

Oversight Hearing on Yellowstone National Park Bison

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands United States House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources

Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer

March 20, 2007

Chairman Grijalva and Ranking Member Bishop, I thank you for inviting me to address this subcommittee, and affording me the opportunity to share my thoughts about the management of Yellowstone National Park Bison. Few issues have been as contentious to Montanans as bison management near Yellowstone National Park. As the last vestiges of our Great Plains herds, Park bison are important to our heritage, and to the nation. Unfortunately, they also represent one of the few remaining reservoirs of brucellosis in the nation.

I have taken on this issue not because I have in mind a quick fix, or because I have all the answers, but because sustainable solutions are long overdue. I have hoped to refocus our collective attention.

The livestock industry in Montana and nationwide has gone to great lengths, at substantial costs, to eradicate brucellosis from cattle. Montana remains brucellosis-free, but in the last 2 years Idaho and Wyoming have both dealt with the loss of their brucellosis-free status. As a result, livestock producers in Wyoming and Idaho have been subject to additional time-consuming and costly measures when they ship cattle from their states. Recently Wyoming regained its status, but even as Idaho works to do the same, no clear plan exists to prevent a recurring situation, and it may be simply a matter of time before Montana loses its status.

My priority is to protect Montana's brucellosis-free status. Having been involved in the cattle industry my entire life, and particularly in the seed-stock business, I understand the intricacies of the disease and the necessity of remaining brucellosis-free.

Longstanding and conflicting policies at the US Departments of Agriculture and Interior have caused the federal government to be less than helpful. Not only do Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho deal with the real threats of brucellosis to our cattle industry, but we often receive a black eye when we are forced to take management actions to prevent potential transmission of brucellosis when bison enter Montana.

From 1985 to 1990, Montana culled bison entering the state through a hunt that really more closely resembled a firing line, where government agents pointed out the bison to be shot. The public outcry led to a halt of bison hunting that lasted throughout the twelve years of the administrations of then Governors Marc Racicot and Judy Martz. The bison herd continued to grow, and subsequent management and legal actions led to a settlement with federal agencies that resulted in the current Interagency Bison

Management Plan (IBMP). When the IBMP was crafted in the year 2000, about 2,500 bison occupied the Park. Last year—several mild winters later, and before the Park sent almost 1,000 animals to slaughter—the count was estimated at 4,900 bison. The population estimate now stands at 3,600 head.

The IBMP establishes zones on the north and west sides of the Park where bison are tolerated outside Park boundaries. The plan designates hazing, capture, testing, and slaughter as management tools when bison leave the Park. In recent years almost \$1 million per year has been spent on these activities. The Plan also calls for the eradication of brucellosis when research someday provides the means to do so. Principally, however, the Plan calls for temporal and spatial separation of bison and cattle.

Plan proponents have tried to assure me that the IBMP protects Montana's brucellosis-free status, providing a sort of federal guarantee from USDA-APHIS. Unfortunately, the disease status activities in Wyoming and Idaho provide little in the way of comfort. The fact remains that Montana will lose its brucellosis-free status if two herds are found to be infected. In other words, loss of status is caused by infection, and is not prevented by the existence of a document.

On the ground, such assurance is far from secure. Bison can and have moved many miles into Montana overnight, presenting the possibility of commingling with cattle. The result is a situation where cattle and bison occupy the same space, at the same time. Additionally, when bison are captured in the Park, many are shipped live to Montana slaughterhouses hundreds of miles away. Possible roadway accidents, careless offal disposal methods, and tissues carried off by scavengers become a concern. From a risk management perspective, we must do better than the present Plan.

State veterinarians in the 19 western states agree. A year ago I received a resolution from their organization, the Western States Livestock Health Association. It advocates reducing commingling through spatial and temporal separation, quarantine measures if commingling occurs, and contemplates additional requirements and sanctions on the three states if their recommendations are not implemented.

Despite these facts, I still hear some in the livestock industry say we're doing enough to manage risk. Alternatively, they call simply for the eradication of brucellosis. Who can disagree? Eradication is a goal shared by every party interested in Park bison management. It is lauded—even demanded—as a solution, yet we lack an effective vaccine, and I have yet to see an eradication plan from the federal government.

