BISON TRANSLOCATION, BISON QUARANTINE PHASE IV ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks,
Helena, MT

February 2010

Background

Bison Quarantine was initially included in the Interagency Bison Management Plan and the Final EIS that was completed for that plan in 2000. These documents anticipated the addition of quarantine as a method for live distribution of bison that otherwise would be sent to slaughter. A Quarantine Feasibility study was initiated in 2004 with the purpose of determining whether it is possible to develop quarantine procedures, using the best available science and adaptive research strategies, to certify that individual or groups of YNP bison are free from brucellosis, including latent infections of brucellosis. The need for such a study is to demonstrate whether quarantine is a feasible management tool for the management of YNP bison. The study also responds to a growing interest in using surplus YNP bison as part of a broader bison conservation strategy.

In 2004 FWP completed an EA and subsequent Decision Notice to initiate Phase I of the bison quarantine feasibility study. Phase I included initial capture and testing of bison calves outside of YNP, maintaining seronegative bison through Fall, and then randomly selecting half the calves, euthanizing them, and subjecting them to a battery of tests to assure a 95% certainty of detecting infection at 5% or greater prevalence. A total of 100 bison calves that originated in Yellowstone National Park (YNP) were brought into Phase I of the quarantine facilities in 2005 and 2006. If successful, then the remaining bison graduate to Phase II/III. Phase I was successful.

In December 2005, FWP and APHIS completed a draft MEPA/NEPA EA for Phase II and III of the bison quarantine feasibility study. In Phase II, remaining bison would continue to be raised in quarantine and would be allowed to breed at two years of age, all the while being tested for brucellosis. In Phase III, pregnant bison would be allowed to calve, with mothers and offspring subject to additional testing within 5 days after calving. Assuming bison continued to test negative for brucellosis, there was a high degree of confidence that quarantine bison could be considered brucellosis-free.

Phase IV involves continued testing of the original quarantine bison and their offspring for a period of 5 years, during which they must be maintained in a closed herd separate from other bison or domestic livestock. Phase IV is intended to increase confidence and confirm that none carry a latent infection

The feasibility study design calls for a repeat of the above protocol. Therefore, a second batch of bison calves were entered into Phase I in 2008. They moved into Phase II and III in 2009, and will move into Phase IV in late 2009/early 2010.

In March 2009, FWP completed an environmental assessment for the placement of the first group of bison from the quarantine facility in Gardiner, MT (41 bison - 21 cows, 16 calves, and 4 bulls) on the Northern Arapaho Tribe at the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. Before this translocation could be completed, the Tribe rescinded their proposal due to difficulties securing the needed facilities for the bison. Thusly, the bison remained at the quarantine facility.

As of November 2009, the quarantine facility's maximum capacity was reached that included the original group of bison, their offspring, the second half 2005-6 group of bison accepted into the research program, and another 100 bison calves that were brought in to the facility in the winter of 2008 for a second repetition of the quarantine protocol.

For the research to continue and to ensure the health of the bison in the program, there is an immediate need to translocate 88 bison to another location so the final group of bison can progress through the quarantine protocol.

Intention of the Alternatives (broad terms)

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to translocate 88 wild bison resulting from the bison quarantine facility near Gardiner, Montana to a facility capable of housing the bison and their offspring in a closed herd for a period of 5 years, and allow continued brucellosis testing of the bison during that 5-year period. The age-gender composition of the bison includes: 7 bulls, 34 cows, 16 yearlings, and 31 calves.

Alternatives Considered:

Alternative A (Proposed Action): 74 Bison to Turner Enterprises Inc.'s Green Ranch, 14 to Guernsey State Park, WY.

Translocate 74 bison to the Green Ranch (Turner Enterprises Inc.) in Gallatin and Madison Counties, Montana and 14 to Guernsey State Park in Platte County, Wyoming.

