



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) recently completed public “scoping” as a first step in the process of developing a long-term bison conservation and management plan for the state. The plan will be developed as a programmatic environmental impact statement (EIS), which will address issues associated with bison and options for their long-term management as a Montana wildlife species. The EIS will examine an array of issues and possible alternatives ranging from ‘no action’ to ‘bison reintroduction’ and each alternative’s potential beneficial and adverse environmental, social, and economic impacts.

Public scoping is intended to engage the public in identifying issues, impacts, concerns, conservation challenges, and possible opportunities. Comments collected from the public are used to further identify issues and to develop thoroughly vetted alternatives. FWP received a total of 22,928 comments from approximately 20,160 individuals that express a diversity of views and opinions. FWP collected 3,472 of those comments from individuals and organizations during the public meetings. The remaining comments were submitted online or through the mail from individuals, agencies, organizations, and from a 2010 petition.

Each comment was individually reviewed. All of the comments and alternatives will be examined as we proceed with the EIS process independent of the number of comments received. A number of comments were related to how the National Park Service manages the bison herd in Yellowstone National Park, the Interagency Bison Management Plan, or the quarantine feasibility study. While these comments were reviewed they are more appropriately directed toward other processes or programs.

The following is a summary of the primary issues and concerns identified from the comments, questions and suggestions received. The following statements are paraphrased and representative of the diversity of comments received:

- **General Management Issues and Concerns:**
 - Managing bison movement and distribution across the landscape could be difficult.
 - Bison movement and distribution could be managed through hunting or other means.
 - Population control/management could be difficult.
 - Population control/management could be addressed similar to other game species.
 - Bison management could be impacted by changing conditions, e.g., drought, fire, or snow.
- **Fencing and Confinement Issues and Concerns:**
 - Bison could impact existing fences.
 - Bison should be managed as a wild herd and a fenced herd is not a wild herd.
 - Fair chase hunting would not be possible with a confined herd.
 - A non-fenced herd could require more complex management.
 - The containment and management of a fenced herd could be expensive and resource intensive.

- Bison should be managed as a fenced in population.
- Fencing to contain bison could impact the movement of other wildlife.
- **Public Safety Issues and Concerns:**
 - Bison presence could threaten the safety of children, hunters, ranchers, and recreationalists.
 - Bison could pose similar risks to humans as other animals i.e. elk, moose, cattle.
 - Bison presence could result in increased wildlife-vehicle collisions.
- **Private Property Rights and Property Damage Issues and Concerns:**
 - Bison could damage cropland and infrastructure.
 - Bison could compete with domestic livestock for forage.
 - Landowners should be able to remove problem bison if agency response is not swift.
 - There is no existing compensation program for private property damage by bison.
 - There is no existing incentive or compensation program for landowners who allow bison on their private lands.
 - Bison could be used to limit rights on private property.
 - The right to have wild bison should be a private property right.
- **Disease and Herd Health Issues and Concerns:**
 - Any bison used for restoration should be tested prior to release and monitored over time.
 - Bison could spread disease to livestock or other wildlife.
 - Livestock could spread disease to bison.
 - There is no existing contingency plan in place for a bison herd that becomes infected.
- **Hunting Issues and Concerns:**
 - A reintroduced herd should be hunted.
 - Bison should be hunted in a manner similar to other game species.
 - Hunting bison could impact their movements and distribution.
 - A huntable population of bison could provide benefits to the community and economy.
 - The presence of bison could impact the ability to hunt other species.
- **Genetics and Restoration Source Herds Issues and Concerns:**
 - The genetic makeup of a potential source herd should be evaluated.
 - Potential bison should be free of cattle gene introgression.
 - Small amounts of cattle gene introgression would be acceptable.
 - Domestic bison could impact a wild herd's genetic makeup.
 - A herd should be of sufficient size to ensure genetic health.
 - Small herds should be managed intensively to maintain genetic health.
- **Legal Status, Classification, and Regulatory Issues and Concerns:**
 - Confusion exists as to the current status and classification of bison in Montana.
 - The classification of bison should remain as both livestock and wildlife.
 - Bison should only be classified as livestock.
 - Legal status of bison in surrounding regions could have an impact on management.
 - FWP should be the sole managing authority.
 - Montana Department of Livestock should be the sole managing authority.
 - Bison that are classified as wildlife should be managed by FWP and bison that are livestock should be managed by Montana Department of Livestock.
 - There should be an agency liable for damages caused by bison.
- **Land Use and Land Management Issues and Concerns:**
 - Grazing leases and current uses of public land should be maintained if bison are restored.
 - Presence of bison could impact grazing leases and other current uses of public land.
 - Wildlife should be a priority on public land.

