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# STATE OF MONTANA

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## COMMENTS FROM THE MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF LIVESTOCK ON THE DRAFT REVISED FOREST PLAN AND THE DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT FOR THE DRAFT REVISED FOREST PLAN

The Montana Department of Livestock (MDOL) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Draft Revised Forest Plan and the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Draft Revised Forest Plan. Comments are organized into sections that apply to each document.

### Comments on the Draft Revised Forest Plan:

1. The Desired Conditions 01, 02, and 04 (FW-DC-WLBI), should be consistent with United States Forest Service (USFS) commitments in the court mandated multi-agency agreement that culminated in the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP). Under the goals of IBMP, Yellowstone National Park (YNP) bison are allowed to free-range within established boundaries. The Forest Plan should defer to the IBMP, and any subsequent adaptive management changes agreed to by all partner agencies. MDOL does not support the expansion of bison habitat without utilizing the currently established collaborative process established by the December 2000 Record of Decision (ROD) on bison management.
2. MDOL supports Goal 01 (FW-GO-WLBI) with limitations. Currently, bison do not fully utilize the existing available range, and MDOL supports “habitat improvement projects” for the use of bison within the currently established habitat for bison under the IBMP when bison are reasonably expected to reach that habitat by “natural movement”. We question the need for habitat improvement projects outside the currently established habitat and suggest that other projects are given higher priority.
3. MDOL supports Goal 01 (FW-GO-WLBI) for bison within established habitat under the IBMP as the strategies described in this goal are likely to reduce conflict, and improve societal value of bison.
4. MDOL supports Objectives 01 (FW-OBJ-WLBI) within the established area for bison under the IBMP.
5. MDOL supports Guidelines 01 (FW-GDL-WLBI) Alternative E that favors livestock where that use has been ongoing.
6. MDOL is opposed to Guidelines 02 and 03 Alternative D (FW-GDL-WLBI), and strongly requests that any effort to “facilitate bison expansion into unoccupied, suitable habitat” defers to the existing process well established under the IBMP and subsequent adaptive management changes.
7. MDOL is concerned that all alternatives under Standards 02 (FW-STD-GRAZ) imply an established risk of disease transmission from domestic to wild sheep. While there have been documented incidents of pneumonia in wild sheep following contact with domestic sheep, there are numerous incidents where subsequent negative impacts on wild populations have not

occurred. Likewise, numerous wild sheep pneumonia outbreaks have occurred with no documented or likely contact with domestic sheep.

Additionally, research<sup>1</sup> has demonstrated the presence of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (a frequently cited etiologic agent responsible for wild sheep pneumonia die-offs) in numerous wildlife species. This study, along with other findings documenting isolations of *M. ovipneumoniae* in healthy wild sheep puts the benefits of separation of wild and domestic sheep into question. Therefore, MDOL suggests that established domestic sheep grazing opportunities are not negatively impacted by potential contact with wild sheep. At a minimum, USFS must make the Forest Plan adaptable enough to accommodate information if subsequent research continues to cast the risk of wild sheep contact with domestic sheep into doubt.

8. MDOL requests the information cited in #7 (above) should also be considered for Standards 03-05 (FW-STD-GRAZ).
9. MDOL suggests that the designation of bison as a “focal species” is unnecessary and inappropriate. As a large herbivore, bison have an impact on ecological conditions, however, their role in “maintaining or restoring the ecological conditions to maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities in the plan area” as described on page 218 of the Draft Revised Forest Plan is minimal compared to other herbivores such as elk or apex predators in the same ecosystem.

#### **Comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement:**

- a. MDOL supports the continued exclusion of bison from the list of “species of conservation concern” based on the criteria for inclusion as stated on page 410 of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement which states that species may be included, “that are known to occur in the plan area and for which the Regional Forester has determined that the best available scientific information indicates substantial concern about the species’ capability to persist over the long term in the plan area.”
  - i. The area outside of the current IBMP Zone 2 of the bison management area (agreed upon by the IBMP partners including the USFS) should not be considered for this designation because by definition, (and in actuality) bison are not “known to occur” in this area.
  - ii. There is no “substantial concern” about the capability of bison “to persist over the long term in the plan area” based on the continued and well documented fecundity of the species under current IBMP management.
  - iii. Successful bison quarantine, and continued commitment to the quarantine process by the state of Montana and YNP provides further resilience to any unforeseen catastrophic impact on bison in the current ecosystem.
- b. MDOL is concerned that the Bighorn Sheep section starting on page 428 (especially in Key Stressors on page 432) draws a conclusive opinion on the risk of pneumonia transmission from domestic to bighorn sheep. MDOL suggests that significant research exists to question this conclusion as described in #7 above, and believes the emphasis on separation of these two species will result in undue reduction of grazing opportunities for domestic sheep.
- c. The statement on page 455, “the Yellowstone bison population is unique in that it is genetically pure due to isolation from domestic bovines (such as cattle),” is incorrect as it has been documented that the original population of 25 bison remaining in Yellowstone National Park were augmented by over 20 additional bison raised by cattle ranchers (as alluded to in the first

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<sup>1</sup> Highland MA, Herndon DR, Bender SC, Hansen L, Gerlach RF, Beckmen KB. *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* in wildlife species beyond subfamily Caprinae. Emerg Infect Dis. 2018 Dec.

