Clarifying Interests... Exploring Parameters related to Bison Discussion Group Convened by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks September 26-27, 2013

Yogo Inn, Lewistown, Montana

Session Summary

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- 1. Provide a discussion opportunity to better inform and clarify interests and concerns about bison on the landscape in the area.
- 2. Explore common values, parameters and guiding principles related to bison.

Getting Started - Desired Outcomes for the Session

Individual Discussion Group participants stated the following desired outcomes for the session:

- Find some clarity about what others want and see where the discussion goes... have others understand and honor my concerns.
- Explore some path forward.
- Try to find a clearer process for going forward perhaps some kind of document or paper that helps describe that process.
- Come away with a positive "thing" and respect for humans as well as environmental concerns.
- People leave with a better understanding of each other's' issues.
- Get some clarity about each other's "interests" and explore some ways to move forward; identify how bison and local economics might connect.
- The Group recognizes that the people and culture of the area is an important part of the discussion.
- Whatever the process or path, any management plan is realistic and reasonable and respect the local people and economy.
- Get some clarity about what "huntable" population of bison means. Discuss what "free-roaming"... "wild" mean. Move toward sound, science-based management. Discuss the role, cost to State taxpayers. Discuss the liability of bison owners. Hear and value local input.
- Discourage/get rid of misinformation. Think about "shared stewardship" as a concept; move dialogue from "either or" to "both and"...
- Consider/explore bison and economics and that this is just one more impact/influencing issue to agriculture producers. In the end, who will pay?
- Try to reduce insecurities about bison. Explore unclear terms.
- Develop better understanding of each other; provide each other with a platform for more honest, broader discussion on agreements/disagreements.
- Get clarification on realistic ways to move forward.
- Advance the dialogue including clarification of terms.
- Get general agreement that the Yellowstone bison model is not the best model for other areas including this area.

Individual Desired Outcomes cont.

- Explore some movement. Under what circumstances might there be a place for publically held/managed bison in Montana?
- Participate in a process for civil discussion on where we're headed with bison in Montana.
- Have honest, open, direct discussion "more light than heat".
- Honor hunter interests; honor wildlife interests. What and how related to bison?
 What should the balance be?
- Have productive dialogue; recognize/value emotion as well as issues and facts.
- Move forward...

Identifying/Clarifying "Interests" Related to Bison

It is in the interest of local government:

- To have a healthy, economic structure where services are available and there is a viable population in the area to serve.
- To understand the economic impacts of bison.
- To have it very clear about who owns and is liable for bison.
- To respect any enabling legislation,

It is in the interest of the agricultural community:

- To have it recognized that wildlife can have economic impacts on private landowners and understand the significance of those costs to the landowner.
- To understand that long term stewardship and resource protection comes from multi-generational families on the land.
- To have it understood that protecting property rights can contribute to long-term economic sustainability.
- To have it recognized that we want to continue to contribute to "feeding the world".
- To protect and grow agriculture in Montana because it's an economic driver in our State.
- To have the bison issue resolved and addressed by sound management strategies.
- To "fix" the Yellowstone bison issue because it has effects on the whole State.

It is in the interest of the Montana hunting public:

- To have a huntable population of "wildlife" including bison (animals recognized as part of the public trust and managed by the State of Montana).
- To have it very clear about who owns, who manages, and who is liable for bison.

It is in the interest of bison restoration/conservation advocates:

- To see ecological restoration achieved in Montana for the cause of greater species restoration in the Country.
- To have any restoration effort be led by the State of Montana and Montana citizens because it will result in a more sustainable and wiser result.
- To use bison to diversify local economies,
- To respect any enabling legislation,
- To protect genetics
- To have a bison restoration plan that includes the support of Montana's Indian Tribes as original bison advocates.
- To have it very clear about who owns, who manages, and who is liable for bison.
- To have it recognized that it's very difficult but important to restore and conserve native species.

It is in the interest of the private property owner:

- To have private property rights recognized and honored.
- To have property owners understand that they have responsibility for the impacts
 of their actions on each other.
- To have it recognized that private initiatives can do a lot of things.
- To have it very clear about who owns, who manages, and who is liable for bison.

It is in the interest of the US Fish & Wildlife Service:

- To honor its mission and enabling legislation to conserve, restore... native species on lands managed by the Fish & Wildlife Service,
- To work with neighbors.