Of the 88 animals available, the following is a summary of the age, sex, and which location the animals would move to:

	Cows	Yearlings	Calves	Bulls	TOTAL
Green Ranch	31	12	25	6	74
Guernsey State Park	3	4	6	1	14

These locations and management proposals by Turner Enterprises and the Wyoming State Parks met the criteria described in the RFP, established by FWP and USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Veterinary Services (APHIS) (with input from experts including the Interagency Bison Restoration Committee), for the distribution of YNP bison from the

quarantine feasibility study and the use of those bison in restoration efforts. Criteria considered for the transplant location are included as *Appendix A* in the draft environmental assessment.

As part of the proposed action, both the Green Ranch and Guernsey State Park would be required to hold the transplanted bison in fenced pastures for five years and make those bison and their offspring available for testing by APHIS VS. Both organizations will be required to agree to a brucellosis monitoring protocol developed by APHIS VS.

At the end of the 5 year monitoring period, the Green Ranch would return 100% of the research herd and 10% of their progeny back into its direct management and allow the remainder of the progeny to go into private ownership would be retained by the Green Ranch. Guernsey State Park would not return any of the bison to FWP at the end of the monitoring period.

Alternative B: No Action, 30 Bison Remain at the Quarantine Facility and 58 are Slaughtered

Under the No Action alternative no bison would be tranlocated to a new location outside the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. The original feasibility study was tailored to accommodate a limited number of bison held at the quarantine facility (QF) with the expectation that when a group was ready for disposition, an organization meeting FWP and APHIS's criteria would be chosen and the bison would be moved off-site to complete the monitoring component of the study. Because the need to remove the 88 bison from the quarantine facility is critical for the continuance of the feasibility study, under this alternative approximately 58 bison would likely be slaughtered in order to provide enough space for the remaining animals and the progression of study. Furthermore, the reduction is necessary because of APHIS's desire to maintain vegetation values on the leased land and reduce social stress between the confined bison.

Additionally, if a portion of this group of bison were kept at the quarantine facility, funding would need to be secured by APHIS and FWP to cover the costs for the leased property and hay for those animals through the winter or until an alternate location can be selected. FWP annually contributes approximately $24,700 to the Quarantine Feasibility Study. This amount does not include APHIS funds used for the study.

The feasibility study would continue as described on page 5 of the draft EA and further discussed in the EA completed for Phases II/III.

Alternative C: Fourteen Bison are Translocated to the Guernsey State Park in Wyoming and the Remaining Bison are Processed as Described in Alternative B

This alternative would translocate 14 bison from the quarantine facility to the Guernsey State Park in southeast Wyoming and the remainder would be managed as described in Alternative B, in which a portion of the QF bison would be slaughtered.

Alternative D: All 88 Bison are Translocated to the Green Ranch near Bozeman, Montana

This alternative would translocate all the available bison leaving the quarantine facility to the Green Ranch. The management of the herd would be the same as described under Alternative A

with the exception at the end of the five years the Green Ranch would return the original QF bison and 25% of their offspring to FWP and retain the remaining offspring.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Further Consideration

Translocation of Bison to a Different Location

All the proposals received during the RFP process were evaluated on the organization's ability to meet the objectives and criteria of the quarantine feasibility study. Additionally, proposals were evaluated if the required bison handling facilities would be available to receive bison by the end of February 2010. Although the proposals from Wildlife Conservation Society (zoo consortium) and Fort Belknap could meet many of the quarantine monitoring requirements, neither organization could accept the bison in the necessary time frame.

The proposals from other private entities were eliminated from additional consideration because they did not meet the translocation criteria and were requesting the bison for solely commercial interests.

Returning Brucellosis-Free Bison to Yellowstone National Park (YNP)

Returning QFS bison to YNP would preclude completion of the quarantine feasibility study and the use of quarantine as a management tool. This option was originally discussed in the environmental assessment completed for Phase II/III and with in its Decision Notice. In both those documents, FWP, APHIS VS, and other cooperating partners believed the placement of the brucellosis-free bison back in the Park would be an inappropriate use of the QFS bison since there were no areas within the park that did not already have an established bison herd, the exposure of the brucellosis-free bison to known infected herds would likely reinfect the returned bison with the bacteria, and the population of the existing bison herds in YNP is already at or above the carrying capacity of the resources. Thus, if they moved beyond YNP boundaries they would be managed under the guidance of the IBMP.