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line of page 456). It has been reasonably speculated that this close contact with cattle is responsible for the initial brucellosis infection of the bison herd.

- d. The statement on page 455, “whereas state agencies (Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Livestock) have the lead role in managing bison populations” is incorrect. Bison are captured, processed, sometimes tested and loaded onto trailers by Yellowstone National Park personnel. MDOL does not have a role in managing bison populations except to provide law enforcement escorts during the transport of bison shipped for processing. While the MDOL has in the past used a temporary trap facility on the Horse Butte peninsula, the trap has not been operated since approximately 2009.
- e. The statement in the second paragraph of page 457, “Bison presence is currently limited to relatively small areas on the Custer Gallatin, primarily located within state-identified bison management zones” is incorrect in that the boundaries of tolerance for bison are not “state-identified”, but rather were reached through a negotiated agreement between IBMP partner agencies and described in the Record of Decision signed in December 2000, and updated through adaptive management.
- f. The fourth paragraph on page 457 states that bison are “migratory”, which suggests that the animals have a predictable movement route on a regular cycle. However, bison are better described as nomadic in that they explore new areas when existing food sources become scarce, or social pressure (likely due to density) triggers dispersal and subsequent movement outside the boundaries of YNP.
- g. The fifth paragraph on page 457 states that the northern and central herds are “genetically distinguishable groups” which is incorrect. Due to the high rate of exchange of individuals between both groups, the herds are not genetically unique, and are primarily distinguished by their fidelity for a particular area of YNP.
- h. Paragraph three on page 461 suggests that the risk of brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle is only theoretical. However, the disease is manifested in a similar manner (placentitis leading to abortion, and weak or stillborn calves) in both species, and shedding of high numbers of *brucella abortus* organisms in bison products of parturition (especially fetal tissues and placenta) have been well documented. Therefore, it is unreasonable to suggest that *b. abortus* found in bison abortions is uniquely non-infective. Further, this paragraph fails to acknowledge that the opportunity for transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle is rare due to a robust effort by state agencies to maintain separation between these species, and the relatively few cattle operations in the immediate vicinity of YNP. Finally, the proceedings of the 1983 meeting of the United Animal Health Association (page 171) provide a case history that strongly suggests brucellosis transmission from an infected domestic bison herd to an adjacent cattle operation.
- i. MDOL supports the last sentence in paragraph 2 of page 464 as long as the boundary that is considered is within Zone 2 of the bison management area as defined by IBMP. Because USFS is a signatory partner of the IBMP, MDOL suggests USFS is largely obligated to limit bison use of landscape that is within that zone. Furthermore, an expanded zone has a high likelihood of incurring unplanned and significant costs on other IBMP agencies, and to create private property conflict, and impair public safety. MDOL does not support a unilateral expansion of bison habitat through the forest planning process, and suggests that USFS defer to the IBMP partnering agencies of which USFS is a member.
- j. MDOL has significant concerns and in fact objects to Alternative D based on this alternative’s support for year-round bison population in an area presumed to be out of Zone 2 (area agreed upon through the IBMP partners including the USFS), and providing “no exceptions for management actions specifically designed to control bison movement,” which is critical for the

success of the IBMP. In fact, MDOL suggests that exception for bison management by partner agencies should be common to all revised plan alternatives.

In summary, MDOL sincerely appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on both, the Draft Revised Forest Plan and the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Draft Revised Forest Plan. MDOL shares USFS' goal of protecting our natural resources while continuing opportunities for livestock grazing. MDOL's main concerns regarding the draft documents are an apparent focus by USFS on expansion of bison habitat outside of the currently established area (Zone 2 of IBMP) which has been negotiated through a highly contentious and yet collaborative process. We strongly urge the USFS, as a signatory to the IBMP, to defer to the existing IBMP framework which includes an established method for revising bison conservation area through adaptive management.

MDOL's other significant concern is that both documents assume that the threat of pneumonia from domestic to bighorn sheep has been conclusively established when in fact much information exists that calls this conclusion into question - including a recent study that documents the presence of *M. ovipneumoniae* in numerous wildlife species. We strongly suggest that potential contact of bighorn sheep with domestic sheep should not be used to categorically exclude grazing opportunities for domestic sheep and cattle.

MDOL, therefore, supports Alternative A, E, B and C in that order for bison and bighorn sheep. For both bison and bighorn sheep, MDOL does not support Alternative D.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marty Zaluski", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Marty Zaluski, DVM

State Veterinarian  
Administrator, Animal Health and Food Safety Division  
Department of Livestock