

# Summary Report from the Interagency Bison Management Plan Meeting (In-person and via Zoom) July 21, 2021



**First draft presented July 30, 2021 by meeting facilitator Scott Bischke**

The following summary report reflects activities of the July 21, 2021 meeting of the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) Partners, held in person in Lapwai ID and via Zoom teleconferencing. This report comes from the notes of facilitator Scott Bischke<sup>1</sup>. The report will be marked *Draft* until formal Partner agreement to make it *Final* at the start of their next meeting. The report is shorter than usual because a full video (over 5 hr) of the meeting is posted on the meeting webpage at <http://www.ibmp.info/Library/20210721/20210721.php>.

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<sup>1</sup> MountainWorks Inc.; [scott@MountainWorks.com](mailto:scott@MountainWorks.com)

## Attendees

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Eight Partners attended the in-person meeting in Lapwai: Bing Matt (CSKT), Daniel Wenner (ITBC), Mike Honeycutt (MBOL), Martin Zaluski (MDOL), Marina Yoshioka (MFWP), Cam Sholly (NPS-YNP), Quincy Ellenwood (NPT), and Kathy Minor (USFS-CGNF). The ninth Partner, Ryan Clarke (APHIS), attended via the Zoom telecom. In addition to these Partners, across the day 30-35 others attended in person and ~15 others attended on the Zoom telecon. Those on the Zoom telecon, aside from Dr. Ryan, were all agency or tribal staff.

## Action items identified during the meeting

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### CHRIS GEREMIA

By Sep 30—Provide Partners NPS population count results and proposed population goals for 2021/22.

### JASON BREY

(Winter Ops related—to be written into that document?) Communicate with Partners regarding any impact (e.g., closures, special safety considerations) that West Side USFS projects may have on 2021/22 hunters on the West side.

### GROUP MEETING TO ASSESS HWY 191 SAFETY ISSUES WITH A FOCUS ON FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Led by Tom M: Julie C, Chris G, Carl S, Jason B, James Holt (BFC), Pat Flowers is representative for the area and should be contacted. Two levels: 1) What can be done now (e.g., signage); 2) Big thinking, big \$s overpasses etc. As part of this work, Julie C, who is currently working with MDOT on the Cougar Creek bridge project, will keep the team abreast of what is happening with that project.

### WINTER OPS PLANNING GROUPS

- \*\* Reinstate group from last year to design operation of Stevens' Creek Facility (ship and slaughter), bison conservation transfer program (quarantine), and hunting harvest. This group, per Partner agreement, is asked/empower to "expand their discussion scope" in considering 2021/22 Winter Ops (Carl S, Tim R, Dan W, Ryan C, Mike T, Marina Y, Neil T, Tom M — this group make up may change)

### SCOTT BISCHKE (COLLECTION OF ACTION ITEMS)

- change listing on IBMP website of Apr1 IBMP report to "final"
- Work with NPT team to find location for, and then set agenda for, the Dec1 IBMP Partner meeting
- Send out action item list to the Partners from this meeting (include dates for input to Winter Ops Plan revisions and completion of IBMP Annual Report).
- For next meeting, add 1) status of all Tribes who will be hunting in 2021/22; 2) add outcome of discussion of Winter Ops Plan re trap/hunt/ etc operation

## Meeting logistics, format, limitations

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### PARTICIPATION FROM THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The general public not able to be in Lapwai was invited to join the meeting via Facebook Live. The real-time feed of the Zoom telecom was hosted on the NPT Tribal Council Facebook page. Links were provided on the IBMP website meetings pages. (See overview in next section, as well.)

One day before the meeting, a Google Form was made available for public input with a link again posted on IBMP meetings web page. A note told the public that any comments received would be sent to the IBMP Partners. One comment was received and sent to the IBMP Partners and staff several days after the meeting. That comment had to do with the Zoom telecom, as posted on the NPT Tribal Council Facebook page, was difficult to hear. No comments were posted from the public to the Google Form dealing with perceived IBMP issues or opportunities or requested modifications.

