the issue, Christensen said.

"Until we can get to the heart of the issue and start to come up with some workable solutions — which I believe there are many — we're going to be stuck in this cycle of consternation and conflict," Christensen said.

Yellowstone National Park declined multiple interview requests for this story, saying park staff were busy and there was nothing new to comment on.

Other groups are working to expand bison range outside Yellowstone through returning disease-free animals to tribes.

Jason Baldes, vice president of

two-year quarantine process, which tests the bison for brucellosis every few months.

"The importance is it gets the buffalo out of the park alive instead of just killing them," Magnan said of the program. "But I feel sad for the bison. It's been years we've been doing these quarantines and we've never, ever had a positive case."

Magnan noted the thousand-plus animals that were killed this year coming out of the park — animals he said are worth keeping alive, despite politics.

"What makes me so mad is they don't test to see if they have brucellosis or not. They just round them up and slaughter them. There could have been some good animals that we could have taken care of," Magnan said.

OUTDOORS

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New path?

Group proposes tribal confab to discuss co-management of YNP bison

New path?

Group proposes tribal confab to discuss co-management of YNP bison

BRETT FRENCH
Billings Gazette

A plan to share stewardship of Yellowstone National Park's bison between tribes and federal agencies is being proposed by a Montana bison advocacy group.

Buffalo Field Campaign's executive director, James Holt Sr., a member of the Nez Perce Tribe, mailed a letter on June 16 to 31 tribes proposing a summit in November at Fort Hall, Idaho, to discuss the idea.

"The time has come for Tribal Nations to come together to share our hearts and unite on behalf of Yellowstone Buffalo," Holt wrote.

The group said in a press release that including tribes in bison management would be the "beginning of 'true reparations' for the long-standing practice of cultural genocide, or ethnocide, that is still being perpetuated by the cattle industry to preserve their monopoly on public lands forage in the West."

The statement goes on to specifically target the Montana Department of Livestock for its involvement in bison management, the only wildlife species in the state overseen by the agency.

AND MORE

Dallas Gudgeff, who sits on the Buffalo Field Campaign board and is a member of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, said the gathering and bison proposal is a first step toward an even larger objective — tribal co-stewardship that also includes wolves and grizzly bears, with the goal of increasing protections for the keystone species.

The group is hoping that a growing recognition of traditional ecological knowledge will provide momentum, Gudgeff said, despite the obvious headwinds the group will face from state officials.

The Buffalo Field Campaign was founded in 1997 by Mike Mease and Lakota elder Rosalie Little Thunder. The proposal to co-manage wildlife species has come as "tribal voices" have been elevated at the nonprofit, Gudgeff said. After founding the nonprofit, Mease spent the next 12 years living in a tepee



PHOTOS BY JACOB W. FRANK/NPS
Yellowstone National Park's bison herd is a conservation success story. Now an advocacy group is calling for tribes to help manage them.

near Yellowstone's West Entrance as he fought — through litigation, advocacy and education — to protect park bison from shipment to slaughter.

AT ISSUE

In his letter, Holt called the current management of Yellowstone bison politicized. Montana manages the species unlike any other wildlife because they may carry brucellosis, a disease that can cause pregnant cattle to abort. As a result, bison are allowed to roam only so far outside of Yellowstone in Montana before being killed or herded back into the park.

Elk, which also carry brucellosis, are not similarly managed, although the state does track infections and attempts to keep elk and cattle separate in the spring.

Scientists believe the disease is most easily transferred from an infected pregnant animal's birthing tissue and fluids. Spring is when elk and bison give birth to their calves.

Yellowstone officials, under a court-mediated settlement with Montana in 2000, agreed to reduce bison populations

to limit their presence outside the park. To that end, the National Park Service captured Yellowstone bison and shipped them to slaughter for years, with the meat provided to cooperating tribes. The framework for the program was outlined under the Interagency Bison Management Plan, or IBMP.

In 2005, the state of Montana began allowing limited bison hunting on public lands outside the park. The following year, the state recognized the Nez Perce Tribes treaty rights to hunt Yellowstone bison. At the time, then Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath said the state wasn't granting the Nez Perce the right to hunt. Instead, Montana was "pre-empted by superior federal law from interfering with the rights certain tribes have from their treaties with the United States."

TRANSFER

More recently, Yellowstone officials have moved away from shipping bison to slaughter and are instead capturing bison for brucellosis testing. This winter, 282 bison were segregated for

the program. Bison that pass repeated tests while in quarantine are eventually allowed to be shipped to the Fort Peck Tribe. From there the bison can be trucked to tribal partners through what's called the Bison Conservation Transfer Program.

Montana will not allow the transport of live bison that have not completed quarantine protocols, unless they are going to slaughter. Since 2019, the Bison Conservation Transfer Program sent about 300 Yellowstone bison to 23 tribes in 12 states.

Although the Park Service reduced its shipments of bison to slaughter, this past winter members of eight tribes shot around 1,100 bison that migrated outside the park's boundaries (hunting is not allowed inside the park). In all — including hunting, culling and wounding loss — the Park Service estimated the loss of bison this winter at around 2,300 animals. Yellowstone's fall bison population was estimated at about 6,000 animals.

"Tribes must not settle for 6,000 wild buffalo when management should target populations of 50,000 or more," Holt wrote. "Tribes must not settle for a few thousand barren acres outside Yellowstone National Park, when buffalo should have access to 8 million adjacent acres of suitable habitat on open and unclaimed federal lands."

The unclaimed federal lands Holt referred to are mostly Forest Service acreage adjoining Yellowstone. In Montana, that would include portions of the 1.8 million-acre Custer Gallatin National Forest to the north and west of the park.

Adding another wrinkle to the whole discussion, Yellowstone's wild bison are being considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agency cited several reasons for providing protection, including: "loss of migration routes, lack of tolerance for bison outside Yellowstone National Park, and habitat loss."

MEMO

Included with Holt's invitation to tribal leaders was a

memo outlining Buffalo Field Campaign's legal basis for its idea. The memo pointed to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland's order in March recognizing the importance of wildlife grasslands through collaboration among state and federal agencies, landowners and tribes. Haaland is the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary. She is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna.

Haaland's order was criticized in March by Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte. In a letter to the secretary, Gianforte said, "Montana is a sovereign entity that exercises full authority over the management of bison within its borders. The utter lack of meaningful engagement from USFWS (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and NPS (U.S. National Park Service), and now the issuance of S.O. 3410, seems to demonstrate DOI's ill-advised and predecisional commitment to forcing any bison agenda it sees fit."

His letter goes on to call the park's bison "diseased" and the animals' increasing population as leading the Yellowstone ecosystem into "ecological crisis."

In May, the Bozeman Daily Chronicle obtained documents showing the National Park Service was concerned in 2022 that Montana may "litigate if Yellowstone bison were not vaccinated and aggressively culled toward a target population of 3,000 animals."

In 2016, bison were named the national mammal, further elevating discussions and work to preserve and restore a species that for thousands of years was essential to Native Americans' livelihood on the Great Plains. The animals were nearly extirpated by Euro-Americans in the 1800s before conservation actions were undertaken.

Yellowstone's bison are a result of that conservation success, one of the few herds to remain relatively wild. Their genetics are also valued because they have only a tiny percentage — less than 1% — of cattle genes, a remnant of ranchers' attempts to crossbreed the animals in the early 1900s.