

SCOPING NOTICE

Bison Quarantine Feasibility Study Phases II and III

Dear Interested Party,

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) announce their intent to prepare an environmental assessment analyzing the environmental impacts associated with a proposed decision to implement Phase II and Phase III of a bison quarantine feasibility study.

This action is being proposed pursuant to the state of Montana's authority to manage publicly owned bison that enter Montana from Yellowstone National Park, APHIS' regulatory authority relative to the National Brucellosis Eradication Program, and the provisions of the Interagency Bison Management Plan.

The proposed action is to develop appropriate quarantine facilities to implement Phases II and III of the quarantine feasibility study. Quarantine facilities for Phases II and III will be constructed on either one or two sites depending upon available funding and suitable lands at the appropriate time.

The Interagency Bison Management Plan and EIS previously evaluated impacts associated with the removal of bison from the Yellowstone population and permitted a decision to send bison that would otherwise be slaughtered to an approved research or quarantine facility.

Phase II is best described as the maintenance and breeding phase of the proposed quarantine process. This will involve the transfer of successfully quarantined bison advancing through the existing Phase I facility at Corwin Springs to a second facility where they will be maintained through their second year. The feasibility study Phase II proposes to temporarily (for up to three years) utilize approximately 400 acres of land within the Dome Mountain Wildlife Management Area currently administered by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. This facility will be designed to meet USDA standards for quarantine and will be double fenced with game proof exterior fencing. Breeding of two-year old female bison from Phase I will be accomplished using existing or previously quarantined Yellowstone bull bison during the late summer (August-September). Breeding activity will be carefully monitored and mating will be constructed to maximize genetic diversity in the quarantine population.

Phase III is best described as the calving phase. Provided that a degree of success is achieved in earlier phases, pregnant 3-year old bison will be moved to a third facility at an as yet undetermined location with similar design standards as the Phases I and II facilities or these bison will be cycled back to the Phase I facility at Corwin Springs to complete their first calving. Animals will be monitored and tested to determine if brucellosis has been expressed during pregnancy and calving. Animals testing negative for brucellosis will advance to the release step. The development of a third quarantine facility is contingent upon the availability of lands and funds for development.

This quarantine protocol, if completed, could generate a population of disease-free animals, including at least one calf crop. These animals would be available for a soft release restoration project on suitable habitats within the original range of plains bison. This protocol will be implemented a second time to complete the feasibility study.

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The principle decision that will be made is whether to proceed with Phases II and III of the bison quarantine feasibility study. Factors for making this decision include: determining whether Phase I of the study was successful; appropriate locations for facilities to hold bison during Phase II and Phase III of the study; criteria for evaluating the suitability of potential release sites; and possible recipients and release sites for those bison that clear quarantine during the feasibility study.

SCOPING ISSUES

FWP and APHIS have worked extensively with a variety of agencies, organizations, and interested individuals to develop the procedures for a quarantine feasibility study. FWP and APHIS also submitted the quarantine feasibility study proposal for scientific peer-review and secured a research permit from the National Park Service after research committee reviews of the proposal. FWP completed an EA for Phase I of the study in October 2004. Based on this work, FWP and APHIS determined that the following issues are pertinent to the environmental analysis and pending decision:

1. What are the environmental effects associated with the siting of the Phase II facilities on the Dome Mountain Wildlife Management Area?
2. What are the effects to private landowners in the vicinity of the Phase II quarantine facilities?
3. How will animals be handled and managed during this study and will they be treated humanely?
4. What locations are suitable for siting Phases II and III quarantine facilities?
5. What additional steps will the agencies consider to be certain that bison advancing through the quarantine protocol are brucellosis free?
6. What is the decision process for determining appropriate recipients and locations for distribution of live bison?
7. Where will bison be released that have been certified as brucellosis free following the feasibility study?

FWP and APHIS invite public comment for the purpose of clarifying these issues and identifying additional pertinent issues. Responses to the following would be especially helpful:

1. Perspectives regarding the overall scope of the project.
2. Additional issues that are not included in the above list.
3. Specific information sources that you think would strengthen the analysis of issues.

PROCESS INFORMATION AND SCHEDULE

The environmental assessment and decision notice will be developed according to the following tentative schedule:

- March 15, 2005—Project announcement and initiation of public scoping period
- April 15, 2005—Close of public scoping period
- July 15, 2005—Release of draft environmental assessment and request for public comment
- August 15, 2005—Close of public comment period on draft environmental assessment
- September 15, 2005—Release of decision notice

COMMENT DEADLINE

Scoping comments are due by April 15, 2005

CONTACT INFORMATION

Email scoping comments may be sent to: BisonQuarantineEA@mt.gov

Scoping comments may be mailed to: Bison Quarantine EA
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PO Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701
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QUESTIONS?

Project information is available at: <http://fwp.state.mt.us/>

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