## CHANGES DUE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND LIMITS OF MIXED MEETING FORMAT

*Many health precautions, fewer attendees, running a combined in-person meeting with a Zoom telecon is tough*

Given the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, even in the face of increasing levels of vaccination, the Partners followed numerous precautions for the meeting. Those precaution—guided by the Nez Perce Tribe Emergency Response Team, working with the NPT IBMP team and Events Center—included the following: 1) Meeting attendees were expected to be vaccinated; anyone not vaccinated was asked not to attend; 2) Proof of vaccination was not be required but simply determined by attendee confirmation; 3) masks and hand sanitizer were be provided (many attendees brought their own) with a non-touch thermometer available; 4) the meeting space was large and the events team provided ample spacing opportunities for social distancing; 5) QE requested that the Clearwater Lodge staff provide rigorous sanitation of hotel rooms before attendee arrival; 6) the facilitator took photos as a record of people in the room during the course of the meeting day in case contact tracing proved necessary at a later date.

The pandemic (and also possibly poor air quality due to fires) resulted in far fewer people in attendance than normal. The facilitator noted only a single member of the public (i.e., neither Partner nor treaty hunting Tribe lead, nor their staff) in attendance, where 25-50 members of the public might have been more typical.

The comment from the public noted above (hard to hear, see the Zoom meeting on across Facebook Live) reflects the difficulty of having a meeting that seeks to take place both in-person and over Zoom. A with the public comment, Partners and staff calling in from across Zoom, reported difficulties hearing all speakers (some yes, most not so good). Improvement could have been made had all Partners at the in-person meeting been on the Zoom meeting with computers (only a few were) so that their voices carried more solidly onto the airwaves. Even that solution, however, was heard to have feedback. (The facilitator suggests that it is better (more efficient, better communication) for the Partners to meet in person \*or\* via Zoom telecon, but not try to combine the two meeting styles until improved technology for such mixed meetings exists.

## Meeting opening

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The NPT, via Clearwater Lodge catering staff, provided a hearted breakfast for all in attendance before the start of the meeting. Lead Partner Quincy Ellenwood introduced Nakia Williamson, the NPT Cultural Program Director, who led a prayer and singing invocation to open the meeting. Quincy welcomed the group to Lapwai, then everyone in the room, as well as on the Zoom call, introduced themselves and their organization. The facilitator provided a brief history of the IBMP, followed by an overview of the meeting. Partners agreed to declare the *draft* meeting summary from their April 2021 meeting as *final*, and instructed the facilitator to mark it as such and post to the IBMP website.



*An opening prayer and then singing invocation was led by Nakia Williamson, left, NPT Cultural Program Director.*

Each Partner and Treaty hunting tribe lead spent a short time updating the group on recent happenings for their group, including how they are handling issues of the pandemic and current fires. A few items of note:

- Most groups mentioned their handling of the pandemic (e.g., vaccination levels, degree that their offices are open or not), and their continued concerns because of the delta variant. Most have had—and continue to have—some restrictions to travel and/or in-office work.
- YNP currently has more cases of COVID for its employees than one year ago. Next year is the 150<sup>th</sup> year anniversary for YNP.
- Both YNP and Flathead Lake area were mentioned as having increased visitation. YNP is on track for a record number of visitors in 2021.
- Multiple discussions and concerns were expressed regarding of fires in progress and also concerns expressed about high temperatures (concerns included potential of both fires and heat to impact hunting this year).
- General agreement about how nice it is to be together meeting in person again.
- Fire and drought having big impacts on Montana agriculture and hence MDOL/MBOL staff. Some ranchers are needing to move their cattle out of Montana because of the drought.
- CSKT held memorial for members that have passed away (232 names called out from the last two years); COVID was a factor in the death for a number of those whose lives were celebrated.
- Multiple thanks were provided to the NPT for their efforts made to host this meeting.

## **Improving IBMP effectiveness**

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The Partners organized their discussions into three categories, as reported below, that they several years ago agreed upon as the key areas that where they had good chance of making progress. Highlights of the discussions are provided for each of the three areas below. Action items, denoted by “\*\*,” are also captured here and repeated in the action item section.