Translocation of the 88 Quarantine Facility Bison to a FWP Wildlife Management Area (WMA)

This option has not been fully evaluated by FWP for both the short-term impacts and long-term implications at this time. Before placing bison on a WMA, FWP believes it is necessary to first evaluate the role of wild bison in Montana, as well as specific potential impacts (social, political, and biological) in the area of the WMA. Additionally, no WMAs have the required facilities or staffing to manage bison as specified in the RFP. Infrastructure that is lacking includes bison-proof fencing to ensure their movements are contained within the WMA and adequate bison handling equipment necessary for continuing APHIS VS testing. Most WMAs were purchased to address specific wildlife objectives (e.g., big game winter range). None were considered as possible bison habitat at the time they were acquired to the exclusion of other wildlife.

FWP has begun the preparation of a statewide evaluation of bison's role as wildlife on the Montana landscape, which would likely include an investigation and discussion of the possibility for translocating bison to WMAs in the future if deemed appropriate and socially acceptable.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision to proceed or not with the project.

An environmental assessment was completed on the proposed action by FWP and released for public comment December 14, 2009 through January 12, 2010. Additionally, a public hearing was hosted by FWP Regional office in Bozeman on January 7, 2010 where 55 individuals representing different organizations and the media attended. The meeting provided an opportunity for FWP to address questions about proposed project and its alternatives and receive public comments.

Legal notices announcing the availability of the EA were published in the *Bozeman Chronicle and Helena Independent Record.* In addition to the announcement, the EA was posted on FWP's webpage - http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicnotices/environmentalAssessments.html. An announcement regarding the EA and the public comment period was emailed to 259 interested parties and a postcard was mailed to additional 178 individuals and organizations that expressed interest in bison management in the past.

Summary of Public Comments

Public participation is a mechanism for agencies to consider substantive comments on a proposal. Over 1,000 comments were received via email, regular mail, and though the public hearing. Of the email comments submitted, 79% were in the format of two different form letters. One supported the proposed action and the other was in opposition. Overall, those that expressed opposition did so primarily because they are opposed to slaughter of any bison, and are opposed to privatization of any of the bison, including future generations of offspring. Those in support are opposed to slaughter of any bison and are most supportive of completing the feasibility study so that this tool could be available for longer-term bison restoration efforts. Most commenters also strongly encouraged FWP to complete a statewide bison conservation strategy outlining long-term prospects for bison as wildlife in Montana.

Numerous comments were received pertaining to bison management in general and the status of the health and population of Yellowstone bison. Those comments are beyond the scope of this EA and are not addressed in the subsequent section. These include questions regarding elk and brucellosis, prevalence of brucellosis in YNP bison, YNP bison capacity, etc. The following is a synopsis of the feedback and FWP's response to relevant comments and questions.

1. FWP does not have the legal authority to place QFS bison at the Green Ranch.
   FWP Response: FWP disagrees. Montana statute section 87-1-201 Montana Code Annotated (MCA), authorizes the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission to set the policies for the protection, preservation, and propagation of the wildlife, fish, game, furbearers, waterfowl, nongame species, and endangered species of the state 87-1-201 MCA. Within the policies established by the Commission, FWP is responsible for

supervising the management and public use of all the wildlife, fish, game, furbearing animals, and game and nongame birds of the state.

FWP has a long history of successfully transplanting wildlife within the state and supporting species-specific conservations efforts in other states (MCA 87-5-701). The authority for the transplantation is derived from both wildlife management responsibilities and the transplantation duties under the statutes cited above. The transplantation has traditionally been to place transplanted species with Tribes, States, private owners, and others depending upon the status of the species, such as the research status of a quarantined bison, and whether they have facilities to effectively manage the species. It is FWP opinion that the translocation of QFS bison to the Green Ranch for the completion of the quarantine feasibility study is NOT setting a precedent for the potential privatization of other wildlife species in Montana.

