

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Bison
Region: 3
Hunting District: 385 (Absaroka-Beartooth Portion)
Year: 2024-2025

- 1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).**

Establish a quota range of 1 – 15 for the 385-21 bison license (early backcountry bison season in the Absaroka-Beartooth wilderness area north of Yellowstone National Park).

This license was established in 2016 and the current quota is 5. Preliminary observations by FWP staff and hunter reports suggest there may be sufficient bison to offer a slight increase in hunter opportunity in future years. Establishing this quota range will give FWP the flexibility to adjust this special opportunity according to the population's ability to sustain harvest long term.

- 2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.**

The objective is to provide a unique opportunity for a wilderness bison hunt, with conservative hunting pressure to allow bison to continue to inhabit and expand their range within the wilderness area. The proposed quota is conservative in order to maintain this season cautiously and ensure that excessive hunting pressure does not limit bison distribution or deter bison from inhabiting the area, and to provide a quality hunting experience with high success for license holders.

- 3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints.**

The success of this proposal will be measured by hunter success and satisfaction, and whether bison continue to inhabit the area in stable or increasing numbers. Bison numbers will be tracked by ground and/or aerial surveys depending on available resources.

- 4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).**

The Absaroka-Beartooth portion of hunting district 385 is sparsely populated with bison, and there is currently no objective for bison numbers within this area. The overall bison population resides mostly within Yellowstone National Park. Small numbers of bison move north of the Park into the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness area during summer and fall. Most bison are observed in the upper Slough Creek drainage, however there are scattered observations of bison in Buffalo Fork and Hellroaring drainages as well as in the upper elevation divides between these drainages.

- 5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).**

The area is very remote wilderness accessible only by foot or horse. Retrieving a harvested bison will present an extraordinary challenge. A mature bull bison can weigh 2,000 pounds and yield 800 pounds of meat. Hunters must be prepared to pack out this amount of meat, as well as the head and hide if desired, and to care for the

meat properly in order to avoid spoilage. It is not recommended that hunters attempt this hunt without a string of pack-animals capable of this task and several additional people to assist with processing the harvested animal.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

This proposal has been shared during summer scoping meetings and at meetings with the Park County Rod and Gun Club. Public response has been favorable.

Submitted by: Michael Yarnall
Date: 31 July 2023
Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Bison
Region: 3
Hunting District: 395
Year: 2024-2025

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The current season allows for 40 either-sex 395-20 bison licenses with no current quota range established. The proposed season would allow for 25 either-sex 395-20 bison licenses with a quota range of 5-50.

The proposal would not alter the bison hunt roster, which would continue to be used in case of a large migration out Yellowstone National Park (YNP).

This proposal also suggests adding into bison regulations for HD 395 this textual note:

NOTE: bison are migratory in this area and annual opportunity will vary based on weather conditions. Bison presence is not guaranteed.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective is to align hunter opportunity with realistic odds of bison presence and to introduce a quota range to operate within as bison population change may warrant. Currently, the Central Herd of bison has declined and so has opportunity on the West Side HD 395. If the Central Herd increases again, having an established quota range will help FWP be responsive to this change by increasing bison licenses.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints.

The success will be measured through hunter harvest data and YNP bison surveys. Current 5-year average hunter harvest success rate is 18%. This is substantially lower than any other special management opportunity (moose, sheep, goat) in the same area. A desired 5-year average success rate for bison, given their migratory nature, would approach 50%. Concurrently, if YNP bison surveys show increases in Central Herd bison and hunter harvest success increases, FWP may propose to again increase these bison licenses.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

The Central Herd of the Yellowstone Park bison population has declined in recent years with more bison moving to the Northern Yellowstone. The last 5 years, state hunter harvest has averaged 7 bison. Tribal harvest has averaged 18 bison. Details on the YNP bison population status relative to management objectives can be found at:

https://www.ibmp.info/Library/OpsPlans/2022_StatusYellowstoneBisonPopulation_FINAL_Oct2022.pdf

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Availability for bison for state hunters (i.e., their migration out of Yellowstone National Park and into Montana) is highly dependent on weather. In 2018 and 2019, 0 bison were harvested by state hunters. In 2020, 10 bison

were harvested. In 2021, 1 bison was harvested. In 2022, a big weather year with a lot of snow, 25 bison were harvested by state hunters.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

This has not been widely vetted yet but has been discussed internally among FWP colleagues at the IBMP meeting.

Comments in favor of this proposal include that it would follow the science that the Central Herd presents less hunting opportunity as its numbers have declined, and we would be issuing licenses commensurate with this decline and the lower expected opportunity. We would not be selling hunters licenses for what may not be present. Further, in the event of an unexpected exodus from the Park, the bison hunt roster could always be activated.

Comments opposed to this proposal include that: 1) Tribal harvests are not similarly restricted, so restricting state hunters could seem unfair. 2) Hunters want the opportunity and should know it is different from moose, sheep, and goat and that success is not assured. There are no bonus points for bison, so people do not lose out if the bison do not migrate out. 3) The public doesn't fully understand the northern and central herd dynamic, and may only see that bison culling and hunting on the north side is so extreme they may not understand why we would want to cut licenses on the west side. 4) Hunting is a minor factor for bison on the west side, and vehicle collisions take many bison anyway. Allowing hunting is better than seeing a bison hit by a semi-truck.

Submitted by:

Date:

Approved:

Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by:

Name / Date

Reason for Modification: