

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 26, 2010

The Honorable Jon Jarvis
Director
National Park Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington , DC 20240

Dear Director Jarvis:

We are seeking your attention and action to address the ongoing issue involving Yellowstone National Park bison. As you know, bison management remains highly contentious and is one of the most challenging policy issues facing NPS today. Despite significant expenditures of federal funds, both before and after the creation of the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) in 2000, over 6,000 wild bison have been killed, largely through management actions, since 1985.

This winter, due to heavy snowpack, many bison have roamed beyond the boundaries of YNP. There are currently over 500 bison held at the Stephen's Creek Capture Facility inside YNP northern boundary and additional captured bison now being held at USDA's Brogan facility outside the Park. We commend the Park Service's earlier decision not to consign any bison to slaughter this winter/spring, but we are concerned about a recent announcement that your agency may still send bison that have tested positive for brucellosis to slaughter. It is our understanding that the bison have only tested positive for "exposure" to brucellosis and are not necessarily infected or capable of transmitting the disease. We would like to express our support for the initial commitment not to slaughter any bison this season.

It is clear to us from recent statements by the new Park Superintendent, Dan Wenk¹, that NPS is ready to stake out a new direction for bison management, working with the other agencies and partners toward the goal of ending the horrible spectacle of capturing and slaughtering these treasured bison². We would like to encourage you and your creative staff to strive for a new policy that is firmly grounded in the founding principles of the National Park Service. We recognize that such an effort will be very challenging but we are certain that NPS and its partners have the technical and physical capabilities needed for this task.

¹ IBMP News Release, 3/08/11.

² Matthew Brown, "Schweitzer pushes bison culls, park chief balks", Associated Press, 3/08/11.

Unlike domesticated bison, Yellowstone bison are unique. Beyond their iconic image as a symbol of strength and wildness, they are one of most popular species for Yellowstone visitors, a year-round source of tourism intrinsic to the regional and tri-state economies. More importantly, the Yellowstone bison are the world's last herd of purebred wild buffalo. Due largely to the confining prescriptions of the IBMP, NPS and its partner agencies have become too comfortable managing these bison like livestock; the last group of an entire species deserve far better than our current management efforts.

Since the initiation of the IBMP in 2000, over 3,500 bison have been slaughtered. Much of the plan's predicted progress in bison management has gone unrealized, and many of the plan's analyses have proven to be wrong. The General Accounting Office, in a 2008 report³, rightly criticized NPS for the implementation of the IBMP. Although the report led to some critical changes in the plan, the IBMP still prioritizes the protection of what is now less than several hundred cattle that, with few exceptions, graze seasonally on public and private lands near YNP over protecting and enhancing the bison population. We feel that bison herd protection must be the number one priority of any bison management policy.

Many of the primary circumstances and policies that the current IBMP is based upon are now very different than they were when the plan was drafted. Specifically, far fewer cattle graze on either public or private land in the areas where bison migrate when they leave the Park. In the northern boundary area during the winter and spring, only 50 head of cattle are present in the area adjacent to the Park. The two operators of these herds have both publicly expressed their opinion⁴ that they can live with migrating bison and are not concerned about brucellosis transmission from bison. They also agree that the current IBMP is wasteful and ineffective. In the western boundary area, no cattle are ever present until early summer. On the Horse Butte Peninsula, land ownership changes and the permanent closure of grazing permits on federal land have rendered the area completely free of cattle year round.

Additionally, several new scientific studies of brucellosis, and Yellowstone bison in general, demonstrate the need to revise the IBMP. These studies include new information on bison genetics and bison health⁵ and a quantified examination of the risk of brucellosis transmission⁶. It is clear to us that the current IBMP is no longer consistent with the best available science and is likely causing a significantly negative impact on the health and future of the Yellowstone herd.

Perhaps one of the most important developments is the revision of USDA's APHIS federal brucellosis policy. The interim rule published this past December⁷ effectively

³ Government Accountability Office, "Yellowstone Bison: Interagency Plan and Agencies' Management Need Improvement to Better Address Bison-Cattle Brucellosis Controversy", March 2008.

⁴ Carly Flandro, "Gardiner-area ranchers weigh in on nearby bison", Bozeman Daily Chronicle, 1/31/11.

⁵ Thomas H. Pringle, "Widespread Mitochondrial Disease in North American Bison", Nature Precedings, 2/11.

⁶ A. M. Kilpatrick, C. M. Gillin & P. Daszak, "Wildlife-livestock conflict: the risk of pathogen transmission from bison to cattle outside Yellowstone National Park", Journal of Applied Ecology, 2009.

⁷ Federal Register / Vol. 75, No. 247 / Monday, December 27, 2010 / Rules and Regulations

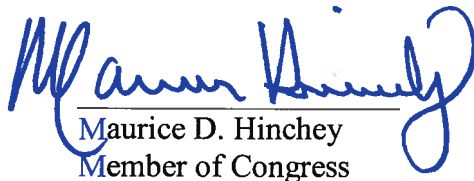
eliminates any negative consequences from a brucellosis transmission in the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA) to the statewide livestock industry in Montana. In fact, a recent report⁸ commissioned by the Montana Legislature found that the state is saving between 5 and 11 million dollars annually due to the new policy and the implementation of the Designated Surveillance Area as prescribed by the new APHIS guidelines. The new APHIS rule, while primarily based on the expanding presence of brucellosis in free ranging wild elk in the GYA, has potentially profound implications for wild bison as it addresses and mitigates the primary concern of the livestock industry about migrating Yellowstone bison.

Considering the many land-use changes, advancements in scientific understanding of bison and brucellosis, and recent changes to federal brucellosis policy, it has become abundantly clear that the IBMP must be replaced.

We ask NPS to work diligently toward a new policy that places the conservation of bison and the end of invasive livestock practices, including the unnecessary hazing, capture and slaughter of bison, as top priorities. We especially urge NPS to work closely with the current IBMP's Native American partners in the development and implementation of a new bison policy.

Beginning with the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, the United States Congress has had a long history of involvement and concern for this unique and imperiled wildlife species. We remain fully engaged today and have high hopes that NPS will meet this difficult challenge in the years to come. Please keep us fully informed about your progress in developing a more scientifically sound, comprehensive, humane, and publicly acceptable bison policy that fully embodies the mission and purpose of the National Park Service.

Sincerely,


Maurice D. Hinchey
Member of Congress


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Member of Congress



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Member of Congress



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Member of Congress



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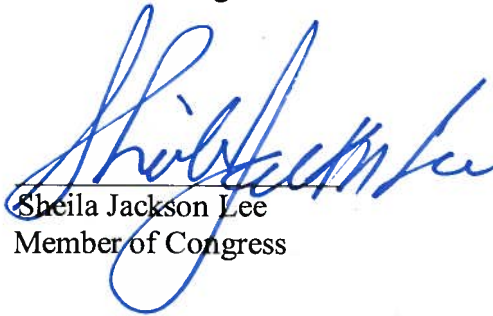
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