FWP believes it is fulfilling its mission as a steward of Montana's biological resources and responsibility in the supervision, preservation and propagation of all fish and wildlife of the state (87-1-201 MCA) through its participation in the quarantine feasibility study and the Interagency Bison Management Plan, which seeks to solve disease and management challenges associated with YNP bison. As part of the study, a choice must be made for where to place the QF bison while in Phase IV. Alternatives A and D both serve to meet the objectives of FWP's authority and mandate, but it also the criteria of the quarantine feasibility study as outlined in previous environmental assessments. Through the success of the study, FWP anticipates there will be additional restoration opportunities in the future for brucellosis-free bison on tribal and public lands and the long-term conservation of the species.

The Request for Proposal process was described in the Phase II/III Environmental Assessment. That process included a solicitation of proposals from interested parties, and review of proposals by an interagency review team that consisted of representatives from Montana Department of Livestock, USDA APHPIS, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the InterTribal Bison Cooperative. This review committee provided input on the RFP criteria, reviewed the proposal, and developed a recommendation that was provided to the FWP Director.

2. The proposed action is in conflict with the conditions of the Scientific Research and Collecting Permit issued to AHPIS VS by the National Park Service.

   FWP Response: The permits states in particular, "Any specimens collected under this permit, any components of any specimens, and research results derived from collected specimens are to be used for scientific or education purposes only, and may not be used for commercial or revenue-generating purposes unless the permittee has entered into a Cooperative Research and Development Agreement (CRADA) or other approved benefit-sharing agreement with the National Park Service (NPS). The sale of collected research specimens or other unauthorized transfers to third parties is prohibited." FWP does not believe it is violating this condition if the bison were translocated to the Green Ranch since all of the original QF bison originally collected in YNP under this permit would be used for scientific purposes (i.e., quarantine feasibility study) and would be

returned to FWP at the end of the monitoring period. FWP does not believe that the permit conditions pertain to the progeny or the progeny of progeny of specimens collected in YNP under the permit. Finally, a representative from Yellowstone National Park was on the interagency review committee that helped review proposals for placement of the bison and make recommendations as to their disposition.

3. Placing the QF bison at Turner's Green Ranch is inconsistent with the original goals of the Quarantine Feasibility Study.

   FWP Response: The 2005 Bison Quarantine Feasibility Study- Phase II/III Environmental Assessment states the primary goal of the study is to develop quarantine procedures, using the best available science and adaptive research strategies, that would allow bison from YNP to be accepted as free of brucellosis and suitable for establishment of new public and Native American bison herds or to augment existing public or tribal herds in North America. Additionally, quarantine protocols developed by APHIS VS require a monitoring program for evaluating final disease status and project success to be implemented 5 years after the bison's release from the quarantine facility.

   The placement of the QF bison at the Green Ranch and Guernsey State Park would allow for the completion of the monitoring program in areas bison historically occupied in facilities that ensure access for APHIS VS staff and where QF bison can be sequestered from other bison herds and cattle, thus meeting the primary goal of the feasibility study. After the 5 year monitoring period, the placement of the returned QF bison to locations on public and tribal lands will likely serve to meet the goal of genetically augmenting those herds.

4. Wildlife that belongs to the public should not be privatized or commercialized because it removes public wildlife from the public trust. QF bison should be translocated to tribal and public lands.

   FWP Response: In Montana, FWP is the trustee of the state's wildlife resources and is charged to manage those resources for the benefit of the species for current and future generations. Montana's broad statutory discretion for management is for the protection, preservation, management, and propagation of wildlife resources. See Mont. Code Ann. § 87-1-201. In its discretion to manage resources, including wild and research bison, for the benefit of the species for current and future generations, FWP entered into the quarantine feasibility study to assist future conservation efforts. If successful, the protocols developed from the study would establish a process whereby YNP bison could be screened and certified brucellosis-free, rather than sent to slaughter. The QFS could remove the uncertainty, misperception and fear that all YNP bison are infected with brucellosis and threaten livestock interests.

   The use of the Green Ranch for placement of the research bison does not privatize or commercialize the corpus of the public trust, the research animals. Those will remain in the public trust. While the progeny of the original QFS research bison will be removed from public ownership, the corpus of the public trust remains intact when returned to FWP for placement after Phase IV of the QFS when they can be considered brucellosis-free and placed without monitoring protocol and QFS standards. FWP believes the

decisions allowed through its role as the management trustee of these resources include, for the QFS bison, long-term benefits that could be great over time when the brucellosis barrier is removed. FWP's trustee role in the public trust doctrine is not compromised by the participation in a study that could produce the results FWP is hopeful the QFS will produce.