### **HUNT/BOUNDARY ISSUES**

- HUNT MANAGERS MEETING AND MOA. MFWP ran the annual hunt managers’ meeting in Missoula in May. Outcomes included 1) MFWP and USFS working to create a kiosk with hunting information (e.g., safety closures) at Beatty Gulch. Hopefully these will be in the next couple of weeks. They are also creating an informational video to further help convey information to hunters more effectively.
- The Crow Tribe is expected to begin exercising their bison hunting rights this coming winter. In answer to a question, DW stated that the Crow Tribe has not indicated to date that they will be signed on to the Tribal MOA. Strong encouragement was made that members of the MOA reach out to the Crow Tribe, and Blackfeet, ShoBan, and N. Arapahoe, to join the MOA. QE noted: “We are stronger in numbers. What comes out of the MOA is communication” (among hunters, among law enforcement, more).
- JW noted that the MOA tenets are scoped to increase safety and that those aspects are not just be about the Tribes. He noted that the MOA fosters relationships between groups far beyond issues at Beatty Gulch, with potential positives lasting far longer than just the coming year.
- REGARDING WINTER OPS AND POPULATION GOALS. CG—YNP estimated 4700 animals were on the ground going into last summer. Prior to counting, the Park is currently *estimating* that the YNP population is in the 5100-5300 animal range. This year’s count by YNP is expected to be started during the week of August 18, and Partners should have the NPS report detailing bison population estimate and suggested goals by the end of September (\*\*). NPS’s initial estimate today—i.e., without having this year’s population count yet—is that removing 500-600 animals would stabilize the population.
- CarlS — Regarding the idea brought forward by MDOL that the capacity to handle bison shipped to slaughter may be reduced this year: will that decreased capacity impact bison removal operations? How are we going to meet population goals and how do we assure trap won’t impact demographics? TR — NPS has been talking with MDOL and with multiple slaughter houses. Given drought and going into winter with higher population than last winter, we think that treaty hunting tribes may be able to exercise

greater hunting removals. One possibility under consideration is to take more animals into the quarantine program, as well. Not solely a Park issues; all of us need to get our heads together to improve hunt tactics, better coordinate capture/hunt activities. RC — I can provide more in the quarantine section, but we will have one pen open for new animals for capture facility this winter. CS — Bison Conservation Transfer Program has been very successful — with bison moved as far north as Alaska, as far east as New York — but we must realize that the numbers are relatively low right now (~160 animals transferred to date) and that we kind of measure success here in micro-steps. But I do think it is time for us to do something better and bigger, to break out of this paradigm we've been in for last two decades. ... we can either sit here and make progress the way we did the last 20 years, or we can start thinking collectively, as a group, in a bigger way.

- CarlS — Yes, agree. I want to note that we are still working in the silos. Yes to thinking outside the box — can we, for example, move animals in the park out of the park? Could we create a group that starts by identifying all the things that hold us up from moving forward?
- \*\* Partner agreement to reinstate group from last year to coordinate operation of Stevens' Creek Facility (ship and slaughter), bison conservation transfer program (quarantine), maximize hunting harvest, and maximizing bison disbursement onto available landscapes outside the Park.
- ENFORCEMENT. NPT Officer — Sometimes it works well, sometimes it doesn't. Some days it can be like herding cats. MOA has helped with coordination and coordination has improved over the years. Safety meetings every morning are essential. Every morning I head over there and you have to have something in your heart that will help you throughout the day and what I have in my heart is that I believe in what I am doing. Because I want everyone to be safe. Adam P—Most of enforcement actions associated this year with our bison work were actually about other species. Slower year from enforcement just because of lack of bison out, but there still were lot of hunters. There is a concern that if lots of bison come out we may have a major safety issue. Also to note, Kqyn Kuka of MFWP has been working with the USFS to put kiosk at Beatty Gulch with maps that hunters can then use to better understand boundaries and rules.

