

Yellowstone program makes largest transfer of bison to tribes

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Yellowstone National Park transferred the largest number of bison to date to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation last month, as part of a program to return the culturally significant animal back to tribes.

The transfer of 112 disease-free Yellowstone bison to the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes of Fort Peck is the continued work of the park's Bison Conservation Transfer Program, which has more than doubled its capacity in the last year. Last January, the park transferred just 28 bison.



The program expansion is the first step to changing the way Yellowstone manages its bison population, said Scott Christensen, executive director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

"The long term goal is to get out of the practice of sending Yellowstone bison to slaughter, and instead use these amazing animals to support the tribes and their desire to have wild bison on their own land," Christensen said.

Since its launch in 2019, the program has moved 294 bison from Yellowstone to Fort Peck. 170 of those bison have been further transferred to 23 tribes across

12 states in partnership with the InterTribal Buffalo Council, the park said in a release.

But now that the park has expanded its quarantine facility, cohorts of hundreds of bison can move through the program at once, Christensen said.

Wild roaming bison are largely not tolerated across Montana because of the risk they pose to ranchers and the livestock industry.

Some 60% of Yellowstone bison have been exposed to brucellosis, a disease that can spread to cattle and cause them to stillbirth or produce weak calves.



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A line of bison walk along a road in Yellowstone National Park on Tuesday.

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While there have been no recorded brucellosis transmissions from bison to cattle in the wild, the disease has spread to cattle from elk.

Over 30 million bison used to roam throughout North America, but their mass slaughter in the late 1800s left only about a thousand bison on the landscape by the 20th century.

The Yellowstone bison are the direct descendants of the last herd of wild bison in the West. Their genetics make the animal even more important to tribes today.

Over the past 50 years, Yellowstone's bison herd has expanded to its largest size yet — growing from 500 in 1970 to around 6,000 animals today. Historically, Yellowstone officials have culled a certain

number of animals each year to keep the population stable.

Some bison are killed by state and tribal hunters as they migrate out of park boundaries during the winter. Others are trapped and sent to slaughter.

Christensen said the goal is for bison management to eventually revolve around tribal hunting and the transfer program, rather than the slaughter of hundreds of animals each year.

Captured bison that initially test negative for brucellosis can be enrolled in the transfer program.

Animals in the program are quarantined for at least 60 days and tested repeatedly.

Then, animals can be sent to another state quarantine facility, where they undergo additional testing at six and 12 months before they're released.

"It is important we continue to look for opportunities to build on the success of this program in order to move larger numbers of disease-free bison to Tribes across the country, while also achieving our future goal of eliminating shipments to slaughter," Yellowstone Park superintendent Cam Sholly said in a release.

The park intends to enter 250 new animals in the program this winter, according to the release.

The program expansion has been coordinated with Native stakeholders like the tribes of Fort Peck and the InterTribal Buffalo Council.

Ervin Carlson, president of the InterTribal Buffalo Council and member of the Blackfeet Nation, said the Yellowstone bison are critically important to tribes. They always have been — but work to

bring them home after their restoration from near-extinction is only a recent memory.

Bison provided clothing, shelter, food, and tools for Native people, Carlson said.

"They used to be our complete existence and economy. They have spiritual significance, too," Carlson said.

Carlson coordinates with other tribes outside of Fort Peck who want Yellowstone bison. Animals from the transferred herd have already gone to other tribes in Montana and Oklahoma, he said.

Christensen said the Greater Yellowstone Coalition is excited to see the positive direction that bison management is headed.

"The impact that these Yellowstone bison will have goes far beyond Fort Peck and the park itself," Christensen said.