It is in the interest of the US Bureau of Land Management:

- To be good stewards of Public Lands.
- To work with permittees in forwarding that stewardship while honoring permittees' needs related to allotments on Public Lands.

It is in the interest of the Montana Department of Livestock:

- To control/eradicate disease in domestic animals.
- To prevent the transmission of animal diseases to humans.
- To protect the livestock industry from theft and predatory animals.
- To have it very clear about who owns, who manages, and who is liable for bison.
- To clarify the role of the Montana Department of Livestock related to bison.

It is in the interest of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

- To be good stewards of Montana's fish, wildlife and parks now and for future generations.
- To insure that all the public's interests are honored.
- To understand where there is "common ground" including parameters that help describe/define a decision space related to bison and a useful process for exploring the issues.
- To have a huntable population of "wildlife" including bison (animals recognized as part of the public trust and managed by the State of Montana).
- To have it very clear about who owns, who manages, and who is liable for bison.

Important Questions Raised in the Discussion

What concerns exist if bison were to be managed as "wildlife"?

- Will managing bison as wildlife be a decision made by Montana citizens?
- Who would be liable/responsible for what?
- Can wildlife in this case, bison be contained?
- What would be the population objectives and goals related to bison?
- How would forage and range management strategies be affected by bison and how would that be resolved on private as well as leased land?
- Can there realistically be sustainable funding to managing bison as wildlife?
- How would current/future bison livestock producers be affected by a "wildlife" designation?

What concerns exist if bison were to be managed as "livestock"?

- How would bison restoration be affected if the species has no standing as "wildlife"?
- What opportunities would exist for the public to influence bison management if they are only privately owned?
- How would privately owned animals be contained?
- What would be the impact to the public hunter if bison are privately owned as "livestock"?
- If designated "livestock, how might bison contribute to the economy and as a food source?

Participant Comments

"What could we say 'we've learned' from the discussion?"

- Montana law says "must be contained" and we need full and clear understanding of what that law means and does not mean.
- There needs to be discussion about private land within the CMR and on BLM lands.
- It should be recognized that 'adaptive management' does not necessarily mean increased numbers.
- There is a critical need to get definition on this issue and a need for a draft framework to start to work on what/where/how, etc. (i.e., What's the role of Montana Departments?). Perhaps an outline of a plan should be initially presented to this group for feedback.
- It's difficult to separate out disease and Yellowstone from perceptions and fear related to an economic threat.
- It's important to develop working relationships and have transparent process. "Bad relationships" have unintended consequences.
- Words get in the way when we're not clear.
- We need to recognize that bison is a different animal!
- "Free-roaming" is not a useful term in moving the process forward.
- The word "wild" doesn't help.
- Might we be able to have a "test" project with a population objective; clear drawn boundaries with barriers; "incentives" versus "compensation"?
- Tribes could be a "test" project.
- It is difficult to balance local needs and values with national and larger State citizen values.
- Bison could be managed as wildlife within constraints.
- Lessons should be learned from the Yellowstone situation and not used as a model in other parts of the State.
- Containment is critical to any forward movement.
- Containment means different things to different people and containment strategies have to be credible. A goal might be managing a specieis in a predefined management zone.
- How might individual herds be managed?
- Whatever happens, diseased bison will not be part of restoration and there has to be monitoring and management related to disease.
- Adaptive management needs to be part of anything we do.
- Regardless of this discussion, "sides" still exist but we have affirmed and clarified some things.
- People need to be assured that we won't bring the Yellowstone here it should be fixed first.
- Bison restoration/conservation advocates spoke of respect/indicated for agricultural and private property interests and that's different than some of the discussion we've heard from the west side of the State.
- There is a lot of misunderstanding about the Yellowstone situation.

"What could we say 'we've learned' from the discussion?" cont.