#### **BISON QUARANTINE AND TRANSLOCATION**

- DW—There have been no transfers to Ft Peck (to or from) since the last meeting. Currently there are two test groups at Ft Peck:
  - 1) has 11 males who are getting their 6 month test soon
  - 2) has 57 individuals (32 females, 18 males, 7 calves [born this spring]) — this group should be ready to transfer this winter. ITBC plans to transfer in two groups to any tribe successfully responding to the request for proposal (applications will be do Sep 3<sup>rd</sup> — contact Dan Wenner or Megan Davenport at ITBC)
- DW—The original two pens at Ft Peck have been split into 4. Considering creating a 5<sup>th</sup> pasture, as well. Under the current situation, Ft Peck will not be able to fill 4 (or 5) pens. ITBC's position remains that Ft Peck needs to be able to do Phase II of quarantine procedure for this program to be fully successful. Another concern is that Corwin Springs may be used as research facility under possible changed status of *brucella abortus* < facilitator's note: see update section on this topic below >, thereby further decreasing the number of bison available to the transfer program. We've had 150-200 animals go through the programs and have never had a single animal sero-convert, thus we should expand (e.g., allowing Phase II) program to meet its full potential and thereby get more of the bison out across the country.
- ChrisG — Update on what is happening in the Park. We have two groups:
  - A) has 20 males, expected to complete Phase II in early winter (Dec/Jan) and after testing be moved to Ft Peck
  - B) has 25 females and 3 males, currently breeding with intent to calve next summer.
- Chris G—Regarding the expansion of the facility: the Park broke ground *today* in beginning to create 3 new pastures which will almost triple capacity (change in capacity from current 80 animals to almost 200). Depending on how quickly completion of new pastures occurs, NPS hoping to enter two groups of

40 animals into the quarantine program this winter. Regarding transfer: 39 females and 2 males that were undergoing quarantine in the Park were moved over to the pastures at Corwin Springs so that they could start breeding and move into Phase II.

- RC—Corwin Springs facility: in April received females from YNP facility, as Chris just mentioned. Those females were split into two cohorts (being bred at present with a couple of males from YNP that were also received recently). Otherwise, APHIS has a small cohort that just calved this past spring (now comprised of 4 cows, 4 calves, and a bull). Those animals, assuming they remain negative — will likely be transferred to Ft Peck in January just ahead (i.e., 2022). When that group of 9 leaves Corwin Springs will have a *small* pen open. The big opportunity for moving more animals over to Corwin Springs from Stevens Creek will come when the larger group is transferred away to Fort Peck.

### IMPROVE HABITAT UTILIZATION (ESPECIALLY WEST SIDE)

- West side hunting: AP — MFWP issued 40 license on the North side. State hunters harvested 6 on north side (4 of which were backcountry permits). Had 10 animals harvested on the West side. In the two years before, state hunters had 0 animals harvested. TM — CSKT asks all hunting groups to consider no hunting on the West side to allow for bison to move into the new West side tolerance area, all the way up to the Taylor Fork. We have to willingly hold back our hunting to allow the bison to grow in number and expand out into the tolerance zone. (AP—note that MFWP does still have hunting closed in the northern part of the new West side tolerance area, i.e., hunting district #395). EHolt — No harvest last year on the West side by the NPT.
- West side habitat: JBrey — North Hebgen project has both numerous timber sales, as well as non-commercial habitat treatments. Biggest item going on later this summer is the three commercial sales (Hebgen Flats, Whits/Red, Teepee Creek). While sales and projects weren't specifically scoped as bison habitat improvement projects, all the projects—particularly Hebgen Flats—will have that benefit of opening up the tree canopy for improving forage for bison (though as per previous presentations at previous bison meetings, that improvement will be limited by the productivity of the soil). Hebgen Flats project will continue into the Fall and likely into the Winter. Given that timeframe, USFS says it will communicate with the Partners on any impact the 3 projects might have on hunting this fall (\*\*).
- Distribution and use of habitat on the West side — not discussed
- Reengagement of West side owners — Nothing new to a report with engagement directly.
- Highway safety West side — Some discussion from Partners regarding the highway and concerns for safety. Positive statements made for Buffalo Field Campaign regarding their work (e.g., signs) to increase safety for bison and motorists. Important point, visitation in winter very small. NT—Federal transportation bill mentions wildlife safety for perhaps the first time, including having funding opportunities for safety (overpasses, fencing, etc). CG/TR — Majority of accidents on Hwy 191 north of W Yellowstone outside of the Park. JHolt (ED of BFC) — Two bison fatalities in March. Yes we need more signs. Seems fatalities often come from semi drivers that aren't familiar with the area. We feel like transportation bill and infrastructure bill are avenues to strengthen safety aspects of Hwy 191 (including in reaction to increased bison population). MZ – recall resource and importance of MDOT in the highway safety discussion. TM — yes I would be willing to lead a group about wildlife safety in the Hwy 191 corridor (\*\*). JCunningham — FWP is currently working on the Cougar Creek bridge with MDOT (Julie can loop people into that project \*\* but can only offer to increase visibility into that work, not as a replacement for this group). JBrey — Need MDT support but note that this area does not show up as a safety hotspot in state of MT.