The assumption bison translocated to tribal lands would never be privatized or used commercially is a misconception. If QF bison were placed on tribal lands, those animals are no longer in the public trust; they become part of the wildlife resources of a sovereign nation, managed under their laws, policies, and oversight. Native Americans have a long cultural and spiritual connection with the species. Prior to the arrival of Europeans to America, most Plains Indians followed bison across the plains from southern Colorado to Montana. Where the tribe migrated depended on there being buffalo nearby. Bison provided materials for clothing, shelter, food, tools, toys, and medicine, as well as articles of everyday life.

In present day, the bison is still very much respected and recognized as the life-giver as it was in earlier times. Many tribal ceremonies still have the bison woven in ceremonies through its hides, skulls, ritual paints, and songs. However, bison on tribal lands have also become an economic resource to the tribal economy through their ranching and hunting activities.

A member of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative did participate in the review of all the proposals for QF bison and will continue to be the voice of the Cooperative during the placement of the final two groups of QF bison. FWP acknowledges that in the quarantine feasibility study EA and decision notice, FWP did state the intent was to relocate them to tribal lands or suitable public land in Montana. However, FWP noted in the decision notice that if sites were not available other locations would be considered, which does not prohibit public or Tribal lands outside the State or private lands.

5. YNP bison should be managed as a big game species and released back into their native environments and have migration corridors established for them.

   FWP Response: FWP agrees. Bison should be managed as wildlife. However, since the management of bison is influenced by the need to control the spread of brucellosis by Montana law, FWP is obligated to work cooperatively with the Montana Department of Livestock on the management of bison that are potentially carriers of brucellosis (87-2-216 MCA). The possible establishment for new bison herds within their historic range and the appropriateness of migration corridors will be investigated and evaluated during the preparation of a statewide bison management plan. The reality is most bison herds are fenced, literally and figuratively, and exposed to different levels of management depending upon their location and local social tolerances.

   A response to comments related to statewide bison management is addressed in the response to the next comment.

6. FWP needs to complete a statewide bison management plan that includes discussion of how the Department can utilize WMAs for QF bison leaving the quarantine facility and general bison management. What kind of analysis will be completed for the plan?

   FWP Response: At the January 14th Commission meeting, FWP formally committed to begin the initial steps for a statewide bison management plan that is expected to be completed in 2012. Since the management of bison is an important matter for many public and private entities, FWP believes it is prudent to implement a thorough process of gathering relevant research materials, bring public and private interested parties together for open discussions on bison management for the State, complete an objective evaluation of appropriate locations to establish bison herds, and define long-term management goals for the species. The public is encouraged to watch for announcements on how to participate in this process – including information that will be posted on the FWP website. The completed analysis of possible reintroduction locations for bison is expected to define appropriate locations for the QF bison that will be returned to FWP at the end of the brucellosis monitoring period.

   FWP anticipates the preparation of the management plan would necessitate the completion of an environmental impact statement. However, based on the data collected and input from partners and the public, FWP may decide an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of analysis.

7. FWP should pay TEI for holding the QF bison for the 5-year quarantine period instead of giving him the offspring or until tribal or public lands become available for the QF bison.

   FWP Response: The TEI proposal did not include an option to pay for housing the bison for five years. It is unknown if such a proposal would be a consideration of TEI. TEI's proposal estimates the value of holding and testing the QF bison at $428,000. No funding has been allocated for this, and at this time FWP is unable to compensate any organization that would be willing to host the QF bison until a location on tribal or public lands became available. FWP believes the exchange of offspring for the costs of maintaining the QF bison per the quarantine protocols at a location that meets all the criteria of the RFP is acceptable, legal, and appropriate. It should be noted that under Alternatives A and D, the proposers assume all risk that the QF bison will remain disease-free. Should bison test positive for brucellosis at any time during the 5-year testing period, there is strong likelihood that some or all would be destroyed, and no compensation would be paid for expenses incurred.