The National Park Service today insists on minimal management of bison in the Park, despite a long history of intensive management activities within its boundaries, including captivity, feeding, live removals, lethal removals, and regulated hunts. Similarly, the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service today insists on strict, state-wide application of its "two-herds-and-you're-out" brucellosis policy for the cattle industry in the three states that border the Park, even though the risk of transmission affects only a

very small geographic region. This is despite the fact that USDA has historically allowed the use of smaller, regionalized management areas for disease control.

Past suggestions for bison management have included a test and slaughter program that would eradicate brucellosis in Park bison; a specially-managed hunt inside Park boundaries; creative fencing of Park boundaries. Each of these notions presents problems, and yet we have seen no forward-looking ideas from the federal government.

Hope for mild winters seems to be the only long range federal plan, along with the expensive and ongoing hazing, capture, testing, and slaughter actions when bison breach Park boundaries. Meanwhile, cattle producers pray for no more brucellosis transmissions or disease status downgrades from the federal government. But hopes and prayers do not constitute a plan.

Last July I sent a letter to USDA Secretary Johanns and Interior Secretary Kempthorne to encourage them to resolve their agencies' conflicting approaches, and to work with us to develop realistic and effective long-term management. Let's just say that the response was not overwhelming.

The State of Montana has begun to explore the elements of eventual solutions. For the first time in 15 years, in 2005 we conducted a public bison hunt. It was a fair-chase hunt. Big game herds across the West are managed through hunting, and it is a part of our heritage and tradition. The first Montanans hunted bison for at least 12,000 years, which is why 16 of the 140 hunting permits currently available go to Montana's Indian tribes. Our state joins Alaska, Arizona, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming in managing bison through hunting.

Montana's hunts over the last two years have been successful, but hunting is merely one of the tools available for bison management. It can be used even more effectively over time, given more experience and adequate area to maintain a fair-chase hunt.

To explore other solutions, I have begun meeting with affected landowners near the Park, agricultural and conservation organizations, and others interested in bison management. I have proposed ideas for maintaining better separation between bison and the approximately 700 units of cattle near the Park in order to protect the status of the 2.5 million head of cattle throughout the rest of the state.

One idea is the establishment of a small, specialized area near the Park where we would apply stricter management protocols for cattle—100% test in, 100% test out. In exchange, USDA-APHIS would agree that Montana would not lose its brucellosis-free status should two herds become infected inside that designated area. The intent is not to increase the area where bison may wander outside the Park, but instead to better manage cattle in the area, and to utilize geography to control bison from December to March, when they are commonly on the move. Beyond this area a "drop dead" zone would exist as it does now. Each spring, all bison would still be moved back into the Park.

Another idea is the negotiation of grazing leases with private landowners near the Park that compensate them for grazing only non-ruminant animals until brucellosis is eradicated—or even permanent purchase of grazing rights or other management agreements that landowners find reasonable. Whatever the mechanism, agreements would be voluntary, and the federal government would need to provide fair-plus compensation. The amount of private land involved likely would not exceed 9,000 or 10,000 acres. Montana has 94 million total acres, so we're talking about an area that makes up about one ten-thousandth of the land area of the state. For perspective, that is an area the size of New York City on a map of the lower 48 states. To these ends, we have been involved in productive negotiations with Royal Teton Ranch, the largest cattle operation on the north side of the Park.

An urgent necessity is the funding of further research into a more effective brucellosis vaccine, and into more effective vaccine delivery methods. The Park Service has recently completed studies confirming the efficacy of remote vaccine delivery, but vaccine effectiveness lags. RB51 is credited with 65-70% effectiveness in cattle. Novel vaccines exist, including "RB51-plus," developed at the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, and "Strain 82," developed at the All-Russian Veterinary Institute. USDA funding for the National Brucellosis Eradication Program should be prioritized for further research for bison, cattle, and elk. Ongoing quarantine studies should continue as well. But again, the federal government must provide the resources necessary to dramatically speed up disease research and development.

There are almost certainly other good ideas. Just as I have proposed ideas for practical solutions to this seemingly intractable issue, I have invited others to do the same. I will continue to work with the livestock industry, conservationists, and the federal agencies that bear responsibility. We must provide real risk management for Montana's cattle industry and manage bison with the respect they deserve.