

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: January 13, 2011

Agenda Item: Bison Translocation

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: **Endorse Course of Action**

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 mins

Background: Bison were once numerous throughout the eastern 2/3 of Montana, but have been extirpated from the state except the area in and around Yellowstone National Park. The YNP bison herd represents the largest wild population of genetically pure bison in North America, but are also carriers of brucellosis. A quarantine feasibility study was initiated in 2005 to determine if seronegative bison collected as calves remain seronegative. The first cohort of 86 genetically pure, seronegative bison resulting from that ongoing feasibility study became available for distribution in 2009, with additional cohorts expected to be available at the end of 2010 and 2011. Per the quarantine feasibility study plan, the bison must be held in a closed herd and monitored over the course of five years after leaving the quarantine facility. An RFP for holding the first cohort of bison was issued, and after review, they were placed with TEI, Inc. in an agreement that allowed them to keep up to 75% of the offspring produced during the 5-year period they needed to be held and monitored. The remaining bison and their offspring would be returned to FWP. That decision has been challenged in a lawsuit as a violation of the public trust. Additionally, approximately 50 bison annually must be moved from the quarantine facilities over the next 2 years. As a result, FWP is exploring alternative locations, on WMAs or elsewhere, where the bison and their offspring would remain in the public trust pending completion of the quarantine procedures. Permanent placement of these bison would be determined following completion of a statewide bison management plan that identifies permanent sites where brucellosis-free bison could be established. This plan will be developed through public process. FWP is seeking endorsement from the commission to move forward with identifying potential locations where bison can be held until such time as a permanent location can be identified. Potential interim holding locations that will be explored including but not limited to Spotted Dog WMA, Marias River WMA, Beartooth WMA, and possibly some non-WMA sites.

Public Involvement Process & Results: During the comment period on the EA to place the first cohort of quarantine bison with TEI, Inc., there was significant public comment and press, indicating the public is aware of the issue. There was a strong advocacy by some of those commenters to hold the bison on a WMA, and by some of those to use the WMA as a nucleus of a free-roaming herd. If FWP moves forward on a proposal to place bison on a WMA, a complete EA or EIS will be completed which will include an ample public comment process. Similarly, if FWP identifies permanent sites through the management planning process, there will be a thorough MEPA process.

Alternatives and Analysis: Alternatives include leaving the first cohort of bison with TEI, and issuing another RFP for the subsequent quarantine bison pending completion of a statewide plan, or providing the bison to Native American Tribes that have expressed interest in having them.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the Commission endorse moving forward with evaluation of alternative sites for interim holding of the next cohort of quarantine bison and possibly the bison currently being held by TEI, Inc. while a comprehensive bison mgmt plan is developed with public inputs.

Proposed Motion: I move the Commission endorse FWP to move forward with identification and analysis of potential sites where quarantine bison can be held in the public trust until completion of the bison quarantine feasibility study, and a bison management plan for MT that may identify the same or alternative, permanent sites.