   As noted in the draft EA, the need to move the 88 QF bison is critical because capacity at the quarantine facility has been reached and a new group of QF offspring are to be born this spring, which will again expand the population within the facility. If the 88 bison were to remain at the facility until a location on tribal or public lands was identified, it would be necessary to slaughter a portion of them because of the capacity constraints, which would preclude completing the feasibility study.

8. The proposed action will set a precedent for the privatization/commercial of wildlife, which requires the preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS).

   FWP Response: FWP disagrees. See FWP's response to comment #4 regarding privatization/commercialization. The EA is a concise public document that serves to provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an EIS. After completing the EA, FWP has determined that the preparation of an EIS for translocation of bison for purposes of the completion of the quarantine study is unwarranted.

9. Why aren't the Gallatin National Forest and other public lands (Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge) adjacent to YNP being used for the placement of the QF bison?

   FWP Response: A proposal was not submitted from the Forest Service or US Fish and Wildlife Service for the bison leaving the quarantine facility therefore these areas were not considered.

10. Why doesn't the proposed action require FWP Commission approval?

    FWP Response: FWP believes it has received the Commission's approval to complete the quarantine feasibility study since the Commission has been informed and involved with the project over the last 6 years. Beginning at the September 2003 Commission meeting, Keith Aune delivered a PowerPoint presentation on the bison quarantine process as a means of population management. At that meeting, the Commission granted the Department's request to proceed with the proposal. In subsequent Commission meetings in December 2004 and August 2006, the Commissioners were kept informed about the quarantine feasibility study and authorized the Department to lease the Slip 'n Slide Ranch for the purposes of operating the bison quarantine facility as described in the 2005 Bison Quarantine Feasibility Study EA.

    Per 87-1-301MCA, FWP's Commission has well defined powers of authority for the following:

    (1)(a) set the policies for the protection, preservation, management, and propagation of the wildlife, fish, game, furbearers, waterfowl, nongame species, and endangered species of the state and for the fulfillment of all other responsibilities of the department as provided by law;

    (b) establish the hunting, fishing, and trapping rules of the department;

    (c) establish the rules of the department governing the use of lands owned or controlled by the department and waters under the jurisdiction of the department;

    (d) have the power within the department to establish wildlife refuges and bird and game preserves;

    (e) approve all acquisitions or transfers by the department of interests in land or water, except as provided in 87-1-209(4);

    (f) review and approve the budget of the department prior to its transmittal to the budget office;

    (g) review and approve construction projects that have an estimated cost of more than $1,000 but less than $5,000; and

    (h) manage elk, deer, and antelope populations based on habitat estimates determined as provided in 87-1-322 and maintain elk, deer, and antelope population numbers at or below population estimates as provided in 87-1-323.

(2) The commission may adopt rules regarding the use and type of archery equipment that may be employed for hunting and fishing purposes, taking into account applicable standards as technical innovations in archery equipment change.

(3) The commission may adopt rules regarding the establishment of special licenses or permits, seasons, conditions, programs, or other provisions that the commission considers appropriate to promote or enhance hunting by Montana's youth and persons with disabilities.

Additionally, the FWP Commission can adopt rules to control the importation, possession, or sale of certain wildlife species and exotic wildlife (87-5-712 MCA).

Although the Commission is kept informed as to the actions of the Department, the Director may permit the exportation of species of wildlife which appear on the state list of endangered species for scientific, zoological, or educational purposes, for the propagation in captivity of such wildlife, or for other special purposes (87-5-109 MCA).

11. Is it possible to expand the quarantine facility?

    FWP Response: Pasture space may be available at the Brogan Ranch. However in 2008 when the use lease was renegotiated between APHIS VS and the property owner, the lease price for the pasture had risen and was eliminated from their agreement. APHIS VS does not know if the property owner would be interested in leasing the pasture at this time or if the lease price would be different from previous discussions.

12. What is the justification for Turner keeping 90% of the offspring as described in Alternative A?

    FWP Response: The justification presented to FWP by Turner Enterprises for keeping 90% of the QF bison offspring as described in the Proposed Action is based on the number of QF bison to be placed at the ranch, the forecasted level of reproduction, and the ranch's projected costs for managing those bison over 5 years and the expectation a need to recoup some of those costs. Also see response to comment #7.

