

NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Protecting Parks for Future Generations

**Testimony of
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Re: "Yellowstone National Park Bison"

**before the
House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Oversight Hearing
U.S. House of Representatives**

March 20, 2007

Mr. Chairman, and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify about the bison that make Yellowstone—our first national park—their home. Founded in 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association works to protect and enhance America's National Park System for present and future generations. Today, we have 22 regional and field offices across the country, including the Yellowstone Field Office in Livingston, Montana, which I manage. I'm here today on behalf of our more than 325,000 members, who care deeply about our national treasures and want to see them protected.

The History of Bison, and Bison Management, in Yellowstone National Park

Yellowstone National Park remains the only place in the country home to truly wild, genetically pure bison with an unbroken connection to their native habitat. Tens of millions of bison once thundered upon western plains in the mid-19th century. When the buffalo slaughter of the late 1800s ended, only 23 bison remained in the wild, and Yellowstone was their sanctuary. Numbering 3,600 today, Yellowstone's herd has irreplaceable biological, cultural, spiritual and historic value, and is one of our nation's great conservation success stories.

The designer of the famous buffalo nickel, minted between 1913 and 1938, chose the buffalo design because it represented a uniquely American image. Yet, over the past two decades, 5,000 wild Yellowstone bison have been killed by state and federal agencies to keep them from accessing winter habitat in Montana adjacent to the park. Last year alone, more than 900 migrating bison were stopped at the border of Yellowstone and shipped off to slaughter. This is a national travesty and an embarrassment to the National Park System. Ironically, this slaughter takes place at a time when Yellowstone is experiencing a significant growth in visitors who offer wildlife viewing as the primary reason for their visit. Fully 57% of Yellowstone's visitors cite seeing bison as their main reason for visiting the park and wildlife watchers spent \$82 million in the Yellowstone gateway region in 2004.



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Each winter, bison, like other wildlife, tend to move out of Yellowstone's high country to lower habitat with better forage on lands adjacent to the park. In fact, in 1926 Congress authorized additions to the Absaroka and Gallatin national forests next to Yellowstone, recognizing that wildlife needed to use lower-elevation land beyond park boundaries, especially during winter. Some falsely claim that the reason bison leave Yellowstone is because there are too many bison in the park and there is not enough forage to sustain them. Instead, the most recent studies attest that there are an estimated 3,600 bison inside the park, well below the most recent estimated carrying capacity of 5,500-7,500 for Yellowstone. In addition, in 2002 the National Research Council, the working arm of the National Academy of Sciences, completed an exhaustive review of science related to the health of Yellowstone's northern range, and found that bison and other ungulates are not destroying Yellowstone's grassland habitat. Scientists tell us that it doesn't matter if there are 3,000 or 300 bison in the park, when the snow gets too deep, they will seek winter habitat and forage outside the park. But in recent years, there has been a policy of zero tolerance for wild bison beyond park boundaries that does not allow these animals access to ancestral lands.

Yellowstone's wild bison are being captured and killed due to a fear that they will transmit brucellosis to cattle. Brucellosis is a disease caused by a bacterium (*Brucella abortus*) that can infect wild and domestic animals. Brucellosis has little effect on wildlife, including some Yellowstone bison and elk with the disease, but it can initiate premature births in cattle. For this reason, livestock interests have worked hard to eliminate brucellosis from domestic herds. Ironically, Yellowstone bison picked up the brucellosis bacterium from a herd of dairy cattle that were brought to Yellowstone National Park nearly 90 years ago. There has never been a single recorded case of wild bison transmitting brucellosis to cattle in the wild. The risk of transmission between wild bison and cattle was deemed low in a 1992 General Accounting Office report, and again in a 1998 National Research Council study.

Solutions to Protect Bison, and Montana's Livestock Industry

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) believes that the American public now has an unprecedented opportunity to not only greatly advance efforts to restore bison on the landscape, but to also assure security for the region's livestock industry.

Bison are currently managed under the Interagency Bison Management plan (IBMP), whose purpose is:

"...to maintain a wild, free-ranging population of bison and address the risk of brucellosis transmission to protect the economic interest and viability of the livestock industry in the state of Montana."

Seven years and about \$21 million dollars after completion of the IBMP, the goals of the plan have yet to be achieved. There is a solution to the current dilemma, however, but it is not being aggressively pursued under the current IBMP. The solution NPCA supports has four components.

Those components are:

- 1) Completing an agreement with the Royal Teton Ranch (RTR);
- 2) Establishing a brucellosis classification “sub-region” within the Greater Yellowstone Region;
- 3) Instituting spatial and temporal separation of cattle and bison; and,
- 4) Assuring the development of a safe, effective vaccine for livestock and bison.

All four elements are designed to protect the livestock industry while restoring critical bison habitats outside the park, thereby reestablishing a healthy, free ranging Yellowstone bison population. In and around Yellowstone National Park, we still have a chance to restore those habitats before our options close, as they have in so many other national parks across the country.