- Yellowstone Part was established pre-statehood for Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming (the states bordering the Park) and therefore YNP "owns" the wildlife rather than wildlife being managed by individual states.
- In the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge wildlife are owned by the citizens of Montana and managed by FWP.
- There needs to be an analysis of the Yellowstone situation and workable remedies identified before moving forward.
- There needs to be a focus on how we address property damage from bison and what precedent that might set.
- Local work groups need to be involved in the restoration of bison in Montana.
- As an Agency, FWP needs to be aware of the terms used and how they are interpreted.
- There is misunderstanding about where FWP is with bison and therefore we need a clearer, more transparent process.
- It's time for FWP to make some decisions (i.e., rare wildlife species or basically extinct or conservation plan that manages bison as wildlife or...?).
- Any process needs to be open and inclusive, including Tribes.
- There may be some tolerance for bison on private lands depending on the landowner.
- If bison are designated "livestock", FWP is not the appropriate manager.
- If there is a State trust species on Reservation lands, then what? What does this mean to the public hunter?
- How might allotment management plans/permits be influenced by the presence of bison?
- How might this affect/involve Counties and money?
- FWP/agency resources, and where to get them, has to be built into any plan. Where will the resources come from to pay for bison management/containment strategies, population numbers, etc.?
- We have a better picture of what's important here.
- "Wildlife" is a critical concept/term here rather than "wild".
- "Openness" creates trust.

General Acceptance among the Discussion Group Members Suggested Guiding Principles to Help Define a "Decision Space"

- Comply with the law.
- Respect private property rights.
- Have clear desired outcomes.
- Manage bison as "wildlife" through a FWP realistic management plan.
- Manage expectations by addressing/resolving containment; fencing; cost; impacts; liability/responsibility; strategies for resolving problems that may occur, etc., and an adaptive management component.
- Target a population in part on public land available for public hunting.
- Utilize a local working group to clarify any site specific plan; recognize and be inclusive of statewide and tribal interests as well.
- Assure open and honest communication and commitment.
- Recognize that leaders have to lead (decisions are not popularity contests). Recognize that leaders are responsible for the decisions they make.

Suggested/Tentative Agreements on Constraints/Parameters

- There should not be free-roaming bison with no containment.
- There should be a clear process for adjusting any plan; the plan should be broadly accepted by affected stakeholders; and the plan needs to be in place to ensure objectives are monitored, achieved and where useful, adapted.
- There needs to be a clear, lawful containment plan. Any containment plan needs to explain how containment protocols will be funded.
- Source population(s) must be clearly identified and disease free.
- A monitoring protocol must be in place to ensure the health of the population.
- Potential co-mingling between wild and domestic bison must be addressed.
- Public hunting is recognized as a positive social good and should be used as one of the primary management tools.

Suggested "Process" Concepts

- The Department needs to accept ownership and chartering of this group as a "citizen council" related to bison in Montana if it wants it to continue.
- This "Council" should meet again/continue to meet assuming some tentative agreements are honored (e.g., "wildlife" rather than "wild"; free roaming and containment agreements, guiding principles, etc.).
- If this council meets again, additional interests should be added to the table to assure a full set of perspectives (i.e., Tribal, sportsmen, crop farmers. local government organizations such as Conservation Districts, etc.)
- A timeline is needed from FWP regarding a recommendation or report. (It's hard to describe a process when it's unknown what the plan or timeline might be.)

Suggested "Test" Project - Concepts and Outline

- Implement a "test" project to evaluate restoration and management of bison as wildlife by FWP.
- Have meaningful involvement from landowners, sportsmen, conservation interests, etc.
- A "test" project should:
 - Meet State statutes:
 - Have clear, desired outcomes and benchmarks along the way;
 - Have a defined term (period of time);
 - Have a limited, defined number of bison;
 - Have well-defined geographic boundaries;
 - Have well-defined containment measures;
 - Include a research and monitoring component;
 - Include an adaptive management component (define "adaptive management") including an exit strategy'
 - Identify clear next steps if successful;
 - Include contingency planning for catastrophic changes and circumstances, management conditions, natural disasters, etc.
- Include public hunting.
- Explore the concept of "incentives" versus "compensation:
 - Design "test" incentives for landowners;
 - Provide compensation for property damage.
- Identify sustainable funding for management (funding sources should not influence local decision making).
- Assure cost accounting and annual reporting.

Where do we go from here?

- The facilitator will provide the Department with a summary of the meeting within the next 2 weeks.
- The FWP Director will review the summary of the Discussion Group meeting with Staff; brief the Governor; and inform Discussion Group members about decisions on where to go from here.
- Discussion Group members asked if the Director might be able to communicate with them once a month or so so that they can stay informed/engaged in what is happening related to bison process.
- The meeting summary will also be put on the Department's website for members of the public who were not at the Discussion Group table. .