### Nez Perce Tribe Cultural Program

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Nakia Williamson, Director of the NPT Cultural Program, provided a ~1 hr presentation of the history, culture, homeland, and more of the Tribe. Nakia's Powerpoint presentation can be found on the IBMP website

page for this meeting (see <http://ibmp.info/Library/20210721/20210721.php>). The same webpage has the video of the meeting and Nakia's talk can be found starting at ~2:45:05.



*Nakia Williamson provided a discussion about the culture of the Nez Perce Tribe to the Partners and staff attending the meeting at the Clearwater Lodge in Lapwai ID. Nakia's full presentation can be found on the meeting webpage, as described in the text of this report.*

## **Status of new Environmental Impact Statement for bison management (NPS)**

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T Reid — NPS is working on new NEPA process is with DOI Environmental Quality Division to develop alternatives. Once those have been decided, NPS has a variety of tasks before being able to publish a Notice of Intent (NOI). CS — Work on the EIS had been done. About 6 months back NPS decided to go back and reevaluate potential alternatives to make them a bit less like continuing business as usual with incremental improvements, and instead be a bit more aggressive in consideration of the potential alternatives in the new EIS. Once complete, the NOI will be briefed up the DOI chain. Partners and Tribal groups will be kept informed. Goal for release is sometime later this calendar year.

## **Opportunity to introduce new Adaptive Management (AM) changes**

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No new AM changes were put forward by Partners.

## Status updates

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Lawsuit updates (TR who notes that his is the NPS take and others might provide different summaries) — There are two lawsuits of note and the short version is that both suits are appealing rulings that have been made allowing NPS to do NEPA on a new EIS while working under the current IBMP. In both instances, briefs are occurring on these appeals and court hearings have yet to be scheduled.

Update on removing *Brucella abortus* from the CDC select agent list (MZ) — USDAA released advanced notice of proposal for evaluating removal of *B. abortus* from the select agent. There has been no action on that idea but in the interim they did declare an intention to allow outside studies on *B. abortus*. We interpret that as being such studies could be done within the DSA. We are in the process right now of building a small coalition of folks to support and push USDA and CDC to finalize rulemaking to remove *B. abortus* from the list but as we know from previous efforts it's still unlikely outcome.

Request for status update on the draft policy statement on the outdoor research facility for brucellosis potential (RC) — Can't give update on the notice itself, but can say that a group of state and federal veterinarians are working on possible research projects in light of the outdoor research policy potentially being allowed. (\*\*MZ will provide Scott the web link defining the current status; and Scott to post <provided post meeting — <https://www.selectagents.gov/regulations/policy/animalstudy.htm> > ).

## Planning for 2021 (and beyond) IBMP meetings

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After short, open discussion, the Partners decided to again meet in person for their December 1, 2021 meeting. The meeting will be held in Missoula, MT, and the facilitator was tasked with securing a meeting location and block of rooms (night of Nov 30) for the meeting.