1) Assist with the completion of a grazing agreement with the Royal Teton Ranch.

Simply put, current bison management isn't working because the habitat currently available to bison is inadequate. Habitat is the key. For years, biologists have told us that the Royal Teton Ranch just north of the park is the lynchpin when it comes to access to key winter habitat.

Under direction from Governor Schweitzer, negotiations are underway to purchase the grazing rights of the Royal Teton Ranch, otherwise known as the Church Universal and Triumphant, and contractually allow bison to cross that private land to access significant public land winter habitat. The final proposition is the lynchpin to success on the bison issue.

The details of the grazing lease are still being worked out. It is critical that any agreement allow for adequate numbers of bison to use RTR lands and that the overall cost of the deal stays within reason, but assuming those two issues can be agreed upon, successful completion and funding of this agreement will be the most significant action to advance the bison issue in many years.

The agreement would be financed by federal, state and private funds. It is essential that sufficient dollars be appropriated by Congress to contribute to completing the grazing agreement.

2) Create in statute direction for establishment of brucellosis classification “sub-regions” within the Greater Yellowstone Region.

The USDA has classified Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming's livestock as 'brucellosis free.' However, if two cattle herds are found infected with brucellosis in a single small area of the state, the whole state is penalized and loses its “class free” status. This has happened in both

Wyoming and Idaho over the past few years and these states have been required to take specific actions in an attempt to regain their class free status.

Some in the livestock industry have rightly questioned why an entire state should lose its' status when brucellosis is detected in a small part of the state. NPCA agrees. Lost in the debate about bison is the little acknowledged but important fact that brucellosis resides in most wildlife species, including elk, which range across a much broader geographic landscape than do bison. Put in another context, eradication of brucellosis in all wildlife is simply impossible in the short term. But when it comes to bison, Congress can become a significant part of the solution by directing the USDA to create a brucellosis sub-region, or zone, in counties surrounding Yellowstone National Park.

A subzone that is managed for spatial and temporal separation that provides government assistance for fencing and vaccination of existing cattle herds within the sub-region and that looks to public lands for creative management and preference around wildlife would be a major step towards both protection of Montana's state cattle industry as well as reestablishment of a free roaming bison herd. With the establishment of this subzone, in the unlikely event that two herds of cattle were found with brucellosis within this zone, all of Montana's cattle outside this zone would not be penalized by losing their brucellosis free status. This is a smart and essential strategy of containment and protection.

3) Institute spatial and temporal separation of cattle and bison as the primary short term means to address brucellosis.

Efforts relative to bison and brucellosis have largely focused on attempts to eliminate brucellosis. The fact is, even if agencies were 100% effective at eliminating the disease from bison, many other wildlife species also have brucellosis.

Recently the Western States Livestock Health Association, an organization of the western state veterinarians, has recently stated that the separation of livestock and bison is an essential component of any long-term solution. Montana's Governor Brian Schweitzer has said he agrees with this, as does NPCA. In the past, this separation was achieved through the slaughter of bison, but that is the most draconian and inflammatory of separation strategies. Many other approaches can be at least as effective. It's also important to preface these strategies with the reality that there are less than 500 cow-calf pairs occupying public lands on the north side of Yellowstone. On public lands adjacent to the park, spatial and temporal separation strategies include:

- Delaying by a few weeks the turnout date for livestock onto public land grazing allotments, which will eliminate any possibility of brucellosis transmission from a bison fetus to livestock;
- Adjusting livestock grazing allotments to accommodate for a steer operation, which would eliminate possibility of transmission;

- Employing creative fencing strategies that keep bison and livestock separated;
- Looking for opportunities to purchase, trade out or eliminate existing leases with willing permittees.

By providing the dollars needed to purchase or transfer grazing rights from willing sellers on these lands, critical winter habitat will be made available for bison through spatial and temporal separation.

4) Assure the development of safe, effective vaccines

Studies have shown that safe and effective vaccines can reduce brucellosis rates in bison. In addition, the implementation of a vaccination program in Yellowstone National Park would eliminate the requirement that all bison be tested for the presence of brucellosis before they leave the park.

We are not there yet when it comes to producing an effective vaccine that can be comprehensively administered to wildlife. Additional dollars are needed for research and science.

Equally important is the need to devote additional resources to develop a safe vaccine that could be administered to livestock. Obviously, it would be much more practical to administer a vaccine to livestock than to wildlife.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Yellowstone, our nation's first national park, is at a crossroads in terms of the long term viability of its, and America's, most iconic wildlife species. Central to their long-term survival is the recognition of and the protection of, habitats essential to free roaming bison. We are already seeing what happens when such essential habitats are shut down, excluded and compromised in other parks around the country. When critical habitats are lost, the potential to use reasonable, appropriate means of managing wildlife can be vastly curtailed, with only the most unpleasant, inhumane and wasteful means remaining. We have a chance in Yellowstone now to demonstrate that we can realize a fully functioning park for bison, but realizing this opportunity will require prompt action.

Thank you for considering our views. I would be happy to answer any questions.