



**FINAL Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement
Bison Conservation and Management in Montana
January 2020**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the purpose of this Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)?

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.

How are bison currently classified in Montana?

Bison are designated as both a wildlife species in need of management and a species in need of disease control in Montana.

Don’t the bison that migrate out of Yellowstone National Park count as wild bison?

Those bison are wildlife, but they are managed under the Interagency Bison Management Plan, which has two central goals: a free-roaming Yellowstone bison herd, and the minimization of disease transmission risk to domestic livestock. Because of animal health concerns, they are currently not part of the discussion about restoring bison as a native species to Montana.

How does this process differ from the current Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) revision process?

Although the two projects focus on the same species, they are entirely separate efforts. One focuses on the potential of additional conservation bison herds in Montana and the other focuses on the on-going management of Yellowstone bison.

The EIS for revising the IBMP, of which FWP and the National Park Service are co-lead agencies for developing, is the plan that will guide management of bison that migrate out of Yellowstone National Park into Montana.

FWP’s statewide bison restoration EIS has been developed to consider bison restoration elsewhere in Montana, where animals can be managed as a native species.

What is FWP’s statutory requirement to manage bison?

FWP is required to manage wildlife, fish, game, and nongame animals in a manner that prevents the need for listing under the state or federal list of endangered species and in a manner that assists in the maintenance or recovery of the species.

What alternatives for a future bison restoration program were analyzed in the draft 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

How did FWP evaluate these alternatives when they are based on hypothetical scenarios?

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. Potential impacts to the human and physical environment are evaluated for each alternative, however, the evaluation is indeed based on broad restoration scenarios.

Case Studies

- Alternative #2: American Prairie Reserve (Montana) and the Henry Mountains (Utah)
- Alternative #3: Book Cliffs (Utah)
- Alternative #4: Pink Mountains (Canada) and Wood Bison (Alaska)

What guidelines would FWP use to guide bison restoration within Alternatives #2-#4?

FWP worked with a large and diverse stakeholder group called the 'Bison Discussion Group' to identify general guidelines that fall into four categories: 1) project site guidelines; 2) bison source herd guidelines; 3) herd management guidelines; and 4) program implementation guidelines. These guidelines are described within Chapter 3 of the draft EIS.

Chapter 7 has been added to the final EIS and details a list of specific factors that would need to be considered in any proposal. Some particular guidelines would apply to any restoration project: 1) only animals free of reportable diseases and free of cattle gene introgression would be used; 2) a pre-restoration range assessment would be conducted; 3) a well thought out containment and management plan would be completed; 4) full funding would be secured for at least a five-year test period; and 5) local community involvement would be required.

How much would a bison restoration project cost?

It is difficult to determine costs of a restoration project in detail when no specific location for restoration has been identified. A full cost assessment would be conducted within a follow up site-specific Environmental Assessment if FWP should one day implement a proposal calling for restoration.

What public process was used to ensure adequate public input was secured for this EIS?

In 2010, FWP began a process to evaluate opportunities for restoring bison somewhere within the state through the development of a Programmatic EIS. In 2011, a background document, *Background Information on Issues of Concern for Montana: Plains Bison Ecology, Management, and Conservation*, was prepared by FWP staff in preparation for initiation of this Programmatic EIS. A number of public meetings were held during development of the background document to allow citizens to raise potential issues and to inform them about the evaluation. Public comment was accepted throughout development and following release of the draft document.

A formal public scoping process was initiated in the spring of 2012 to identify potential issues, concerns, opportunities, and stakeholders. Eight public scoping meetings were held throughout Montana. FWP received a total of 22,928 comments from approximately 20,160 individuals that expressed a diversity of views and opinions. FWP collected 3,472 of those comments from individuals and organizations during

the public meetings. The summary of these comments is presented in Section 1.7, *Issues Identified through Public Involvement*, of the final EIS and within the *Summary of the 2012 Public Scoping Process* (Appendix A of the final EIS.)

FWP convened a group of representative interests in Lewistown in September 2013 to discuss the most effective way to move forward with the EIS process. The objectives of this 'Bison Discussion Group' meeting were; 1) to provide an opportunity to better inform and clarify interests and concerns about bison on the landscape, and 2) to explore common values, parameters and guiding principles related to bison. The discussion group met two more times in 2014 and public comment was accepted during each meeting. Summaries from each meeting are available on the FWP website.

FWP finalized a draft EIS in June of 2015, held five public hearings, and opened a 90-day comment period. Public hearings were held in Bozeman, Billings, Great Falls, Malta, and Miles City. Persons who testified at public hearings were encouraged to submit their comments in writing. Public hearings were recorded. Over 300 people attended one or more of the public hearings with the largest attendance in Malta where 180 people signed in. Just over 1,000 comments came in through the 'survey monkey' web service, and 108 comments came in via postal mail or email. Over 20,000 comments came in from members of the National Wildlife Federation via email. Comments were received from 149 different Montana zip codes and from 51 counties. Comments were also received from 38 states and 1 was received from Canada.

How many are in favor of bison restoration compared to how many are opposed?

Public comment is not numerically tallied to determine support for or against an action. There was simply both support and opposition for moving forward with bison restoration.