## Meeting close

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The facilitator thanked Kayeloni Scott for running the Zoom portion of the meeting. Participants provided great thanks to Lead Partner Quincy Ellenwood of the NPT, the Tribe, and staff at the Clearwater Lodge (led by Rachel Ellenwood, who accepted thanks for the staff) for the wonderful hosting and food, including a prime rib luncheon (Dr. Zaluski, and others, were particularly enamored with the baby potatoes).

To close, Lead Partner Quincy Ellenwood thanked everyone for their time and willingness to travel to Lapwai. He said he hoped those who were not here could be with the group in person in Missoula. He said that he hoped God-willing that we can keep people healthy, and all stay positive and strong. Quincy said he hoped that we could do the best we can for the well-being and prosperity of our relatives here. Finally he said thanks to his staff — this is a team effort — and thanks especially to the Partners. Finally, he said thanks to the Clearwater Staff and noted, to chuckles, that he admitted to being a little partial to the food here because the head chef is his sister! Thank you all, Quincy concluded, and travel safely.

## Public comment

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A Google Form was available for public comment from the day before the IBMP meeting until midnight the day of the meeting. The Partners received only one public comment, as follows, which dealt with difficulties of the Zoom telecon and Facebook Live stream, not the content of the meeting.

- Comment #1 (Chamois Anderson): The live feed via FB/Nez Perce is not showing for the public to view the meeting? Can you please troubleshoot for several of us that would like to please listen in?

*\*\* Meeting adjourned \*\**

## Abbreviations

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- AM—Adaptive management
- APHIS—Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
- BCC—Bear Creek Council
- BCTP—Bison Conservation Transfer Program
- BFC—Buffalo Field Campaign
- CG—Chris Geremia
- CGNF—Custer Gallatin National Forest
- CSh—Cam Sholly
- CSc—Carl Scheeler
- CSKT—Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes
- CTUIR—Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
- CV—Clay Vines
- CWG—Citizens’ Working Group
- DSA—Designated Surveillance Zone
- DW—Dan Wenner
- EA—Environmental Assessment
- EC—Ervin Carlson
- EH—Eric Holt
- GAO—Government Accountability Office
- GW—Germaine White
- GWA—Gallatin Wildlife Association
- GYA—Greater Yellowstone Area
- ITBC— InterTribal Buffalo Council
- JH—John Harrison
- JW—Jeremy Wolf
- LG—Leonard Gray
- LW—Leander Watson
- MBOL—Montana Board of Livestock
- MD—Mark Deleray
- MDOL—Montana Department of Livestock
- MDOT—Montana Department of Transportation
- ME—Mary Erickson
- MEPA—Montana Environmental Policy Act
- MFWP—Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
- MH—Mike Honeycutt
- ML—Mike Lopez
- MOA—Memorandum of Agreement
- MOU—Memorandum of Understanding
- MR—Majel Russell
- MSGA—Montana Stockgrowers’ Association
- MSU—Montana State University
- MV—Mike Volesky
- MZ—Marty Zaluski
- NAS—National Academy of Sciences
- NEPA—National Environmental Policy Act
- NGO—Non-governmental organizations
- NPS—National Park Service
- NPT—Nez Perce Tribe
- NPTEC— Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee
- NRC—National Research Council
- NRDC—Natural Resources Defense Council
- NT—Neil Thagard
- Park—Yellowstone National Park
- PIOs—Public Information Officers
- PJ—PJ White
- QE—Quincy Ellenwood
- RC—Ryan Clarke
- ROD—Record of Decision
- RF—Rebecca Frye
- RFP—Request for proposals
- RTR—Royal Teton Ranch
- SB—Scott Bischke
- SEIS—Supplemental EIS
- SG—Stephanie Gillin
- SK—Salish Kootenai
- TM—Tom McDonald
- TR—Tim Reid
- USFWS—US Fish and Wildlife Service
- USGS—US Geological Survey
- WMA—state of MT wildlife management areas
- YELL—Yellowstone National Park
- YNP—Yellowstone National Park