

BIG SKY

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PONY EXPRESS

A caller reported seeing 25 horses loose

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No target set for annual Yellowstone bison cull

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WEST YELLOWSTONE — After a full day of discussions, state, federal and Tribal authorities who manage Yellowstone bison jointly under an interagency plan did not agree to a target number of animals to cull from the overall population this winter, and instead agreed to negotiate the issue further.

“I don’t know what to say, except that we’re not going to set a population (target) this year,” said Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Cam Sholly near the end of a Interagency Bison

Management Plan meeting on Wednesday.

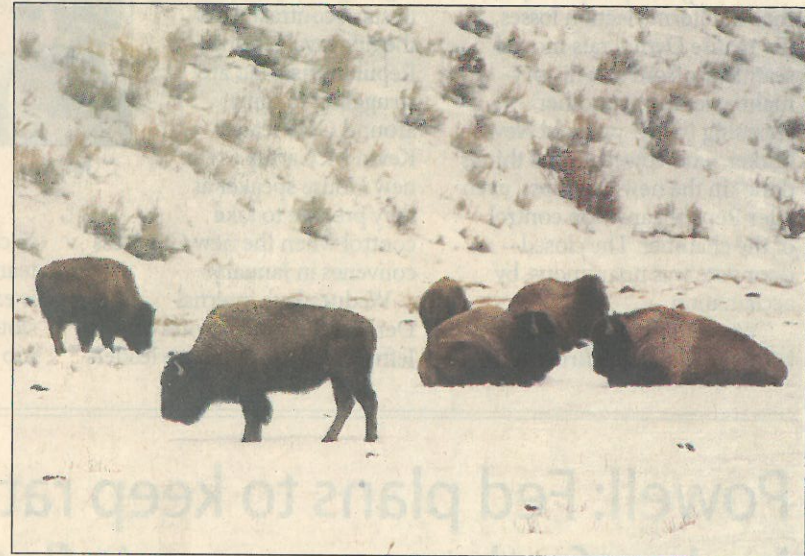
While the agencies did not reach a decision, they agreed to work toward maximizing bison hunting and trapping opportunities at the border of the park based on conditions.

Mike Honeycutt of the Montana Department of Livestock rejected the idea of managing for an increasing bison population, and Quincy Ellenwood, representing the Nez Perce Tribe, rejected the idea of managing for a stable to decreasing bison population.

In the end, the partners did not reach a compromise, and no target ranges were established for the winter operations plan.

Yellowstone bison aren’t tolerated beyond some zones in the state of Montana because of the threat that the disease brucellosis poses to the state’s livestock industry. Because the animals reproduce quickly, a portion of the population is culled annually to keep numbers steady within the park.

There are approximately 6,000 bison in the world’s first national park, according to the latest counts, and the National Park Service believes Yellowstone’s landscape can support about 10,000 of the animals, said Chris Geremia, the park’s lead bison biologist.



SAMUEL WILSON/CHRONICLE/REPORT FOR AMERICA

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Bison lounge in Yellowstone National Park on Feb. 10.

Bison/ from A3

The counts this year are the highest the park has ever recorded, and staff are working to understand what that might mean for the landscape, Geremia said. Based on the winter weather so far this year, he said he anticipates there will be a strong migration.

Under the Interagency Bison Management Plan, first established in 2000, the state of Montana, the National Park Service, seven Tribal Nations and other partners agree to cull some bison from the Yellowstone population each fall. They want to conserve the world's last free-roaming bison herd, and they want to prevent the animals from transmitting brucellosis to cattle.

Brucellosis is a bacterial disease that spreads when animals come into contact with the birth tissues and fluids of infected animals,

and a high percentage of Yellowstone bison have been exposed to it. Cattle that contract the disease can miscarry or produce weak young.

Because of strict federal regulations, any brucellosis transmission outside of a specific zone around the park puts Montana's "Class Free Status" with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in jeopardy. Such a loss could cripple the state's livestock industry.

There has never been a documented case of brucellosis being transmitted from bison to cattle in the wild, in part because of rigorous efforts to separate the species at the border of the park. Elk have spread the disease to livestock outside of Yellowstone more than two dozen times.

As snow accumulates in the winter months, bison migrate to lower elevations outside of the park near Gardiner

and West Yellowstone in search of forage. Once they cross over the border into the state of Montana, hunters can kill them during seasons set by Tribal nations and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Some bison that leave the park get hazed into a trap at the edge of Yellowstone. Many of those animals are shipped to slaughter, and the meat and hides are distributed to Tribes.

Others are enrolled in the Bison Conservation Transfer Program. Bison in the program are quarantined in pens near the border of the park, then trucked to the Fort Peck Reservation for a final round of assurance testing. After that, the InterTribal Buffalo Council coordinates the transfer of disease-free animals to Tribal lands across the country.

Over the last two

winters, the annual bison migration has lagged because of mild winter weather, which meant there have been fewer opportunities for hunters to harvest the animals or for officials to capture them outside of the park.

Last fall, officials agreed to a target of culling approximately 600 to 900 bison from the Yellowstone herds during the 2021-2022 season, but by the time the season wrapped up, fewer than 50 bison had been hunted, slaughtered or sent to quarantine.

Of the bison that were culled, 10 were captured and enrolled in the transfer program, according to an annual report from April. This winter, because of an expansion to quarantine facilities around the park, there could be space for upwards of 200 bison in the program, Geremia said.