

DRAFT

Environmental Impact Statement
Bison Conservation and Management in Montana

June 2015



***Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks***

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is to determine if bison restoration is appropriate and if so, what potential opportunities are feasible and consistent within Montana's laws, policies, rules, and regulations. It is Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' (FWP) desire to fulfill its statutory obligations to manage all wild ungulates in the state, while recognizing that bison management presents additional challenges compared to other species.

Bison are designated as both a wildlife species in need of management and a species in need of disease control in Montana. The only bison currently considered wildlife in Montana are those bison that come from Yellowstone National Park. Management of these bison is coordinated by signatories to the Interagency Bison Management Plan.

FWP is required to manage wildlife, fish, game, and nongame animals in a manner that prevents the need for listing under the state list of endangered species (§ 87-5-10 MCA) or under the federal Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C 1531, et seq.), and in a manner that assists in the maintenance or recovery of those species (§ 87-1-201 MCA). Within this context, FWP is using this EIS to evaluate potential opportunities for bison restoration.

The objectives of this EIS are to:

- Evaluate which method(s) for a pilot bison restoration effort may be appropriate, if any.
- Evaluate potential landownership scenarios where a restoration effort may be feasible.
- Evaluate potential costs and benefits of a restoration program.

The following alternatives are evaluated within this EIS:

- Alternative #1: No Action
- Alternative #2: Restoration of a Publicly Managed Bison Herd on the Private and/or Public Lands of Willing Landowner(s)
- Alternative #3: Restoration of a Publicly Managed Bison Herd on Tribal Lands
- Alternative #4: Restoration of a Publicly Managed Bison Herd on a Large Landscape Where there are Minimal Conflicts with Livestock

At least one "case study" has been included for each of alternatives #2-#4 to illustrate a real life scenario that fits the general criteria of the alternative. The case studies do not represent the only scenarios that fit within the criteria of the alternative but do represent scenarios to assist in evaluating feasibility of each alternative.

Within any of the alternatives to restore bison is an opportunity to carry out a five-year test project. Any test project or any restoration project would follow implementation guidelines described within this EIS to include: 1) project site guidelines; 2) bison source herd guidelines; 3) herd management guidelines; and 4) program implementation guidelines. In particular any test or restoration project would: 1) only use animals free of reportable

diseases and free of cattle gene introgression; 2) involve a pre-restoration range assessment; 3) have a well thought out containment and management plan; 4) have secure full funding for at least a five-year test period; and 5) have local community involvement.

Potential impacts to the human and physical environment are evaluated for the alternatives, however, the evaluation is based on broad restoration scenarios. In general, bison restoration somewhere in Montana could be beneficial to recovery of the species as a whole and contribute to the restoration of ecological processes within the restoration site. Bison restoration could provide new opportunities for hunters and recreationists but could complicate some land management. Agricultural interests could be negatively impacted by bison in areas near private land but the magnitude of those impacts is difficult to determine without a specific restoration site. FWP resources would be impacted in order to increase capacity to manage a greater number of bison as wildlife than currently present.

The final Record of Decision for this EIS will not identify a site within Montana where bison restoration will occur. Rather, the decision will identify potential opportunities and guidelines for restoration if it is determined to move forward with some effort. A site-specific Environmental Assessment will be needed in order to fully evaluate all factors and potential impacts of any effort to restore bison if a record of decision selects any of the restoration alternatives. Selection of the 'no action' alternative will not preclude efforts to restore bison at some later date.

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