- Public land should be used to support the economy.
- Bison restoration should not impact recreational activities on public land.
- Programs should be developed that allow for bison restoration and continuation or even an increase in public land grazing by domestic livestock.
- **Impact on Livestock, and Domestic Bison Producers Issues and Concerns:**
 - Coexistence of bison and domestic cattle on the Montana landscape is debatable or unknown.
 - There is debate over whether wild bison would breed cattle or prevent them from using resources.
 - Wild bison could try to interact with domestic bison.
- **Ecological Impacts and Impact to Other Wildlife Issues and Concerns:**
 - Bison could have a positive impact on prairie vegetation and associated species such as grassland birds.
 - Bison could be an important part of a healthy ecosystem.
 - Bison could negatively impact riparian habitat.
 - Bison could potentially spread weeds.
 - There could be increased competition for limited resources with other wildlife species.
 - Impacts of wallows could be both positive and negative.
- **Economic and Community Impacts Issues and Concerns:**
 - Wild bison could positively impact local economies through tourism, hunting, or other opportunities.
 - Restoration and management of wild bison could be important to Montana's wildlife heritage and could strengthen Montana as a national leader in wildlife and outdoor opportunities.
 - Bison could have negative or positive impacts to the tax base.
 - There could be a loss of agricultural revenue if bison are restored.
 - The threat of brucellosis could negatively impact Montana's beef industry, e.g. lower prices or additional restrictions on Montana cattle or beef.
- **Tribal Involvement and Cultural Connection to Bison Issues and Concerns:**
 - Tribal treaty rights both on and off reservations should be considered.
 - Bison should be restored due to cultural and spiritual significance of bison.
 - Concern was expressed over tribal participation in potential programs both on and off of reservation lands.
- **Role of Federal Government and Other Agencies or Organizations Issues and Concerns:**
 - Bison restoration and management should be a cooperative effort between Montana and the federal government if federal land is involved.
 - The federal government should not be involved in the management of the state's wildlife.
 - Concern was expressed that other organizations and agencies could move forward with bison restoration in Montana if FWP does not.
 - The Montana Department of Livestock should play a role in the management of wild bison.
 - The Montana Department of Livestock should not have authority or a role in the management of wild bison.
- **Funding and Fiscal Issues and Concerns:**
 - Partial funding and resources should be provided by other organizations or agencies.
 - The cost of program alternatives should be examined and considered.
 - The limited funds of FWP should not be spent on bison.

- A bison management program could have an impact on existing programs budgets.
- Taxes should not be used to fund potential programs.
- **Research, Education, and Outreach Issues and Concerns:**
 - Further research as to how bison will behave and use the landscape should be explored.
 - A smaller herd should be used as a research opportunity.
 - Education and outreach relative to hunting, disease, and living with bison should be explored.
- **Potential Locations and Habitat Suitability Issues and Comments:**
 - Rangeland assessments should be completed to ensure that the habitat could support a healthy herd prior to any restoration.
 - Bison should only be restored to their historic range.
- **Potential Program Alternatives That Were Suggested:**
 - No Action: FWP should not move forward with managing bison as wildlife.
 - Restore wild bison to suitable prairie habitats as elk and deer have been restored.
 - Restore only a small herd or herds that could serve as a model for future efforts.
 - Restore a large herd or herds that are genetically viable and ecologically functioning.
 - Restore a herd that is of sufficient size to allow for a hunting program.
 - Manage bison in fenced herds.
 - Restore bison to Native American Reservations only.
 - Confine bison to Yellowstone National Park and manage bison as livestock outside of the Park.
 - Restore bison on public lands, especially the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge.
 - Bison should be sent to Russia, Central Park, or the capital building in Helena.
- **Comments on this EIS and Scoping Process:**
 - FWP needs to act quickly in developing a management plan.
 - Only local input should be included since the program would have local impacts.
 - All citizens should be able to contribute since public land is involved.
 - There is a lack of trust in the planning process primarily related to how comments will be treated.
 - There is concern over FWP's ability to manage bison as wildlife.
 - There is support for FWP to be the agency that manages bison as wildlife.
 - There is support for Montana Department of Livestock to be in charge of bison and their management.
 - Future public meetings would benefit from the provision of beer or at least some coffee.

This is a brief summary of the major issues and alternatives that were suggested during the scoping process. FWP has reviewed every individual comment that was submitted and will use this information to guide the process. The next steps are to gather additional information on the issues and alternatives and then use this information to determine if and/or where FWP may choose to move forward with a potential bison program. FWP will continue to keep all interested parties and the public informed as we continue this process. If a decision is made to focus on any specific area or areas we would anticipate working with the affected communities and interested individuals and organizations to further evaluate any possible program. If you have any questions please contact Arnold Dood at (406) 994-6433.