There was support for a speedy decision to be followed quickly by a site-specific assessment. There was support for restoration of bison on tribal lands as part of tribal efforts. Some argued that restoration of bison is already underway with the Yellowstone National Park bison currently on Fort Peck and Fort Belknap reservations. Others argued that bison herds on the American Prairie Reserve represent adequate bison restoration for Montana, and a few argued further that domestic bison found across Montana represent adequate restoration of the species.

Some reviewers were fearful that bison as wildlife anywhere in the state will threaten the economic stability of local communities, due to effects on agricultural producers, changes in land use, and the disease brucellosis. There were concerns that FWPs continued discussion of bison restoration will result in the degradation of relationships with landowners, less public access for hunters, and the loss of FWP service in other areas.

Some reviewers argued that a bison restoration program resulting in anything less than 1,000 animals is too small for conservation of the bison genome and not an honest attempt to restore the species. Other reviewers argued that any movement toward bison restoration, even with a small test project, is a step in the right direction, and pointed to positive ecological and economic opportunities for local communities. Overall, public comment was mixed, both in support of and opposition to the continued dialogue about bison conservation and management in Montana.

Why has a Record of Decision on this EIS taken so long?

Thoughtful deliberation on this decision was required due to the history of controversy and the competing public expectations surrounding bison management in Montana. In addition, time sensitive

issues like the detection of aquatic invasive species and chronic wasting disease have diverted the attention of the decision makers who needed time to adequately consider the draft EIS.

Which alternative has been selected with this Record of Decision?

This decision does not choose any one of the action alternatives over another, as any of them—taken alone or in some combination—may or may not be acceptable depending upon the specific elements of a given restoration proposal. This decision results in great flexibility for FWP to protect a variety of interests while acknowledging a desire by some for bison restoration. This decision lays the framework for future discussions on bison restoration, to include definition of project guidelines for any project implementation.

Isn't 'any combination' of alternatives actually a new alternative that wasn't evaluated in the EIS?

The Bison Discussion Group's exploration of Alternatives #2-4 acknowledged from the beginning that some combination of alternatives could have the least impact to the human and physical environment.

Does the Record of Decision for this EIS select a site for bison restoration?

No, this decision does not identify any particular site. As stated in the EIS; The final Record of Decision for this Programmatic 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 the state should determine to move forward with a restoration proposal. A site-specific Environmental Assessment will be needed in order to fully evaluate all factors and potential impacts of any restoration effort.

Why didn't FWP select the No Action alternative?

FWP is required to manage wildlife in a manner that assists in the maintenance or recovery of species (§87-1-201 MCA). FWP is also 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.) FWP implements conservation and management strategies that fulfill these directives, and also implements fish and wildlife restoration when appropriate. It is FWP's desire to fulfill its statutory obligations to manage all wild ungulates in the state. FWP believes it is possible to restore and manage bison in a thoughtful way as the record from other restoration efforts shows that management issues can be successfully addressed at a landscape scale.

What is the next step?

FWP will consider any proposal for bison restoration that adequately addresses the guidelines described in chapter 7 of the final EIS and encoded in §87-1-216 MCA. Upon deeming a proposal complete and acceptable, the FWP Director would present the proposal to the Fish and Wildlife Commission. If approved to move forward, FWP would undertake a collaborative approach to site-specific analysis, including the collection of public comment. Any final decision to implement a restoration project would rest with the Commission, given its authority for translocation of wildlife under §87-5-711 MCA.

Is FWP developing a proposal for a site-specific restoration program?

No, FWP is not developing a site-specific bison restoration proposal at this time.

Who can submit a proposal to restore bison?

Any reasonable proposal will be considered from any project proponent so long as the proposal addresses all factors within chapter 7 of the EIS and in §87-1-216 MCA, including adequate consideration

of public and local input. Analysis of any proposal will be a collaborative process among the project proponent, FWP and interested stakeholders.

What is the timeline for the remainder of this process?

Completion of all necessary steps to implement a restoration project as laid out in ‘What is the next step?’ above would take considerable time even for the smallest of test projects. Garnering public input, not to mention support, can often take months, if not years. MEPA processes have certain minimum periods for public input and federal NEPA process has its own minimum periods and requirements that could come into play if federal lands are part of any proposal.

What about ongoing efforts to restore bison in Montana?

In early 2016, the Blackfeet Nation translocated 89 bison from Elk Island National Park in Alberta, Canada. These bison are genetically pure and free of reportable diseases. The Blackfeet tribal government intends to manage them as free roaming wildlife. Tribal intent is to eventually have bison restored in one or more of three areas: the culturally significant Badger-Two Medicine portion of the Lewis and Clark-Helena National Forest; Glacier National Park; and lands north of the park toward culturally significant Chief Mountain and into Canada. This restoration of bison to Blackfeet lands is part of a larger cultural restoration project entitled the ‘Iinnii Initiative’, and the state views this restoration of wildlife as it would the restoration of any native species by another sovereign jurisdiction. In preparing for the potential movement of bison off of tribal lands, it is the Department’s desire to work cooperatively with the Blackfeet Nation and other stakeholders, and within the mandates of state law.

This Blackfeet restoration effort falls outside the bounds of the final EIS while bison remain within reservation boundaries where the tribe has full jurisdiction. Efforts to restore domestic and cultural herds on other tribal lands also fall outside the bounds of this EIS as Alternative #3 calls for restoration of a publicly managed bison herd on tribal lands. No such effort currently exists.