13. What are Guernsey State Park's long-term plans for the QF bison?

    FWP Response: As described in their proposal, Guernsey State Park intends to manage the QF bison through a hands-off approach, unless intervention is needed, to coincide with the long-term goal of conservation for the species and would manage the animals as much as possible as wildlife. At the end of the five years, QF bison and their offspring will serve the long-term greater conservation needs of plains bison by providing for augmentation and establishment of other conservation herds on public and/or tribal lands. Under the direction of bison geneticists and the American Bison Society (Wildlife Conservation Society), genetic diversity will be maintained by importing and exporting genetics from other genetically pure bison conservation herds.

    If the population of the herd exceeds capacity within designated bison area, some bison from Guernsey State Park would be sold along with bison from the two other state park herds.

14. Can FWP commit the next group of QF bison to Ft. Belknap so that they can begin to prepare their facilities now?

    FWP Response: No decision has been made regarding the next cohort of QF bison. FWP intends to contact the Tribe and determine their interest in receiving the next cohort(s), and then will determine whether to commit those or undergo another RFP process. The interagency bison review committee recommended that the next cohort be provided to Fort Belknap if they had sufficient facilities developed, although that recommendation was not consensus.

15. What are Turner Enterprise's plans for managing the genetically pure offspring after the 5-year monitoring period is over? (Additional clarity is requested.)

    FWP Response: That is ultimately up to Turner Enterprises, and to FWP's knowledge, no specific commitments have been made. As described in the Turner Enterprises' (TEI) proposal, the progeny retained by the ranch may be used for TEI's Castle Rock bison herd in New Mexico, which is originated in YNP in the 1930's, has been managed as a closed herd, and been identified as genetically "pure". The genetic purity of the QF bison progeny will be retained. TEI staff has indicated that the genetics of the QF bison progeny will be analyzed and compared with the genetics of the Castle Rock herd, and used to improve genetic diversity if recommended by conservation geneticists.

16. Is there the option for semen extraction and ownership in exchange for housing the QF bison and that all the animals are returned to the State?

    FWP Response: This option was not included in any proposal or analysis. FWP can make such a request of TEI, but the decision would be theirs.

Final Environmental Assessment for the Bison Translocation

FWP concludes that the impacts associated with the proposed alternatives would have nominal impacts on the physical environment or human population in the area. This environmental assessment is therefore the appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action and an environmental impact statement is not required.

Based on the comments received and consideration of their value to improve and clarify the assessment for this project, FWP has made some modifications to the Draft Environmental Assessment narrative. The modified EA will serve as the Final Environmental Assessment for the Bison Translocation, Bison Quarantine Facility Phase IV. This Decision Notice and attached modified Environmental Assessment will be considered the Final EA. Both will be posted on FWP's website.

Decision

Based upon the Environmental Assessment, public comment, the Department's desire to complete the bison quarantine feasibility study, and to conserve disease-free bison from the Yellowstone Ecosystem for the benefit of its genetic integrity for future species conservation efforts, it is my decision to approve the implementation of Alternative D, the translocation of 88 bison from the bison quarantine facility near Gardiner, Montana to the Green Ranch, near Ennis

Montana. This alternative was chosen because it returns a greater number of the offspring of the original quarantine facility bison back to the State of Montana for future conservation efforts and will allow Phase III of the quarantine protocols to proceed as described in the Quarantine Feasibility Study Environmental Assessment. A major theme of the comments was concern about availability of disease-free bison for conservation efforts after completion of the feasibility study. Alternative D provides the greatest return of bison for such purposes. Under Alternative D, FWP expects to receive a total of 150 bison from the Green Ranch, which includes the original QF group and 25% of their progeny, vs. 92 under Alternative A. The alternatives that considered the slaughter of a portion of the QF bison so that the remaining animals could be kept at the quarantine facility were found to be an unacceptable option because it would preclude completion of the feasibility study and remove important brucellosis-free bison from conservation opportunities.

Joe Maurier

Joe Maurier, Director
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

2/1/10
Date